

**“BELIEF IN MAGIC IS OLDER THAN WRITING”: AN EXAMINATION  
OF ETHNOGRAPHIC AND LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF  
AFRICAN-BASED BELIEF SYSTEMS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1928-1988.**

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## Abstract

This thesis maps representations of African-based belief systems in the United States during two pivotal moments in the twentieth century – the Harlem Renaissance and the post-Civil Rights/Black Power era. Adopting a multi-disciplinary approach and engaging with literary studies, history, and ethnography, it employs African-based belief systems as a lens through which to interrogate ideas about the interaction between race and religion, examine how blackness was constructed in the cultural imagination, and explore how racial politics were registered in various types of literature. Primary texts include works produced by the Louisiana Federal Writer's Project, Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*, Harry Hyatt's *Hoodoo Conjuraton Witchcraft Rootwork*, and fiction by authors Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, and Gloria Naylor. By tracing the ways in which representations of African-based beliefs have been constructed across formal and disciplinary boundaries, this thesis argues that at moments of self-definition amongst African Americans, representations of African-based belief systems began to appear with more intensity and became integral to the configuration of black identity in the U.S. It proposes that the texts examined collectively generate three dominant narratives about African-based beliefs: as a marker of racial inferiority; as a method to resist, disrupt, and cope with the effects of power imbalances; and as a means to reconnect with an African identity or ancestry. It argues that black artists and writers challenged the first narrative during these moments by generating the latter two within their works. It participates in current debates about how race is constructed and imagined in the United States, and offers insights into the ways in which racialized power is registered, reinforced, and challenged in the cultural imagination.

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## Introduction

In this thesis I trace multiple narratives through key moments in the twentieth century to explore the ways in which conceptions of African-based belief systems have evolved in the United States and to expose the social functions of these narratives. I utilise the motif of African-based belief systems as a lens through which to view intersecting representations of race and religion, to interrogate configurations of blackness during the twentieth century, and to explore how the dynamics of racial politics register in the cultural imagination. I identify three dominant narratives about African-based beliefs in a number of cultural and literary texts, including works produced by the Louisiana Federal Writers' Project, Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*, Harry Hyatt's *Hoodoo Conjuration Witchcraft Rootwork*, and fiction by authors Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, and Gloria Naylor. To varying degrees, these works generate the notion that African-based beliefs are either a marker of racial inferiority, a method to resist, disrupt and cope with the effects of racialized power, or a means to reconnect with an African identity or ancestry. I argue that the degree to which these narratives are visible in these texts reflect the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which they were produced. Specifically, I claim that in moments of self-definition amongst African American artists and intellectuals during the Harlem Renaissance and Black Power era, narratives about African-based beliefs appeared with more frequency and became central to the redefinition of black identity, particularly those that disputed historical depictions of non-Christian beliefs as inferior.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the beliefs and ritual practices discussed here are adhered to in conjunction with Christian beliefs and indeed numerous practitioners identify themselves as Christian. It is not my intention to create a distinction between Christian and non-Christian beliefs. There is often a relationship, if not fusion, between the two within black folk traditions and black spirituality. Many practitioners are

## Review of the Field and Theoretical Perspectives

This thesis contributes to the body of scholarship that has emerged on African-based belief systems in the United States over the last two decades. The publication of Carolyn Morrow Long's *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce* in 2001 signalled the genesis of this trend. Morrow Long's study encompasses the examination of a number of African-based belief systems including Voodoo, hoodoo, and Santería amongst others as well as the evolution of the spiritual products industry in the United States. Her influential work on the commodification, distribution, and marketing of spiritual products relating to a variety of African-based beliefs paved the way for subsequent historians to delve further into the presence, practices, and functions of these systems. Yvonne P. Chireau's *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (2003) offers an account of the origins and uses of conjure in the African American community from slavery to the twentieth century, arguing that it evolved through the interaction of African, Native, and European cultures. She demonstrates the close relationship between conjuring practices and Christianity and in doing so problematizes the dichotomy between religion and magic, arguing that they often blend into one set of practices and beliefs. She claims: '[a]lthough magic is generally characterized as the antithesis of religion, it seems just as often to reflect the latter, to be its mirror image. When seen from different perspectives, the divisions sometimes break down, revealing the arbitrary nature of the categories.'<sup>2</sup> This thesis takes a similar approach, rather than attempting to categorise African-based belief systems as

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members of conventional spiritual institutions such as Christian churches but still participate in practices that could be identified as hoodoo or conjure. My interest here though is in those beliefs and practices that are typically viewed as outside the realm of "standard" Christian practices. For an overview of black spirituality and the interaction between conjure and the Bible, see Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African-American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

religion or magic, the focus of this investigation is the functions and representations of these systems.

Jeffrey Anderson's *Conjure in African American Society* (2005) also traces the evolution of conjuring traditions by mapping the influence of Native and European cultures on conjuring practices as well as exploring how hoodoo functioned in the nineteenth century. Complementary to Chireau's study, Anderson debunks many of the myths and stereotypes about conjuring traditions. He makes the case that conjure is deserving of serious scholarly attention because it 'has served a variety of functions within African American society and played a pivotal role in the shaping of other aspects of black culture.'<sup>3</sup> Anderson's study also builds on Morrow Long's work to discuss how modernity and the rise of corporate capitalism in the 1920s transformed conjuring practices in the twentieth century, resulting in a shift from a model that positioned the conjuror as community leader or consultant to one that saw an increase in clients buying their conjuring materials from stores or mail-order catalogues.

Katrina Hazzard-Donald's *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (2013) claims that '[h]oodoo is no longer a religion, it is [...] the reorganized remnants of what must have been, albeit short-lived, a full blown syncretized African-based religion among African-American bondsmen.'<sup>4</sup> Hazzard-Donald's study presents somewhat of a divergence from the assessments made by other scholars about hoodoo's development in the United States and, in contrast with Chireau, argues that hoodoo was once a fully-formed religion. She proposes that

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Anderson, *Conjure in African-American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African-American Hoodoo System* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2.



when hoodoo was brought to the United States it survived in three regional clusters before merging into a religion that was practised across the nation. According to Hazzard-Donald, it was only through interaction with other cultures and the commodification of conjure by outsiders that hoodoo as a religion was lost and was replaced by what she calls “snake-oil” hoodoo, that is inauthentic hoodoo. Hazzard-Donald’s research in some ways goes against the grain of scholarship on conjure, but her methodological approach of tracing the development of hoodoo through the examination of specific elements or practices such as the Ring Shout and the John the Conquer root/folktale serves to illuminate conjure’s development, uses, and transformations across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

More recently, Kodi Roberts’ *Voodoo and Power: The Politics of Religion in New Orleans* (2015) offers an examination of Voodoo in New Orleans, paying particular attention to the racial dynamics of the city and practitioners. Extending the positions of Morrow Long, Chireau, and Anderson on the development of conjure, Roberts refutes understandings of Voodoo as a monolithic religion passed from Africans to their American-born descendants and instead proposes that it is a multiracial and multicultural belief system. Beyond Voodoo’s origins, Roberts also accounts for the functions of Voodoo in the Crescent city arguing that rituals ‘promis[ed] power, both social and economic’ and ‘attracted practitioners across racial, class, and gender lines.’<sup>5</sup> This thesis will build on Roberts’ study and discuss how New Orleans Voodoo is represented as a mode of redressing power that developed through the interaction of multiple cultures and racial groups.

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<sup>5</sup> Kodi Roberts, *Voodoo and Power: The Politics of Religion in New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 11.

These field-leading studies, as well as a plethora of articles, have mapped the ways in which numerous African-based beliefs and practices have manifested, functioned, and evolved in the nation over the last two centuries.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these historical accounts, several studies have also emerged on the presence of these practices in literature, most notably Kameelah L. Martin's *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and Other Such Hoodoo* (2012) which traces the figure of the conjure woman in literature and argues that she is a figure who resists the subjugation of black women, much like her historical counterpart.

Similarly, Elizabeth West's *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory, Community, Nature, and Being* (2011) explores the presence of African spirituality in literature to suggest that black women's fiction has retained principles of African spiritual beliefs and that New World African spirituality has been central to the imagination of black women writers in the twentieth century. In addition, James W. Coleman's *Faithful Vision: Treatments of the Sacred, Spiritual, and Supernatural in Twentieth-Century African American Fiction* (2009) examines how the relationship between Judeo-Christian traditions and Voodoo or conjure have manifested in various examples of African American fiction. Lastly, David Murray's *Matter, Magic, and Spirit: Representing Indian and African American Belief* (2007) traces the way in which white authors represented Indian and African American beliefs, particularly the development of ideas about

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<sup>6</sup> For example Yvonne Chireau, "Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 7, no.2 (1997): 225-246; Carolyn Morrow Long, "Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo: Sin, Fraud, Entertainment and Religion," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6, no. 1 (2002): 86-101; Ina J. Fandrich "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo," *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 5 (2007): 775-791; Michelle Y. Gordon, "'Midnight Scenes and Orgies': Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy," *American Quarterly* 64, no.4 (2012): 767-786;

fetishism and primitivism in African and Native beliefs. He also examines how Indian and African American writers revised the representations offered by white authors and revalued Native and African-based beliefs in literature.

In part, this thesis is an effort to synthesise these two bodies of scholarship. In particular, it contributes to research concerning the functions of African-based belief systems as well as how these are registered in various works of literature. It will also build on scholarship that examines the relationship between African-based beliefs and racialized power, paying particular attention to how they functioned and have been represented as a means of resistance. Like Murray's comparative study, this thesis begins with an examination of white-authored representations of African-based beliefs and moves to further explore how African American writers have revised and revalued these beliefs at pivotal moments in United States history. It is concerned with mapping the ways in which shifts in practice, politics, and social attitudes towards African-based beliefs manifested in different forms of literature and in turn how these representations reinforced or challenged the politics that they were produced within.

As this study is concerned with representations and the cultural meanings of African-based belief systems, it is necessary to examine sites where cultural meaning is imagined and produced. Cornel West proposes that '[c]ulture is as much a structure as is the economy or politics; it is rooted in institutions such as families, schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, and communication industries (television, radio, video, music).'<sup>7</sup> I extend the categories that West outlines here and examine how cultural meaning and the work of representation is also rooted in various forms

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<sup>7</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 19.

of literature. Literature provides an apt location for the study of cultural meanings because of the social functions it performs.

Terry Eagleton claims that the aim of adopting an approach that seeks to interrogate the cultural meanings of a text is to ‘*explain* the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings [and] grasping those [...] as the products of a particular history.’<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this investigation adopts a ‘cultural history’ approach to the examination of representations of African-based belief systems that offers close and contextual analysis of a range of texts. They include city and state guidebooks, travelogues, ethnographies, poetry, and fiction and I will discuss how the forms and styles of these texts inform their representation of African-based beliefs. Whilst the authors of the texts examined here take different approaches and spring from different disciplinary backgrounds, they each construct narratives about the object of this study that hold within them cultural meaning and contribute to the production of the discourse on African-based belief systems.

The sources that comprise the first three chapters of this thesis can be broadly defined as ethnographic accounts of African-based beliefs. They purport to offer their readers a ‘true’ account of African-based beliefs, specifically New Orleans Voodoo, in the United States. They are based on materials collected via observation, interviews, and participation, and in some cases are supplemented with archival materials such as newspaper reports. Taking ethnography as a sub-field under the umbrella of anthropology, Meyer Fortes suggests that writing anthropology ‘involves breaking up the vivid, kaleidoscopic reality of human action, thought and emotion which lives in the anthropologist’s note-books and memory, and creating

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<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 3.

out of the pieces a coherent representation of a society.’<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the ethnographer shares a similar task to the historian in that they must construct a narrative based on the evidence available to them. Hayden White argues that historical narratives are never simply a recording of “what happened” but that the process of “emplotment”, of shaping a narrative around evidence, transforms scientific, discursive writing into a narrative that contains fictive elements.<sup>10</sup> He claims that the historian is in essence a story teller, and this seems to hold true for the ethnographer under Fortes’ definition of anthropological writing.

On the other hand, the texts contained in the latter two chapters of this thesis fit into the category of literature in that they are largely works of fiction and poetry. Works of the imagination, as Eagleton suggests, allow us to ‘feel’ and ‘perceive’ the ideology from which they spring and indeed, the texts here provide insight into the ideologies of their historical moments.<sup>11</sup> The modern writer, Lionel Gossman suggests, is ‘a maker of meanings.’<sup>12</sup> I argue that both sets of texts, ethnographic and literary, function in this way; ‘[i]t does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same.’<sup>13</sup> Rose De Angelis advocates investigating the crossover between anthropology and literature arguing that the relationship between the two ‘works well’ and contributes to the

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<sup>9</sup> Meyer Fortes quoted in David Jacobson, ed., *Reading Ethnography* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 88-9.

<sup>11</sup> Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 229.

<sup>13</sup> White, *Tropics*, 98.

desire of scholars in both disciplines to ‘redefine literature as a cultural “artifact” or social “discourse.”’<sup>14</sup>

Whilst the historian, ethnographer, and author share a similar task, it is important not to completely overlook the boundaries between these disciplines. Whilst the manner of making sense of the world and of producing these narratives may be similar, as White suggests, the way in which they are consumed and imagined by the reader differ. Ethnographic accounts carry a claim to ‘truth’ that literary ones do not. That is not to impose a position of superiority on one approach over the other but to note that they each carry different claims to cultural truth and meaning. In light of this, it is important to retain the notion of a disciplinary boundary between ethnography and literature. However, this boundary should be conceived of as permeable and elements from each can be found in the other. It is because of this permeable boundary that it is fruitful to examine works of ethnography and literature alongside one another. Both are heavily invested in the project to make sense of the world, to construct impressions of people and life, and each contributes to the formation of images of culture. All the texts examined here demonstrate this and contribute to the meaning of and construction of discourse on African-based beliefs in the cultural imagination.

### Historical Overview

Given the broad chronological range and exploratory approach that this thesis takes, it does not claim to offer an exhaustive account of representations of African-based belief systems across the twentieth century. Rather, the investigation that follows

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<sup>14</sup> Rose De Angelis, *Between Anthropology and Literature: Interdisciplinary Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

focuses on some of the most notable efforts to shape impressions of African-based beliefs during this period, some of which were more impactful on the discourse about African-based beliefs than others. The texts contained in this thesis, whilst falling broadly into two disciplinary categories, also fall broadly into two historical periods. The ethnographic works were produced between 1928 and 1946 and the literary works were published in the 1970s and 1980s, largely corresponding with the Harlem Renaissance and the post-Civil Rights/Black Power era.

Each period signifies a point in history where interest in hoodoo was more pronounced, both academically and culturally. Anderson argues that since Reconstruction there have broadly been three “waves” of interest in hoodoo; the first wave was from the mid-1880s to the turn of the twentieth century, the second from the late 1920s and ending in the 1940s, and the third in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> My project focuses on the latter two twentieth-century moments when exchanges between literature and social sciences came to fruition; it seeks to contextualize them and expose the ways in which African-based beliefs were conceptualised during these two twentieth-century moments.

The beginning of the first wave from the mid-1880s occurred at approximately the same time as the emergence of African American folklore as a branch of scholarly study. This moment of emergence is often traced back to a letter written by William Wells Newell that appeared in the inaugural volume of the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1888 that announced an agenda for the newly founded and predominantly white membership of the American Folklore Society that

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<sup>15</sup> Anderson, *Conjure*, 3.

included the study of the “Lore of Negroes in the Southern States of the Union”.<sup>16</sup> Shirley Moody-Turner offers an alternative moment of emergence in Anna Julia Cooper’s 1894 Address to the Hampton Folklore Society on the significance of black folklore. Cooper recognized that impressions of black folklore took shape ‘within a larger context that often regarded African American cultural traditions in dismissive and/or derogatory terms’ and accordingly, she advocated for the recovery of black folklore through the works of black authors and folklorists.<sup>17</sup> Moody-Turner traces the efforts of black authors, scholars, and folklorists to recover these cultural traditions over the next decade or so, noting in particular the work of the Hampton Folklore Institute and authors such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt. She suggests that black folklorists, intellectuals, and cultural workers of this period experimented with forms and strategies to present black folklore. The product of this experimentation, she says, ‘centered on excavating what had become ingrained, and often naturalized, protocols for depicting African American culture.’<sup>18</sup> Their work challenged dominant, popular, and often problematic discourses on black folklore and highlighted the role that configurations of black folklore played in the politics of racial representation. As a result of the professionalization of African American folklore scholarship and the project to recover black folklore pioneered by Cooper, numerous articles on black folklore and conjuring practices emerged in various locations during the 1880s and 1890s, including the *Journal of American Folklore*

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<sup>16</sup> William Wells Newell, “On the Field and Work of a Journal of American Folk-Lore,” *Journal of American Folklore* 1, no.1 (1888): 3. In the same volume, Newell published an article entitled “Myths of Voodoo Worship and Child Sacrifice in Hayti” which detailed European accounts of sacrifice and cannibalism that the author concluded had ‘in all probability, no real existence, but are a product of popular imagination.’ See William Wells Newell, “Myths of Voodoo Worship and Child Sacrifice in Hayti,” *Journal of American Folklore* 1, no. 1 (1888): 16-30

<sup>17</sup> Shirley Moody-Turner, *Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.



and the *Southern Workman* (a publication operated by the Hampton Folklore Institute).<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the steady stream of scholarly articles on African-based beliefs that appeared in the 1880s and 1890s, folkloric collections concerning African-based beliefs appeared elsewhere. Mary Alicia Owen's *Voodoo Tales as Told among the Negroes of the Southwest* (1893), a collection of folktales about animals who appear as conjuror figures, became popular, as did other collections of folktales concerning hoodoo including Charles Colcock Jones Jr.'s *Gullah Folktales from the Georgia Coast* (1888) and Joel Chandler Harris' *Stories from Uncle Remus* (1906). Similarly, fictional treatments of conjure appeared during this era, perhaps most notably Charles Chesnutt's collection of short stories titled *Conjure Woman* (1899) which refused to accept the narrative of the Old South as presented in plantation literature and instead deployed conjure as a lens through which to examine race relations and means to demonstrate black resistance to white culture during this era.

The volume of publications on conjure decreased during the 1910s but by the mid-1920s, interest in conjure began to grow.<sup>20</sup> Newbell Niles Puckett's *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926) indicated growing interest as did Zora Neale Hurston's article 'Hoodoo in America' published in *The Journal of American Folklore* in 1931

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<sup>19</sup> For example, Alcée Fortier, "Customs and Superstitions in Louisiana," *Journal of American Folklore* 1, no.2 (1888): 136-140; W. W. Newell, "Reports of Voodoo Worship in Hayti and Louisiana," *Journal of American Folklore* 2, no.4 (1889): 41-7; Louis Pendleton "Notes on Negro-Folklore and Witchcraft in the South," *Journal of American Folklore* 3, no.10 (1890): 201-7; Louise Kennedy "Voodoo and Vodun," *Journal of American Folklore* 3, no.10 (1890): 241; Leonora Herron and Alice Bacon, "Conjuring and Conjure Doctors," *Southern Workman* 24, no.7 (1895):117-8 reprinted in *Journal of American Folklore* as "Conjuring and Conjure Doctors in the Southern United States," *Journal of American Folklore* 9, no.33 (1896): 143-7; "Conjure Doctors in the South," *Southern Workman* 7, no.4 (1878): 30-1; "About the Conjuring Doctors," *Southern Workman* 7, no.5 (1878): 38-9; "Some Conjure Doctors We Have Heard Of," *Southern Workman* 26, no. 2 (1897): 37-8.

<sup>20</sup> Anderson explains the downturn thus: 'The reason for this change was that the nation at large had come to accept the South and its distinctiveness as American.' Anderson, *Conjure*, 10. There could also be several other contributing factors such as the *Southern Workman* dropping its folklore and ethnology column in 1910 and the impact of the First World War on narratives about the nation.

which would later be revised as a section of *Mules and Men* (1935). This period of intensification of interest, from the late 1920s to the mid-1940s, marks the entry point for this thesis and corresponds with a broader flourishing of works that addressed the experiences and cultures of black life in the United States, the Harlem Renaissance. Artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Nella Larsen, amongst numerous others, challenged white cultural hegemony and produced a “new” black aesthetic through art, literature, music, and theatre. While there was a multitude of artistic activity in Harlem brought about by the social and demographic changes that occurred in the city as a result of the Great Migration, it is important to remember, as Cary D. Wintz highlights, that the Harlem Renaissance was a national movement and the environment and consciousness that was emerging in Harlem was replicated in other northern cities as well as in southern cities like Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, Kansas City, and Los Angeles, amongst other in the South West.<sup>21</sup> James Weldon Johnson, in the preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* described the central concern of the Harlem Renaissance thus:

The status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions. And nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cary D. Wintz, “Harlem and the Renaissance: 1920-1940,” in *Women Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Amy Helene Kirschke (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>22</sup> James Weldon Johnson, “Introduction,” in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. J. W. Johnson (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, [1922] 2006), 13.

Johnson and other African American artists and writers saw the Renaissance as an opportunity for African Americans to reshape conceptions of black identity and ultimately as the beginning of a renegotiation of the position of African Americans in society.

One of the central themes of the Harlem Renaissance was representing folk culture. Victor Kramer claims that after the First World War, there was a resurgence of interest in folk material in Harlem.<sup>23</sup> Several artists believed that part of what they were doing in Harlem was making an effort to rewrite and reinterpret black life, in part to challenge the often derogatory depictions of black people and black culture typically based on plantation traditions and blackface minstrelsy that had been produced by whites for several decades before. Harlem Renaissance artists sought to provide an accurate depiction of black life and culture and a major facet of this effort was to offer a more truthful rendering of black folk traditions. Charles Rowell suggests that art and writing produced during the Harlem Renaissance could be divided into three distinct directions: firstly a subscription to the “just like white folks philosophy” which sought to emphasise the similarities between black and white people; secondly, the promotion of the image of the “exotic Negro” and the accentuation of the “primitivism” of black people; and thirdly the reinterpretation and re-evaluation of black folk tradition.<sup>24</sup> It is partly due to the work of this second and third group, and of the Renaissance more broadly, that interest in African American conjuring traditions was revived.

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<sup>23</sup> Victor A. Kramer, “Introduction,” in *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, ed. V. A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>24</sup> C. H. Rowell, “Sterling A. Brown and the Afro-American Folk Tradition,” in *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, ed. V. A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 316.

The connection between primitivism and African American culture was also reconfigured during this period. As chapters one and two of this thesis will expand upon, the motif of primitivism manifested in various ways and with different political and cultural motivations. The primitive, during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, was a term loaded with connotations that suggested the people or objects it described were uncivilised, irrational, and not modern. However, modernist artists' employment of primitive images and influences complicated all that primitive had come to signify in the decades before.

Sieglinde Lemke describes primitivist modernism as a product of the European encounter with African art. Using Picasso's painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* to illustrate this interaction, Lemke argues that contact with African arts influenced European artists to move away from realist expressions and to experiment with nonrepresentational aesthetic forms.<sup>25</sup> James Clifford also calls on Picasso to explain 'an origin story of modernism': 'Around 1910 Picasso and his cohort suddenly recognize that "primitive" objects are in fact powerful "art". They collect, imitate, and are affected by these objects. Their own work, even when not directly influenced, seems oddly reminiscent of non-Western forms. The modern and the primitive converse across the centuries and continents.'<sup>26</sup> Primitivist modernism, popular amongst Harlem Renaissance writers and artists, can be understood as a project or aesthetic that emphasised the affinity (to borrow Clifford's phrase) between European and non-Western forms of artistic expression rather than employing a narrative of opposition between civilised and uncivilised, as had come before. Indeed, numerous European artists viewed their encounter with the primitive

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<sup>25</sup> Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>26</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 190.

in positive terms and speaking of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Picasso remarked the primitivism of the African masks allowed him to 'liberate an utterly original artistic style of compelling, even savage force.'<sup>27</sup> This comment and use of the word 'savage' demonstrates that even though modernists deployed primitivist imagery in new ways and with different aims, they sometimes still invoked old stereotypes that rested on the dichotomy between the civilised and the savage.

The appropriation of non-Western art by European artists is complex. Although the emphasis of connections across cultures works to critique theories of cultural evolution, the "discovery" of tribal art reproduces hegemonic Western assumptions rooted in the colonial and neocolonial epoch.'<sup>28</sup> Indeed, not all white artists presented European encounters with non-Western cultures in positive terms during this period. As Toni Morrison and Gina Rosetti have highlighted, some works produced by white artists, for example Joseph Conrad's early modernist novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899), instead employed an Africanist presence as a site to project white cultural fears and obsessions.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, they entwined primitivism with blackness, both fearing and fetishizing what black primitivism represented: connection to nature, uninhibited sexuality, magic, and mysticism.

But Lemke argues that it was not just European artists who produced work that employed a primitivist aesthetic during this period. Indeed, many African American artists presented primitivist modernist aesthetics in their work, for

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<sup>27</sup> Sam Hunter, John Jacobus, and David Wheeler, *Modern Art*, Revised and Updated 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (New York: The Vendome Press, 2004), 135-6.

<sup>28</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 197.

<sup>29</sup> See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3-28 and Gina Rosetti, *Imagining the Primitive in Naturalist and Primitive Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 146-7. David Levering Lewis' *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) also explores the multiple ways in which African American art, and its primitive aesthetic, was fetishized by white patrons and consumers during the Harlem Renaissance.

example Josephine Baker's *Danse Sauvage* and Duke Ellington's "Jungle Style". She suggests that artists of the Harlem Renaissance sought to employ this trend but with a different political motivation in mind and argues that when Alain Locke encouraged black artists 'to imitate European primitivist modernism and to get in touch with their "African" legacy, he did so to fight American racism by revealing the American Negro to be a producer of culture and deserving of political equality.'<sup>30</sup> Locke and other black artists who adopted primitivist modernist aesthetics often did so to exemplify the ways in which black contributions have been instrumental and integral to the making of American culture. Darryl Dickson-Carr suggests that just as African Americans wanted to be considered full partners in the creation of modern America, as expressed in W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), black artists and writers also desired to be appreciated 'as modernists or in their shaping of modernism itself by their very presence and cultural riches.'<sup>31</sup> Primitivist modernist aesthetics were often employed to demonstrate how African American art was American art and to highlight the creativity of black Americans and their centrality in the shaping of the nation's culture.<sup>32</sup>

Prior to the period that this thesis focuses upon, folk cultures and notions of civilisation and primitivism had been used as a means to judge the intellectual capacity and "stage of human development" of groups, however as will be further discussed in chapter two, images of the primitive, particularly the African Other, were complicated by modernist artists and writers in the twentieth century as well as

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<sup>30</sup> Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Darryl Dickson-Carr, "African Americans and the Making of Modernity," *American Literary History* 23, no.3 (2013): 672.

<sup>32</sup> For more on how African Americans were central to American modernism see W. Fitzhugh Brundage ed., *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011)

by the influence of Boasian theories of cultural relativism in anthropology which largely disputed those of cultural evolution.<sup>33</sup>

Concurrently, in the field of anthropology, Franz Boas was becoming increasingly instrumental in scholarship on black folk culture. Boas was a professor of anthropology at Columbia University and mentored some of the most influential anthropologists in the field including Melville Herskovits, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict. Chireau claims that both Boas and William Wells Newell (who edited the *Journal of American Folklore* for its first ten years from 1888) ‘were responsible for cultivating the interest of an entire generation in African American folklore.’<sup>34</sup> Boas believed understanding culture and folklore could help mend racial division in the United States. He thought that the study of black folklore in particular could ‘assist blacks in their efforts at social advancement’ and ‘augment African American racial pride by the study and interpretation of traditions from the past.’<sup>35</sup> His influence was far-reaching and his desire to recover African American folklore, both in the interest of furthering racial harmony in society and to preserve “relics” of the past, was undoubtedly instrumental in stimulating this second wave of scholarly interest in hoodoo. A discussion of Boas and Boasian concepts of culture will be conducted in subsequent chapters.

In order to focus this first part of my investigation, I have selected works that focus on African-based beliefs in New Orleans. There are several factors that inform the rationale to narrow this part of my thesis by location. Firstly, in many ways New Orleans is seen as exceptional in comparison to other American cities. Though there

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<sup>33</sup> For more on the construction of the Other and the fetishization of non-Western cultures and peoples see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). For more on the African Other in literature see Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*.

<sup>34</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 135.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

are arguments that posit that African-based belief systems developed uniquely in other areas too, in Florida for example due to the large Cuban population, the systems in New Orleans captured the nation's imagination in ways that other locations did not.<sup>36</sup> This means that representations of African-based belief systems in the United States, particularly Voodoo, are often intertwined with representations of New Orleans. The relationship between Voodoo and New Orleans in the cultural imagination is reciprocal: accounts of Voodoo often refer to New Orleans and accounts of New Orleans almost always refer to Voodoo. For the ethnographers in the chapters that follow, New Orleans was seen as the most fertile ground for collecting testimony about conjuring traditions in the United States. Both Hurston and Hyatt, along with other ethnographers and the wider population, envisioned the city as the most magically rich in the country. New Orleans was and remains, as Hurston stated, the hoodoo capital of America.<sup>37</sup>

The second part of this thesis shifts focus to a second moment of pronounced interest in African-based belief systems. Similarly to the first, this second moment appears in conjunction with a broader flowering of African American cultural expression. This is concomitant with the decline of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of the Black Power and Black Arts movements and reflects a moment in which calls for black self-determination were renewed in all areas of life. In *Spectacular Blackness*, Amy Abugo Ongiri argues that scholars should resist interpreting the Black Power Movement as a force that brought about the death of the Civil Rights Movement. Agreeing with Peniel Joseph's assessment that Black Power should be understood 'as an alternative to the ineffectiveness of civil rights demands in critical areas of American life', Ongiri suggests instead that we should

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of how conjure developed in Florida see Anderson, *Conjure*, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, [1935] 1990), 183.



view African American culture of the 1960s and 70s ‘in relation to an understanding of culture as “a noun of process,” as Raymond Williams has declared in *Keywords*.’<sup>38</sup> The primary focus of the Civil Rights Movement was to secure legislation that prohibited discrimination and secured equal rights in voter registration, employment, and other aspects of public life including the desegregation of schools and other establishments such as hotels, transport, and restaurants. The Black Power Movement went beyond these concerns and sought to address the cultural sphere as well as the political and economic. Malcolm X, whom William Van Deburg calls ‘a Black Power paradigm’, made clear that black culture was a central part of the freedom movement.<sup>39</sup> Though Black Power leaders held numerous views on how to attain black self-determination and they were divided on issues of violence and separatism, the importance of promoting racial pride and a sense of unity amongst black people in the United States was steadfast across the movement. The 1960s saw a dramatic increase in the creation of black cultural and creative institutions as well as the emergence of numerous groups of black artists who produced a new black aesthetic in poetry, theatre, music, and performance, most notably the Black Arts Movement.<sup>40</sup> Rather than abandoning the political concerns of the Civil Rights Movement, these groups addressed, explored, and challenged them through art and popular culture.

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<sup>38</sup> Peniel Joseph, “Introduction: Toward a History of the Black Power Movement,” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3; and Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2009), 3.

<sup>39</sup> William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement in American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.

<sup>40</sup> For an overview of black institutions post-1960s see National Research Council, “Identity and Institutions in the Black Community,” in *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society*, eds. Gerald David Jaynes and Robin M. Williams Jr. (Washington DC: National Academies Press, 1989), 186-191.

The second part also expands its scope to examine the treatment of conjure through the lens of black art and particularly black creative writing. Building on understandings of hoodoo through the lens of ethnographers whose work focused on the political and social functions of conjure, the latter two chapters explore how hoodoo was configured in the cultural domain, specifically through works of fiction and poetry. The treatments of African-based beliefs examined in the first part of this thesis should not be viewed as distinct or separate from those in the second, rather they should be viewed as a part of the same process. To do otherwise would overlook the connections and continuities between them and would assume that the issues they are concerned with are not interrelated. Indeed, some of the narratives and images that appear in the ethnographic works that this thesis examines, including conjure as a mode of resistance and as a means to reconnect with an African lineage or history, resurface in literature of the 1970s and 80s.

James Edward Smethurst argues that the rise of Black Power achieved a sense of cohesion through a common thread: 'a belief that African Americans were a people, a nation, entitled to (needing, really) self-determination of its own destiny.'<sup>41</sup> He suggests that the strategies to achieve self-determination and what forms that might take varied regionally, but that across these movements there was a clear emphasis on 'the need to develop, or expand upon, a distinctly African American or African culture that stood in opposition to white culture or cultures.'<sup>42</sup> Without striving to achieve this goal, there was a sense that African Americans would 'remain oppressed and exploited second-class (or non-) citizens in the United

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<sup>41</sup> James E. Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 15.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

States.’<sup>43</sup> It therefore stands to reason then that when a renewed call to redefine and promote black cultural identity as part of a rhetoric of Black Power swept across the nation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, literature on conjure began to appear with more frequency. The Black Arts Movement encompassed a broad range of beliefs, ideologies, and aesthetics but ‘all strains of [the Black Arts Movement] were generally united by a belief in the need for African Americans to determine their own political and cultural destiny within the international struggle against colonialism, neocolonialism, and racism.’<sup>44</sup> The passing of the Civil Rights act in 1964 signalled the moment that segregation was over and African American rights were officially recognised as American rights. During this era, Black Power leaders as well as artists and writers embarked on a project to forge a new black aesthetic and this included the location of black culture within a longer history. In *Black Power*, Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) articulated the necessity to recover black cultural heritage and the growing awareness of this project amongst the black community:

More and more black people are developing this feeling. They are becoming aware that they have a history that pre-dates their forced introduction to this country. African-American history means a long history beginning on the continent of Africa, a history not taught in the standard textbooks of this country. It is absolutely essential that black people know this history, that they know their roots, that they develop an awareness of their cultural heritage. Too long have they been kept in submission by being told they had no culture, no

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>James Smethurst, “Black Arts Movement,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, ed. Roland Greene et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 118.

manifest heritage, before they landed on the slave auction blocks of this country. If black people are to know themselves as a vibrant, valiant people, they must know their roots.<sup>45</sup>

A pan-Africanist, Kwame and other leaders of the movement advocated for the rediscovery of a black heritage that originated in Africa and the formation of a cultural connection across the African diaspora. Conjure was reconceptualised in African American literature as part of a wider trend in the rediscovery of and reconnection with an African heritage spearheaded by the Black Power and Black Arts movements in the late 1960s and 1970s. These peaks in interest, during the Harlem Renaissance and again when the Black Power and Black Arts movements emerged, suggest that attention to conjure peaked as part of wider moments when African American art, literature, and culture flourished more visibly.

#### African-based belief systems in the United States

African-based belief systems are exhibited chiefly through two systems in the texts contained in this thesis: New Orleans Voodoo and hoodoo, otherwise referred to as conjure or root working practices. Each of the texts that this thesis examines features some iteration of one of these two systems; the first three chapters focus on New Orleans Voodoo and the latter two discuss texts that deal with conjure. It is first worth noting that New Orleans Voodoo should not be confused with a generalized definition of Voodoo that has come to signify and encompass New Orleans Voodoo, Haitian Vodou, and West African Vodun or Vodún. Often these systems are equated under a generalized understanding of Voodoo and without an engaged

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<sup>45</sup> Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, [1967] 1992), 38-9.

recognition of the idiosyncrasies of these individual systems. Whilst New Orleans Voodoo may have similarities with other New World African diasporic belief systems such as Santería, Lucimí, Candomblé, Espiritismo or Obeah, New Orleans Voodoo, as its name suggests, refers to a distinct set of religious practices that developed in New Orleans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>46</sup>

New Orleans Voodoo is a syncretic religion that is practised by a diverse group of people and evolved within New Orleans' unique history, politics, and culture. It continues to be practised in the city today and is constantly developing under a *mélange* of economic, social, and cultural influences. Syncretic religions are the result of the blending of multiple belief systems that 'seek to honor the gods and spirits who people the believers' world.'<sup>47</sup> For instance, elements of Catholicism can be seen in New Orleans Voodoo, as can elements of Native American beliefs, due to the interaction of New Orleans' diverse population and the city's transient history. New Orleans Voodoo, like other variants of Voodoo, recognises the existence of a higher power and consists of a pantheon of deities whom believers seek to honour through ritual.

Jeffrey Anderson partially attributes New Orleans' distinctive Voodoo practices to the arrival of large numbers of Haitians in the city during the early nineteenth century following the nation's slave-led revolution. This is particularly

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<sup>46</sup> For an overview of African-derived religions see chapter on 'The African Diaspora' in Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press [1978] 2004); George Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Linda Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Toyin Falola and Matt Childs, eds., *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, ed., *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Christopher Fennell, *Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007)

<sup>47</sup> Anderson, *Conjure*, x.

significant when we consider the role that Vodou played in the Haitian revolution. Kate Ramsey claims that much of the success of the revolution has been attributed to ‘African-based magico-religious practices, organization, and leadership in unifying enslaved, maroon, and free rebels in northern Saint-Domingue in 1791, and ultimately propelling the revolutionary overthrow of French colonialism and the founding of independent Haiti in 1804.’<sup>48</sup> Anderson notes that this influx occurred at a time when seventy-five percent of American slaves were born in the United States. The arrival of Haitians in the city therefore made New Orleans’ black population dissimilar to that of other cities as a higher proportion of its black residents were free and from a nation where Vodou was widely practiced. Voodoo had long been active in New Orleans before the influx of Haitians, but their presence spurred and shaped the city’s practices. Furthermore, the prevalence of Catholicism in the area also contributed to the way in which Voodoo developed in the city. Areas with high Catholic populations aided the continued practice of Voodoo in the nineteenth century. Several Catholic saints functioned in a similar capacity to Voodoo deities and so Voodooists could preserve their own pantheon of deities under Catholic names and avoid persecution by the authorities for practising Voodoo. Because of this practice, as well as the way in which several prominent Voodooists such as Marie Laveau, incorporated Catholic elements into their practices, Catholicism aided the preservation of Voodoo and influenced how it developed in the city.<sup>49</sup>

As well as functioning as a religious system, Kodi Roberts suggests that New Orleans Voodoo ‘represents a dynamic subculture [...] that was constantly growing to incorporate social and economic influences from the wider American culture as it

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<sup>48</sup> Kate Ramsey, *Vodou and Power in Haiti: The Spirits and the Law* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Anderson, *Conjure*, 34.

was expressed in early-twentieth century New Orleans.’<sup>50</sup> Subcultures, according to Clarke et al, ‘take shape around the distinctive activities and “focal concerns” of groups.’<sup>51</sup> They propose that cultures ‘always stand in relations of domination – and subordination – to one another [and], are always, in some sense, in struggle with one another.’<sup>52</sup> A subculture thus stands in a position of subordination to a dominant culture. As a subculture, Voodoo functions as a response to the ‘focal concerns’ of a group whose culture occupies a position of subordination within a dominant culture. If ‘the function of any belief system is to make sense of experience and reality’ then Voodoo, as both a syncretic belief system and a subculture, functions as a means through which practitioners experienced, understood, and interpreted, as well as responded to, ‘the material and psychological realities of their daily existence.’<sup>53</sup>

The other system that is examined in this thesis is hoodoo. Katrina Hazzard-Donald defines hoodoo as ‘the indigenous, herbal, healing, and supernatural-controlling spiritual folk tradition of the African American in the United States.’<sup>54</sup> In contrast to Voodoo, hoodoo practices are not organized around the worship of a supreme god, but practitioners do often seek to achieve their ‘practical objectives through appeals to the spirit world.’<sup>55</sup> Though hoodoo has not tended to be classified as a religion in the same way as New Orleans Voodoo, it similarly functions as a framework through which its believers and practitioners navigate the physical and psychological realities of their worlds. Chireau suggests that conjure falls into an

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<sup>50</sup> Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson & Brian Roberts, “Subcultures, Cultures, and Class: A Theoretical Overview,” in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (*Cultural Studies Birmingham*), ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (Oxford: Routledge, [1976] 2006), 14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>53</sup> Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’*, 3 and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 5 respectively.

<sup>54</sup> Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’*, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Anderson, *Conjure*, x.

intermediate category between religion and magic. Though it lacks the institutionalization of other faiths, she proposes that conjure should be viewed as a “vernacular religion” or what David Hall has termed a “lived religion” in that, like institutionalized religions, practices are ‘embedded in the ordinary experiences and the deeply held attitudes, values, and activities of members of a group or community.’<sup>56</sup> Indeed, as Lawrence Levine concludes when discussing conjure in the antebellum period, ‘[t]he slaves’ sacred folk beliefs may not have been part of their formal religion, but they were *religious* beliefs nonetheless, and many slaves would have had difficulty disentangling the web that bound their formal creed and their folk religion into an intelligible whole.’<sup>57</sup>

Like religion, hoodoo functioned as a way of explaining occurrences and navigating everyday life. Albert Raboteau posits that conjure functioned as an alternate system for explaining life events, especially instances of misfortune.<sup>58</sup> Hoodoo, as a set of religious practices then, functioned in the same way as a religion in this respect. Hazzard-Donald goes on to state that an understanding of ‘hoodoo as a system of spiritual belief and explanation reveals that it appears to address every problem that African Americans have confronted, past or present.’<sup>59</sup> These problems include resisting enslavement and the abuse inflicted upon enslaved persons by their enslavers; retaliating against or coping with the effects of institutional racism post-slavery such as legal issues, lack of adequate healthcare, and economic hardship and inequality; healing physical and mental ailments; and remedying personal relationships such as those between families, spouses, neighbours, and friends.

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<sup>56</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 4. See also David Hall, ed., *Lived Religion: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)

<sup>57</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1977] 2007), 55.

<sup>58</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 267.

<sup>59</sup> Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’*, 3.



Hoodoo or conjure responded to the everyday personal needs of members of a community through appeals to the supernatural world.

It is not my intention here to equate Voodoo and hoodoo. However, the analogous social and cultural functions of each of these systems lend themselves to an overarching analysis of the way in which these two systems and their functions manifest in the narratives and texts that this thesis explores. Moreover, they lend themselves to an analysis of the connotative blackness that they signify in the cultural imagination. Roberts states that Voodoo has long been viewed as an exclusively African American phenomenon because of a wider desire to view culture through a racialized lens and to treat cultures as racially insular or distinct.<sup>60</sup> He suggests that instead, Voodoo is a racially and culturally diverse belief system and that it is as prevalent amongst whites in New Orleans as it is blacks. He argues that the creation of culture in a multicultural nation is often the result of the interactions between different racial, ethnic, and social groups and that this is the case for Voodoo, yet impressions of it remain intertwined with the notion that it is strictly an African or African American phenomenon. The same is true of hoodoo. Anderson claims that '[n]ineteenth-century hoodoo was a result of creolization and syncretism, the mixing of multiple African, European, and Native American cultures', yet it is still largely viewed as a specifically African American phenomenon.<sup>61</sup> As Roberts states, that is not to diminish or dispute the African origins of Voodoo or hoodoo, but to acknowledge that practices and practitioners were not exclusively, even if they were predominantly, African American. Due to racialized conceptions of Voodoo and hoodoo, this thesis then is additionally concerned with how narratives about

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<sup>60</sup> Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Anderson, *Conjure*, 25.

these beliefs inevitably become narratives about the people who practice them and what they signify about blackness.

### Functions of narratives about African-based belief systems

This thesis will illuminate the political and social functions that narratives about African-based beliefs perform, most of which are concerned with significations of blackness, African American folk culture, and the politics of race and representation. The texts that serve this study and the representations of the systems present within them do not offer a singular rendering of blackness or African American culture. Instead, concomitant with the nuances between these systems, and as products of the historical, political, and cultural moments in which these texts were produced, each offer images of African-based beliefs and blackness that perform different functions.

The texts examined here depict African-based beliefs in three ways; either as a marker of racial inferiority, as a means to reconnect with an African identity or ancestry, or as a method of disrupting or navigating racialized power systems. Each of these narratives can also be located in the social and cultural functions that African-based belief systems perform in the material world or with how these beliefs have been perceived historically. As has been discussed, these narratives are largely a project in correcting or re-scripting understandings of African-based belief systems that were produced by whites for decades before and that survived into the twentieth century. The first narrative thread that this thesis interrogates is representations of African-based beliefs and practices as a marker of inferiority. This narrative has roots in scientific racism and early anthropology and folklore studies, and was often

used as a justification for the enslavement and subjugation of Africans and African Americans.

Shirley Moody-Turner argues that when folklore studies emerged as a discipline in the 1880s '[f]or many, [it] offered a way to mark, categorize, and order the allegedly uncivilized elements that persisted in civilized society.'<sup>62</sup> She cites a report of the third annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, published in 1892, in which the president, William Wells Newell, proposed a tiered system of assessing the stage of development of various groups through an analysis of their folklore. He explained that there existed three stages of development; 'savagery', 'barbarism' and 'civilisation' and suggested that even amongst the 'lowest people' there were attempts at creating systems of knowledge and explanation.<sup>63</sup> Impressions of folklore and folk beliefs offered a way to categorize and to assign hierarchical status to groups based on ideas about stages of human development. This way of thinking built on a longer tradition of the development of "scientific" theories that purported that certain races were naturally more developed than others and the findings in these studies were used as a means to justify the enslavement of Africans and African descendants in the United States.<sup>64</sup>

Outside of the professional study of folklore, the observation of a group's folk practices and beliefs were still used as a means to assess their "stage of

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<sup>62</sup> Moody-Turner, *Black Folklore*, 25.

<sup>63</sup> William Wells Newell, "Third Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society," *Journal of American Folklore* 5, no.16 (1892): 3.

<sup>64</sup> For example, see Richard H. Colfax, *Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs, of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes* (1833); Samuel Morton, *Crania Americana* (1839); Samuel Cartwright, *Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race* (1851); Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883). All of whom advocated that Africans and African descendants were biologically inferior to white races and used "evidence" such as the measuring of skulls to support their theories. For an overview of the development of scientific racism in nineteenth-century America see Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002)

development”. According to Moody-Turner impressions of black folklore were largely based on Plantation Tradition literature and the performance of blackface minstrelsy. The images of black people perpetuated in both of these traditions propose that black culture was “behind” white culture. Plantation Tradition literature typically looked back nostalgically upon times before the Civil War and romanticized the slave-master relationship, often depicting it as paternalistic.<sup>65</sup> White enslavers were portrayed as benevolent father figures who, along with their kind and god-fearing wives, cared for faithful “servants” who populated his plantation. This genre of literature and the depiction of black people as reliant upon the guidance of their enslavers raised questions about whether African Americans were able to form their own “civilised” traditions or whether, as Moody-Turner phrases it, they ‘merely imitated or “aped” white cultural forms.’<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, the portrayal of black culture in minstrel performances in the North, popular from the early nineteenth and into the twentieth century, also raised questions about the intellectual and developmental capacity of African Americans. The popular caricatured depictions of black folklore, music, dances, and jokes, amongst other elements of black life, produced impressions of black people and culture that rested on the entertainment and satiation of the white imagination. Minstrel performers portrayed black people as simple-minded and superstitious and the act of “blacking up” confirmed that these were characteristics of black people and not white people. This caricatured image upheld notions of white racial supremacy and reinforced the rationale behind legal and political hierarchies of race

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<sup>65</sup> For more on the myth of idyllic south and black folk culture in plantation tradition literature see J. V. Ridgley, *Nineteenth-Century Southern Literature* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980); Jeremy Wells, *Romances of the White Man’s Burden: Race, Empire, and the Plantation in American Literature, 1880–1936* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011); Brook Thomas, *The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016)

<sup>66</sup> Moody-Turner, *Black Folklore*, 29.

whereby blacks were deemed inferior.<sup>67</sup> Narratives of African-based belief systems as uncivilised were part of a wider ideology and set of images that upheld existing hierarchies of race and acted as further justification for the second-class status of African Americans in society.

The second narrative thread that this thesis traces is the portrayal of African-based beliefs and practices as a means to connect to an African identity or ancestral past. Hazzard-Donald asserts that '[e]ssentially, Hoodoo, for African Americans, is the embodied historical memory linking them back through time to previous generations and ultimately to their African past.'<sup>68</sup> Conjuring practices have been conceived of by scholars as African survivals. Deploying the term 'Africanisms' to refer to these survivals, Melville J. Herskovits explains that enslaved Africans and their descendants retained elements of their African cultures in various aspects of life, particularly in religion.<sup>69</sup> Raboteau claims that several examples of conjure rituals are 'demonstrably African in origin' and that they represent 'vestiges of African beliefs removed from their fully intelligible theological and ritual contexts but still remembered.'<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Lawrence Levine commends W. E. B. DuBois for his assertion that 'the "Priest or Medicine-man" was the chief surviving institution that African slaves had brought with them' and that it was therefore necessary to look to Africa 'for an understanding of a substantial part of the slaves' religious consciousness.'<sup>71</sup> However scholars have challenged such assumptions and assert that rather than being viewed as remnants or survivals of Africa, it is perhaps more

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<sup>67</sup> For more on the development and impact of blackface minstrelsy see Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1993] 2013) and Stephen Johnson, ed., *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012)

<sup>68</sup> Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin'*, 4

<sup>69</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press [1941], 2005)

<sup>70</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 80.

<sup>71</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 58.

fruitful to view these practices as expressions of American experiences that have analogues in African and African diasporic religious practices which also contain elements that are unique to the American context. Contrary to the dominant scholarly consensus, Roberts posits that the current academic record has not definitively established that Voodoo has its origins in Africa, arguing not that Voodoo cannot be traced to Africa, but that it has not been.<sup>72</sup> That being said, whether or not enough research has yet been done to prove that Voodoo and conjure have African origins, both are still widely perceived to have by academics and in the cultural imagination alike.

The association of hoodoo and Voodoo with Africa and African origins serves an important purpose for its practitioners. While Herskovits recognised that the identification of 'Africanisms' in religion and African American culture could be used as 'one of the principal supports of race prejudice in this country', for Africans and African Americans it offered a means of connecting to a familial or ancestral identity which was often lost as a result of the violent removal of Africans from their homeland and the following forced separation and destruction of families as a result of the domestic slave trade.<sup>73</sup> A central part of several of these practices involved calling upon the ancestors for help in achieving various goals. This interaction provided a connection to an African past and therefore access to a sense of belonging to a wider community of Africans and African descendants in the New World.<sup>74</sup>

The way in which African-based beliefs function in the United States as a method of disrupting racialized power, the third narrative that this thesis discusses,

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<sup>72</sup> Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 1.

<sup>74</sup> Chireau suggests that 'in the eyes of many blacks, these supernatural traditions were the bridge that connected the spiritual heritage of the ancestors with the adopted traditions of North America.' *Black Magic*, 33.

can be dated back to the era of slavery. Walter Rucker outlines the power attributed to plantation conjurers by their enslavers and suggests that in their capacity as healers, counsellors, and spiritual guides, conjurers inspired acts of resistance or rebellion amongst their followers. Conjurers and their professed powers were feared by white slave owners across the South and were believed to have been integral to the success of several slave rebellions including examples in New York in 1741, Richmond in 1800, and perhaps most notably, Denmark Vesey's rebellion in Charleston in 1882.<sup>75</sup> A man known as Gullah Jack was one of Denmark Vesey's key co-conspirators in the uprising and was responsible for the recruitment of fellow slaves. Gullah Jack was an African conjurer who was brought to South Carolina via the Middle Passage and is said to have brought with him a bag of conjuring supplies. His fellow slaves understood him to be a powerful sorcerer and as such he was feared by both blacks and whites alike. As conjurer and co-conspirator, he offered his fellow rebels "charms" which they believed would protect them from death, injury, and capture during the rebellion.<sup>76</sup> Gullah Jack's unique position in the community made him very effective at recruitment. His role as conjurer played an integral part in the planning and execution of one of the biggest slave rebellions in the United States. As Rucker argues, it was not that conjurers' mastery of other-worldly knowledge or power ensured the success of rebellions, but their elevated status within the slave community gave them considerable influence and was 'vital to the creation of a revolutionary consciousness' amongst enslaved persons.<sup>77</sup> As

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<sup>75</sup> Walter Rucker, "Conjure, Magic, and Power: The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave Resistance and Rebellion," *Journal of Black Studies* 23, no.1 (2001): 91-2.

<sup>76</sup> Jason Young, *Ritual Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Low Country South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2007), 140.

<sup>77</sup> Rucker, "Slave Resistance and Rebellion," 100.

John Blassingame suggests, '[i]n many instances, the conjurer had more control over the slaves than the master had.'<sup>78</sup>

Not only were African-based beliefs thought to be responsible for larger scale slave rebellions, they were also used in a more personal capacity for protection, resistance, and in some cases, retribution for mistreatment. One of the most notable examples can be found in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* in which Douglass is presented with a root from a fellow enslaved person named Sandy. Sandy tells Douglass that as long as he carries the root he will be protected from the abuse of Mr. Covey, the "slave breaker".<sup>79</sup> Though sceptical at first, Douglass says that he was not subjected to any more whippings after Sandy had given him the root. Not only was he protected from Covey's violence, but he also found the strength and courage to challenge him. They fought, and Douglass felt that Covey got 'entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him.'<sup>80</sup> In the months that followed their confrontation, he was not hurt again by Mr. Covey. Douglass' testimony is one of many that exemplify how African-based beliefs and practices stirred a 'revolutionary consciousness' within individual enslaved persons. Furthermore, not only was the conjurer's knowledge of roots used as a means of protection from physical and psychological harm but often their knowledge was used to cause harm to enslavers in acts of retaliation or retribution for mistreatment. Chireau details numerous reported

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<sup>78</sup> John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 110.

<sup>79</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, (New York: Dover Books [1845] 1995), 41-2.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.



incidents of people poisoning their enslavers in the antebellum period, some of which resulted in death.<sup>81</sup>

This revolutionary consciousness did not fade with the abolition of slavery; instead it carried over into the postbellum period. Roberts suggests that Voodoo practices in the twentieth century were ‘generally speaking, attempts to counter what practitioners viewed as disadvantages of power.’<sup>82</sup> Practitioners and their clients often engaged in rituals that were aimed at obtaining a greater sense of social or economic control. Harry Hyatt, whose interviews with practitioners will be examined in greater detail in chapter three, documented numerous instances of rituals aimed at resolving disputes between landlords and tenants or employers and employees, securing stable work or obtaining money, as well as settling feuds between neighbours, family members, love rivals and friends. As Chireau notes, these rituals were not confined to relations between blacks and whites. In fact, she says that the number of reported poisonings of whites by blacks declined in the nineteenth century and that instances of intra-racial harming became more typical.<sup>83</sup> Voodoo and hoodoo evolved in the twentieth century and adapted to a range of fluctuating circumstances, but it still continued to exist as a means to obtain power and resist positions of subordination.

Not only were African-based practices used as a means of disrupting and obtaining power, but oftentimes they also functioned as a way to cope with various forms of disadvantage and as a mechanism of care for the black community. The clearest example of this is the way in which conjuring practices acted as a healthcare

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<sup>81</sup> See chapter titled “‘Folks Can Do Yuh Lots of Harm’: African American Supernatural Harming Traditions’ in Chireau, *Black Magic*, 59-90.

<sup>82</sup> Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 77.

system, both during slavery and beyond. Sharla Fett, Stephanie Mitchem, and Herbert Covey outline the methods by which enslaved people healed not only one another but sometimes their enslavers using knowledge of herbs and roots as well as spiritual methods of healing.<sup>84</sup> Herbert Covey inventoried the various medical practices of enslaved people and suggests that more often alternative approaches to healing were used than formal medical care. He argues that the prevalence of folk medicine amongst the enslaved was largely ‘driven by a lack of adequate or effective medical care provided by White plantation society.’<sup>85</sup> Conjurers and enslaved “herb doctors” were relied upon to treat the enslaved sick. The need for such figures came as a direct result of the neglect and mistreatment of the enslaved community. Sharla Fett argues that the relationship between the black community and western medicine is built not only on the historical medical neglect of black people but abuse of black people by white medical practitioners.<sup>86</sup> This type of abuse did not end with the abolition of slavery as exemplified in the case of the Tuskegee experiment.<sup>87</sup> As such, a mistrust of western medicine persisted in the African American community and alternative herbal medicine, sometimes coupled with spiritual healing, continued

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<sup>84</sup> Herbert Covey, *African-American Slave Medicine: Herbal and Non-Herbal Treatments* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007); Sharla Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Stephanie Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

<sup>85</sup> Covey, *Slave Medicine*, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Fett, *Working Cures*, 1-2. See for example the case of J. Marion Sims who experimented on enslaved women without anaesthesia, outlined in: Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origin of American Gynecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017). For more on medical racism in the U.S. see: Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2005); John Hoberman, *Black and Blue: The Origins and Consequences of Medical Racism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and Stephen C. Kenny, ‘Power, Opportunism, Racism: Human Experiments under American Slavery’ *Endeavour* 39, no.1 (2015): 10-20.

<sup>87</sup> The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male was an unethical experiment conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service between 1932 and 1972 that left 600 African American men with untreated cases of syphilis. For further see: James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: The Free Press, 1993); Susan M. Reverby, *Examining Tuskegee: The Infamous Syphilis Study and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009)

to function after the abolition of slavery and will be further discussed in chapters two and three. This narrative about African-based beliefs as a means to disrupt and address the imbalance of power is one that has endured through the nineteenth and twentieth century and that is continuously revisited by authors at the two key moments that this thesis is concerned with.

The chapters that follow will chart the ways in which these historical narratives of African-based beliefs as a marker of racial inferiority, as a link to an African ancestry and history, and as a mean to resist and cope with racism and oppression are represented in texts that emerged during the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power era. As we will see, these narratives surface as part of wider efforts to affirm black identity by both white and black authors alike.

Chapter one examines three examples of New Orleans travel literature: *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928), the *WPA Guide to New Orleans* (1938) and *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1945). These publications all stem from the work of two prominent Louisiana Federal Writers' Project workers: Lyle Saxon, who was the head of the Louisiana unit, and Robert Tallant. This chapter explores how Saxon and Tallant presented Voodoo as part of the fabric of the Crescent city. It examines the way in which they sensationalise Voodoo rituals and present them as a spectacle for white tourists. I interrogate their representation of the components of the ceremony as well as their descriptions of Voodooists and argue that they primarily depict Voodoo as a marker of inferiority. I suggest that despite the aims of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) to paint a more inclusive portrait of the United States, their presentation of Voodoo and Voodooists reflect and reinforce hierarchies of race and upholds the rationale behind notions of white racial supremacy. I also argue the location of these representations in state-sponsored guidebooks and FWP affiliated publications

means that these claims carry significant weight in the formation of images of African-based belief systems in the American cultural imagination.

Chapter two offers an examination of Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*, published in 1935. In this chapter, I consider Hurston's unique position as a black modernist anthropologist working under the direction of Franz Boas and sponsorship of wealthy white patrons. I contextualize her writing within the Harlem Renaissance and interrogate personal letters in which she describes herself as a practising hoodooist to explore how Hurston conceived of her role as interlocutor of black folk traditions. I examine how Hurston's position, training, and professional affiliations influenced her writing and presentation of black culture. I argue that the aesthetics of Hurston's account reflect the complex position she found herself in as she wrote *Mules and Men* and that as a result of this position, Hurston employed a double-gaze, as ethnographer and as insider, through which she viewed and presented hoodoo. I argue that while Hurston's account is primarily a celebration of African-based traditions and a counter narrative to impressions of hoodoo as a marker of inferiority, the aesthetics of some of the rituals in her account paradoxically echo derogatory representations of hoodoo.

Chapter three discusses amateur ethnographer Harry Middleton Hyatt's five-volume collection of oral testimony titled *Hoodoo Conjuration Witchcraft Rootwork* (1970-1979). Hyatt collected the testimony of mostly African Americans from twelve eastern and southern states between 1936 and 1940, accumulating the largest collection of testimony relating to hoodoo in existence. This chapter samples Hyatt's New Orleans interviews and utilises archival material in order to explore his methods and modes of presenting African American folklore. Though the impact of Hyatt's work on the American cultural imagination was minimal due to a variety of reasons,

I argue that Hyatt's intention and the reception to the collection garnered from scholars delineates Hyatt's work as one of the few white-authored accounts that sought to rectify the derogatory impressions of hoodoo that circulated in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. This unique collection provides a rare chance to examine narratives of African-based belief systems as voiced by practitioners themselves and provides insight into how these beliefs functioned in the lives of ordinary black New Orleanians.

Chapter four interrogates Ishmael Reed's use of what he calls the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic as a literary concept. Conceptualised in his 1972 collection of poems titled *Conjure*, the development of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic culminated in Reed's master narrative, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). Fusing symbols of African-based belief systems with his unique literary style, Reed uses Neo-HooDoo to renegotiate African American identities in the context of post-Civil Rights America. Reed emphasises the multiculturalism and cultural pluralism incumbent in hoodoo as a means to resist notions of singular racial and cultural identities. Casting himself as a literary conjuror, Reed's Neo-HooDoo aesthetic looks back to an African past to understand the present and to prophesize about African American futures. By reimagining hoodoo in a number of his works, the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic is used as means to protest and challenge white cultural hegemony, promote ideas about multiculturalism, and to advocate for freedom of individual expression and cultural sovereignty.

Chapter five examines Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) to explore how black women authors utilised the conjure woman as a figure through which black Americans can access alternative systems of knowledge as well

as an African ancestral past and identity. I suggest that black women writers of this moment configured the knowledge that conjure women possess in these novels as a representation of black feminist thought during the 1970s and 1980s. It discusses the ways in which conjure women use their knowledge to assist others in gaining a fuller understanding of their identities, discover their ancestral pasts, and become healers of various types of pain and trauma echoing the sentiments of black feminist writers and activists. It also argues that these authors revise historical representations of the conjure woman as malevolent and instead portray her as a community leader and force for good.

As my five chapters demonstrate, I trace the development of narratives about African-based belief systems at two key moments in the twentieth century. I extend individual readings of works produced by the Louisiana FWP, Hurston, Hyatt, Reed, Morrison, Shange, and Naylor, into broader historical and cultural contexts, revealing how impressions of African-based beliefs have changed over time. In doing so, I argue that accounts about these beliefs perform political, social and cultural functions in the U.S. cultural imaginary which primarily fit three central narratives: as a marker of inferiority; as a means to connect to an African ancestry and identity; and as a method to disrupt and resist racialized power.

## Chapter 1: Representing Voodoo in New Orleans Travel Literature

This chapter will examine the representation of New Orleans Voodoo in the works of two Louisiana writers, Lyle Saxon and Robert Tallant. It will analyse three primary texts: Saxon's *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928) and the *WPA Guide to New Orleans* (1938), and Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946) to expose the ways that these texts reflected and shaped popular perceptions of Voodoo in the first half of the twentieth century. The city's travel books offer crucial insights into how these perceptions were intertwined with impressions of New Orleans, attitudes held towards African-based belief systems and practitioners, New Orleans' African American population, and the city's racial politics during these decades. They provide fertile ground for an examination of white impressions of African-based belief systems in comparison to the work of black artists who attempted to rewrite impressions of the folk during the same moment. Tallant and Saxon's publications demonstrate the ways that white voices shaped representations of African American culture in the first half of the twentieth century and reveal the persistence of pejorative stereotypes of African Americans during these decades, as well as the way in which racialized representations of Voodoo were a spectacle for white tourists in New Orleans.

The genre of travel literature allows for an exploration of the interaction between ideas about citizenry, tourism, and the commodification of culture. The texts examined here vary in form; the *WPA Guide to New Orleans* is an official city guidebook, whereas *Fabulous New Orleans*, published prior to the guide, and *Voodoo in New Orleans*, published after, are examples of travelogues. They are accounts of the city based on a series of personal impressions that do not hold the

same authority as the official guidebook, though the latter is also informed by primary material collected as part of the Louisiana Federal Writers' Project.

As part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal which sought to remedy the effects of the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created to stimulate employment and the growth of the nation's economy. The WPA sponsored numerous projects aimed at regenerating infrastructure as well as several arts and cultural projects.<sup>1</sup> One of the most famous branches of the WPA was the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) which was created in 1935 and employed writers, teachers, historians, and other white collar workers who struggled to secure work during the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup> The national project was managed by Henry Alsberg who selected directors to lead state units, including Lyle Saxon who was appointed to direct activities in Louisiana. Each FWP unit was tasked with producing a guide to the state. The state guides were also supplemented with guides to major cities including New York, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, and New Orleans. In addition to the guidebook series, officials utilised FWP materials such as interviews to produce projects on specific groups or regions such as *The Armenians in Massachusetts* (1937) and *The Italians of New York: A Survey* (1938). There were also publications that focused on African American populations in various states including *Cavalcade of the American Negro* (1940), a publication from the Illinois

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the New Deal and the WPA see: Roy Rosenzweig and Barbara Melosh, "Government and the Arts: Voices from the New Deal Era," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 2 (1990): 596-608; Susan Quinn, *The Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times* (New York: Walker and Company, 2008); Michael Hiltzik, *The New Deal: A Modern History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011); Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013); Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Sandra Opdycke, *The WPA: Creating Jobs and Hope in the Great Depression* (New York: Routledge, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> For more on the New Deal and the FWP see: Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and David A. Taylor, *Soul of a People: The WPA Writers' Project Uncovers Depression America* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2009)



unit, *Survey of Negroes in Little Rock and North Little Rock* (1941) from the Arkansas unit, and *The Negro in Virginia* (1940). The Louisiana unit produced three publications: *The WPA Guide to New Orleans* (1938), *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* (1941) and a folklore collection titled *Gumbo Ya Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales* (1945), as well as collecting a multitude of interviews from Louisiana residents including ex-slave narratives.

Part of the FWP initiative was to generate new forms of nationalism through new images and narratives of the nation and to create a narrative that expanded the definition of American beyond white Protestant identities. Under the direction of the folklore editor Benjamin A. Botkin, FWP workers were encouraged to push back against romanticised notions of white Protestant nationalism and to give due attention to racial, ethnic, and religious groups outside of this identity.<sup>3</sup> According to Jerrold Hirsch, Botkin, along with Negro Affairs editor Sterling Brown and social-ethnic studies editor Morton Royse, sought to generate a more inclusive portrait of America in FWP publications.<sup>4</sup> The success of the guidebooks and other FWP-based publications in producing a more inclusive image of America varies between publications and states.

Christine Bold argues that '[a]s contributors to the shaping of a national citizenry, the WPA guidebooks carried a double authority: the truth claims of an informational genre and the official sponsorship of the federal government.'<sup>5</sup> The 'double-authority' of the WPA guidebooks carried substantial weight in configuring images of the nation, its cities, and who was imagined a citizen. The *WPA Guide to*

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<sup>3</sup> Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 3.

*New Orleans*' depictions of the city's African American population and Voodoo practices were therefore central in constructing images of African-based beliefs in the national imagination. Similarly, Claude F. Jacobs argues that '[o]f all the markers, perhaps the tourist guidebook itself has become the most influential in the construction of the tourist gaze and the interpretation of various sites.'<sup>6</sup> Though *Fabulous New Orleans* and *Voodoo in New Orleans* were not official FWP publications, the authority associated with Saxon and Tallant as New Orleans natives and as prominent writers in the city, and later because of their affiliation with the FWP, meant that these texts too carried an authority comparable to that of the official guidebook.

Before his career as director, Saxon worked as a reporter, first for the *New Orleans Item* and then for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. He became frustrated with the limitations of newspaper work and branched out into writing in different forms, frequently blurring the lines between history and fiction. Saxon's first publication *Father Mississippi* (1927) covered a history of the Mississippi river after he was sent to report on the Mississippi River flood of the same year. Following the success of *Father Mississippi*, Saxon published *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928), an informal and popular guide to the Crescent city which lacked the specifics found in most guidebooks, such as lists of hotels, restaurants, places of interest, and transport information, but painted a series of exciting "impressions" of the city based on his own experiences. A year later, he published *Old Louisiana* (1929), a nostalgic history about Louisiana's declining plantation culture. Anthony Stanonis suggests

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<sup>6</sup> Claude F. Jacobs, "Folk for Whom? Tourist Guidebooks, Local Color, and the Spiritual Churches of New Orleans," *Journal of American Folklore* 114, no. 453 (2001): 312. Jacobs uses the term "marker" to mean a representation of a sight rather than the sight itself and suggests that tourist guidebooks are "markers"; an object that provides a link between tourist and sight and that "marks" sights as authentic to the tourist.

that neither of these works were entirely factual accounts, instead he proposes that Saxon ‘introduced his forays into documented events with fictitious personal reminiscences of his life.’<sup>7</sup> Saxon then produced a biography of Jean Lafitte the pirate in 1931 based on tales of treasure hunting in nineteenth-century New Orleans and later a novel titled *Children of Strangers* (1937) about the lives of Creoles of colour in Louisiana’s River Cane County. Saxon was so instrumental in contributing to public images of New Orleans that he even became known to locals as “Mr. New Orleans”. This experience and reputation made Saxon the ideal candidate to lead the Louisiana FWP.<sup>8</sup>

Robert Tallant was also a New Orleans native whose collection of published work included journalism, fiction, and non-fiction and he too often blurred the lines between these categories. Similarly to Saxon, Tallant’s interests lay in the local history of New Orleans and Louisiana. He published numerous works which were located in or based on New Orleans history including *Mardi Gras... As It Was* (1947), *The Romantic New Orleanians* (1950), *The Pirate Lafitte and the Battle of New Orleans* (1951), *Ready to Hang: Seven Famous New Orleans Murders* (1952), and *The Voodoo Queen* (1956) amongst several others. *Voodoo in New Orleans* is a sensationalist work of non-fiction that offers a chronological overview of Voodoo practices in the city from the nineteenth century to contemporary times based on FWP interview materials and newspaper reports as well as Tallant’s own speculations. Tallant also served as an editor for the Louisiana FWP, working closely with Saxon on the production of several publications for the unit. Due to the volume of works that these two writers generated on New Orleans history and culture,

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<sup>7</sup> Anthony Stanonis ““Always in Costume and Mask”: Lyle Saxon and New Orleans Tourism,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 42, no.1 (2001): 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

separately as well as collaboratively under the Louisiana FWP, in addition to the prominent place that they both held in the city, an analysis of a sample of their works is imperative to understanding how images of New Orleans and New Orleans Voodoo were constructed in the early twentieth century.

These three texts additionally demonstrate shifts in attitudes towards the racial politics of the city and to Voodoo. To some degree, each of these texts replicates racist tropes and images found in nineteenth-century treatises of the city, particularly the earlier two. However *Voodoo in New Orleans* offers a more complex portrait of the racial dynamics of the city and impressions of Voodoo. In her disparaging review for the *Journal of American Folklore*, Zora Neale Hurston argued that *Voodoo in New Orleans* ‘offers no opportunity for serious study, and should be considered for just what it is, a creative-journalistic appeal to popular fancy.’<sup>9</sup> In the twenty-first century, criticisms of *Voodoo in New Orleans* largely remain unchanged. It is regarded by scholars now as a ‘racist classic’ that sensationalises, commodifies, and exoticises both New Orleans Voodoo and priestess Marie Laveau.<sup>10</sup> Morrow Long describes it as ‘racist and sensationalistic’ and raises serious questions about Tallant’s ethical orientation and methodological approaches.<sup>11</sup> Martha Ward also suggests that it is mere ‘gossip’ and claims that it is because of Tallant’s book 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 drinking and group sex.’<sup>12</sup> Despite its many

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<sup>9</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “Review of *Voodoo in New Orleans* by Robert Tallant,” *Journal of American Folklore* 60, no. 238 (1947): 436-8.

<sup>10</sup> Ina Johanna Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), xxv.

<sup>12</sup> Martha Ward, *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 17.

historical inaccuracies, hyperbolic accounts, and racist images, *Voodoo in New Orleans* represents somewhat of a break with the travel literature that comes before it due to the way it complicates the racial dynamics of the city. Like its predecessors, it reproduces racist images and tropes, particularly around black hypersexuality, but it also depicts moments of black resistance and exposes white fragility and as such, is worth re-examination.

In order to address these ideas, this chapter will examine the white gaze present in these three texts and interrogate representations of African Americans within the context of the Jim Crow South. This chapter will suggest that, written for an assumed white readership, representations of African Americans and Voodoo in New Orleans travel literature largely reflected, supported, and reinforced racialized systems of power and dominance in the city. The images of black Voodooists presented in these accounts as volatile and threatening, particularly as a sexual threat to white womanhood, replicate entrenched racist tropes and uphold the ideology that informed the Jim Crow South. Yet, it will also argue that these texts and particularly in *Voodoo in New Orleans*, demonstrate that those who were subjected to the white gaze were able to resist and limit it. While stereotypes persisted, this later text unsettles the power dynamic between white spectator and black subject.

### Imagining New Orleans

In the national consciousness of the United States, New Orleans is the home of Voodoo. This perception has not only remained potent because of the unique, historical role Voodoo has played as a religion and subculture of the city. Externally, New Orleans has been marketed and conceptualised as a destination with unique ties

to Voodoo that has additionally contributed to the city's prominent status in the cultural imagination. Narratives about New Orleans' uniqueness bolster narratives about Voodoo, and the presence of Voodoo in the city contributes to New Orleans' overall image as distinctive amongst other American cities. An examination of this relationship and the representations of Voodoo within treatments of the Crescent city are paramount to understanding how Voodoo has been imagined in the United States. Historically, New Orleans has been conceptualised as "out of step" with the rest of the nation, the South, and even other Louisiana cities. While recent trends in scholarship challenge narratives of New Orleans exceptionalism, ideas about the city's "uniqueness" pervaded the United States during the first half of the twentieth century and persist in the popular imaginary today.<sup>13</sup>

There are several characteristics that are utilised to lay claim to New Orleans' exceptionalism, the most prevalent of which is the claim that the ethnic and cultural diversity of the city is like no other. Today, online guides boast that the city is 'a unique blend of cultures' and 'a unique melting pot of culture, food and music.'<sup>14</sup> The city's "uniqueness" is partly attributed to the cultural diversity of its residents. New Orleans' colonial history as former Spanish and French territories, and as a

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<sup>13</sup> Recent scholarship argues that the narrative surrounding New Orleans exceptionalism was not only inflammatory but damaging to the city, especially in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The storm was seen as an opportunity to rebrand New Orleans and prompted scholarship which reconsidered the notion of the city's position as "out of step" with the nation. Charles W. Cannon argues that scholars who refute the case for New Orleans exceptionalism 'do so on the grounds that it is not objective and that exceptionalism "'masks" serious social injustices [...] [which would] presumably be redressed, if it not for the old narrative about New Orleans "unique" culture.' For further on New Orleans' exceptionalism see Charles W. Cannon, "I Want Magic: A Defense of New Orleans Exceptionalism," *Know Louisiana: A Digital Encyclopaedia of Louisiana and Home of Louisiana Cultures*, Accessed 18 May 2018, <http://www.knowlouisiana.org/want-magic-defense-new-orleans-exceptionalism>; Barbara Eckstein, *Sustaining New Orleans: Literature, Local Memory, and the Fate of the City* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Helen Taylor, "After the Deluge: The Post-Katrina Cultural Revival of New Orleans," *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 3 (2010): 483-501; Jennie Lightweis-Goff, "'Peculiar and Characteristic': New Orleans's Exceptionalism from Olmsted to the Deluge," *American Literature* 86, no.1 (2014): 147-169; and Anna Hartnell, *After Katrina: Race, Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2017)

<sup>14</sup> "New Orleans," Lonely Planet, Accessed 28 May 2018, <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/usa/new-orleans> and "New Orleans Welcomes You," The Official Tourism Site of the City of New Orleans, Accessed 28 May 2018, <http://www.neworleansonline.com/>

major port-settlement, means that there has been a wealth of cultural influences on the city's character. Ned Sublette claims that 'by the time Louisiana became the eighteenth state in 1812, most of the elements that make New Orleans so visibly, and audibly, different from the rest of the country were already in place.'<sup>15</sup> Sublette suggests that the influence of three colonial powers (French, Spanish, and Anglo-American), the rapid succession with which these powers relinquished and gained control of the city, and the different languages and cultures brought with them, meant that New Orleans had 'its own personality' from this early period.<sup>16</sup> The movement of people, enslaved and free, from Central and West Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe who passed through and settled in the city had a considerable influence on its cultural identity. As a nexus of the Atlantic slave trade and as one of the biggest markets for the domestic slave trade, the volume of enslaved Africans and African Americans who were brought to New Orleans, and the distinct African cultures that accompanied them, contributed to the city's diverse cultural profile. The city's history of transience as a port, as a European colony, and as a hub for the trading of enslaved peoples has produced what many describe as a "unique" metropolitan identity unlike any other in the nation.

Moreover, not only did New Orleans have an ethnically and culturally diverse population, it marketed itself that way. Davydd Greenwood argues that as a result of tourism, local cultures become a "natural resource" to be merchandized as "local color" and New Orleans serves as a prime example of that phenomenon.<sup>17</sup>

Kevin Gotham posits that in New Orleans, 'the development of tourism was closely

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<sup>15</sup> Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Davydd Greenwood, "Culture by the Pound: An Anthropological Perspective on Tourism as Cultural Commoditization," in *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, ed. Valene L. Smith (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 130.

associated with the transposition of culture as race and race as culture,' suggesting that during the 1920s, the city's advertisement of Creole culture reflected the growing idea that culture and race were reified objects that could be commercialised and commodified.<sup>18</sup> Creole ethnicity became a commodity available for public consumption in the form of Creole food, culture, history, and architecture in New Orleans.

For example, in the 'Folkways' section of the *WPA Guide to New Orleans*, the tourist is imagined to be in the French Quarter on a guided tour of the city in pursuit of Voodoo stories. The section guides the reader through a simulated tour of the neighbourhood driven by the reader's curiosity about Voodoo. The reader, who becomes part of the narrative, meets a Creole man 'who has volunteered to show you around.'<sup>19</sup> The guidebook describes the imagined tourist's interaction with the Creole man:

Curiosity gets the best of you. "Have you been living here long?" you ask. "I've lived here all my life. I'm a Creole." Possibly you had an idea that a Creole was a man of color. You realize now that this is not true. A Creole! Well, well, well. You always wondered what Creoles looked like. This one, who is typical, is courteous, but rather distant. He seems to have forgotten all about you.<sup>20</sup>

Here, the Creole man's ethnicity is commodified and becomes a point of interest to the tourist. 'This one' and the description of him as 'typical' homogenises Creole peoples and suggests that there exists an essential Creole identity to be viewed and

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<sup>18</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 82-83.

<sup>19</sup> Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the City of New Orleans, *The WPA Guide to New Orleans* (New York: Pantheon, [1938] 1983), 57.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.



consumed by the Anglo American reader. Yet it also unsettles what the narrator surmises to be the reader's assumptions about Creoles and race, challenging the reader's assumed understandings of Creole peoples. He is also consistently referred to as 'your Creole' throughout the section which suggests that the reader has ownership of the guide and that he is only there for the delight of the tourist. Seeing the Creole man satisfies the tourist's wonder about what Creole peoples "look like". The way that the guidebook states that this curiosity is satisfied through looking rather than interacting with the Creole man suggests that the primary means through which commodified cultures are consumed in the guidebooks is through looking and by casting othered peoples as spectacles for the white Anglo American tourist. However, despite the tourist's attempts to fully consume the sight of the Creole man, he remains 'distant' and even seems to have 'forgotten all about' the reader. This suggests that the tourist's gaze has limitations and that they do not have total power over those they are viewing. This distance serves to make the spectacle more alluring and further exoticises othered peoples, in this case a Creole man. The guidebooks frequently augment scenes where the reader is encouraged to differentiate themselves from and view other cultures but they also maintain a distance between the reader and his "site", limiting the power of the tourist's gaze.

As a result of the process of commodifying "local color", Greenwood explains, 'onlookers often alter the meaning of the activities being carried on by local people. Under these circumstances, local culture is in effect being expropriated, and local people are being exploited.'<sup>21</sup> In popularising Creole culture in such a manner, concomitant with the implementation of Jim Crow segregation during the 1920s, Gotham suggests that Creole became the equivalent of white. As such, he

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<sup>21</sup> Greenwood, "Culture by the Pound," 131.

argues that, ‘the image of New Orleans as a unique place of rich history, ethnic diversity, and unforgettable charm was built on the erasure of blacks from tourist images and local promotional campaigns.’<sup>22</sup> Though images of New Orleans’ black population did appear in some publications, including those discussed here, they were frequently stereotyped and were not depicted or celebrated as a significant portion of the city’s population, and were certainly never imagined as a potential tourist visiting New Orleans. Catherine Stewart, in her study on representing race in the FWP, confirms that ‘[i]n Southern states, “local color” all too often became a euphemism for black exoticism.’<sup>23</sup> Rather than being presented as an authentic celebration of the cultural and ethnic diversity of New Orleans during this period, the city’s image as culturally diverse and unique was engineered to appeal to the white tourist and in doing so, it distorted images of New Orleans’ black community.

New Orleans is known as a city of indulgence and pleasure. The *WPA Guide to New Orleans* describes it as ‘the city that care forgot’, best known for ‘its liberal attitudes toward human frailties’, its “Live and Let Live policy”.’<sup>24</sup> During the early twentieth century, New Orleans was marketed as a place where people could forget their cares and indulge their desires freely. Its liberal attitudes towards sex in particular gave New Orleans a reputation as a place of liberal morals and sexual deviance. Alecia Long claims that before the Civil War, New Orleans had ‘established an enduring reputation as sinful, sensual and sybaritic’, a reputation that

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<sup>22</sup> Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans*, 82.

<sup>23</sup> Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 39. For more on the representation of black Americans across the guide series see Stewart’s chapter entitled “Committing Mayhem on the Body Grammatic: The Federal Writers’ Project, the American Guide, and Representations of Black Identity”, 35-61.

<sup>24</sup> FWP, *The WPA Guide to New Orleans*, xxxvi.

would continue into the twentieth century and beyond.<sup>25</sup> In her study on the commercialisation of sex in New Orleans between 1865 and 1920, Long argues that in some ways the city's attitudes towards the commercialisation of sex were similar to those of other American cities, but that there were also several factors that set it apart. She posits that New Orleans' 'location in an overwhelmingly rural and religiously conservative region, its complex racial history – especially the prevalence of sex across the color line – and repeated attempts by city municipal authorities to control yet profit from prostitution', in addition to the 'size, duration and nationwide reputation of Storyville' made New Orleans attitudes towards sex distinctive from those of other American cities.<sup>26</sup> Storyville, named after the city's mayor, Sidney Story, who introduced the original ordinance, was a designated vice district that regulated sex work in the city. The municipal ordinance stated that establishments that offered such activity must be confined to the areas bound by Iberville, Basin, North Robertson and St. Louis Streets. The commercialisation of Storyville attracted tourists from all over the country and was central in the construction of New Orleans' image as a sexualised destination oriented around indulgence, pleasure, and gratification. Due to its liberal attitudes towards sex and its tolerance of sex across the colour line, Long suggests that New Orleans acted as a "safety valve" for visitors wanting to escape 'the racial, religious and behavioural strictures' of their own communities.<sup>27</sup> This reputation of the city as a "safety valve", as a place to release tension and to temporarily escape conservative communities, endured beyond the demise of Storyville in 1917.

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<sup>25</sup> Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Furthermore, part of the allure of New Orleans lies in the city's association with the supernatural or the magical. Often referred to as the nation's most haunted city, the official New Orleans tourism website utilises the rhetoric of the magical to describe the city: 'Intimate and unique, New Orleans' oldest neighborhood has exerted a spell over writers and artists since the time of Mark Twain, Lafcadio Hern and John James Audubon.'<sup>28</sup> New Orleans is home to numerous legends concerning the supernatural and the mythical, some of which are inspired by real events or unsolved crimes. Notable examples include the legend of the axeman of New Orleans, an unknown figure who committed a spate of attacks in the early twentieth century whom many believed to be 'a supernatural being, a diabolical fiend and agent of the Devil.'<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the Bottle Men or Needle Men of New Orleans, sometimes referred to as ghouls of African American folklore, were reputed to kill or abduct African Americans and use their bodies for scientific experimentation.<sup>30</sup> Numerous other examples are contained in the pages of the FWP's *Gumbo Ya-Ya: Folk Tales of Louisiana* (1945), including tales of plantation ghosts, restless spirits haunting the streets of the French Quarter and New Orleans' cemeteries, as well as various other supernatural characters rumoured to be active in the city. Today, numerous tours operate in the city based on its reputation as a hotspot for supernatural, and often sinister, activity.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "New Orleans Official Guide – French Quarter," The Official Tourism Site of the City of New Orleans, Accessed 22 April 2019, <http://www.neworleansonline.com/tools/neighborhoodguide/frenchquarter.html>

<sup>29</sup> Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, and Robert Tallant, *Gumbo Ya-Ya: Folk Tales of Louisiana* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, [1945] 2012), 80.

<sup>30</sup> For an explanation of 'Needle/Bottle Men' see Julie Yvonne Webb, "Louisiana Voodoo and Superstitions related to Health," *HSHMA Health Reports* 86, no.4 (1971): 293.

<sup>31</sup> Several contemporary New Orleans tour companies have branded themselves based on the city's reputation for supernaturalism including French Quarter Phantoms, Ghost City Tours New Orleans, Spectral City Tours, Haunted History Tours and numerous others.

These three descriptors of New Orleans – as culturally distinctive, sensual, and magical – all contribute to notions of New Orleans exceptionalism and can also be seen in depictions of New Orleans Voodoo. Descriptions of the city and descriptions of Voodoo in the city echo one another in that both are presented as exceptional in relation to the rest of the nation. Tallant and Saxon’s accounts each contributed to notions of New Orleans exceptionalism and Saxon’s publications in particular were instrumental in creating New Orleans’ image as a tourist destination in the early twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> In the travel books that this chapter examines, New Orleans Voodoo, like the city itself, is presented as culturally distinctive, magical, and sensual. Like New Orleans and like Creole culture, Voodoo is presented as a commodity to be seen and consumed by white spectators. But representations of Voodoo in these sources also extend beyond these categories. Whilst Voodoo is presented as alluring, as the city is, their accounts also present Voodoo as a threat to the status quo. Tallant and Saxon each explore ways in which Voodoo has been perceived as a risk to established hierarchies of race, to the safety of the public, and to moral decency. This perception of Voodoo as dangerous in some ways contributes to the spectacle of Voodoo but it also exposes attitudes towards existing societal structures and the perceived threat that African Americans posed to those structures. Inside these texts, racialized structures of power are illuminated and supported, but Tallant also allows the reader glimpses of the limitations and fragility of this power in his discussion of acts of resistance and subversion from Voodooists.

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<sup>32</sup> For an overview of Saxon’s contributions to the creation of New Orleans as a tourist destination see Stanonis “Lyle Saxon and New Orleans Tourism,” 31-57.

Prior to Saxon and Tallant's work, one of the most notable studies of New Orleans Voodoo was Henry Castellanos' *New Orleans As It Was* (1895), a collection of tales from "Old Louisiana days" which devoted a chapter to "The Voudous: Their History, Mysteries and Practices". Castellanos wrote:

Who has not heard, in connection with the local history of New Orleans, of that mysterious and religious set of fanatics, imported from the jungles of Africa and implanted in our midst, so well known under the appellation of *Voudous*? Drifting into this country and the West India Islands with the constant influx of the Slave Trade, this disgusting organization or order, with its stupid creed and bestial rites, made considerable progress among the low and ignorant of our population in the early period of the present century, and extended its ramifications among the servile classes through most of our Creole parishes.<sup>33</sup>

Castellanos' description of the city's Voodooists performs multiple functions. Firstly, it claims Voodoo as a phenomenon exclusively connected with the city of New Orleans, describing it as 'mysterious' in order to present it as an exciting aspect of the city's character. Secondly, it casts Voodoo as an import from 'the jungles of Africa' that has been 'implanted' in 'our midst', connecting Voodoo with Africa and with the primitive. Describing Voodooists as 'disgusting', 'bestial', and 'stupid', Castellanos' account suggests that African-based beliefs and the people who practice them are inferior. His description becomes both an explanation and justification of the second-class status of enslaved people and their descendants as well as for the Creole population, another othered culture who Castellanos considers 'ignorant'.

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<sup>33</sup> Henry Castellanos, *New Orleans As It Was* (Gretna: Pelican Publications, [1895] 1990), 92.

This rhetoric others Voodoo and casts its practitioners as ‘fanatics’ who are excluded from New Orleans citizenry. Castellanos’ choice of ‘fanatics’ suggests that Voodoo was an extreme faith and that the practitioners were overzealous in the way that they worshipped. Similarly, the association of Voodoo with African jungles racializes it and in the context of the racial politics in the U.S. at this time, suggests that Voodoo and Voodoo practitioners were inferior to the New Orleans citizens who found Voodoo in their ‘midst’.

Outside of publications such as Castellanos’, impressions of New Orleans Voodoo were largely located in nineteenth-century newspaper reports. Accounts often featured scenes of violence, sex, and debauchery.<sup>34</sup> Michelle Gordon argues that when read collectively, Voodoo narratives in this period ‘confirmed for many whites what they presumed to be true about black savagery, feared about losing social control, and fantasized about policing hypersexual blackness and “imperiled” white womanhood.’<sup>35</sup> To a certain extent, Saxon and Tallant reproduce the images located in Castellanos’ book and the narratives in nineteenth-century newspapers but they also challenge them, particularly Tallant’s later *Voodoo in New Orleans*. Narratives of Voodoo as sensational, exotic, sexual, as a threat to morality and white womanhood, and as a marker of inferiority continue to manifest themselves in Saxon and Tallant’s accounts but these texts also exhibit moments where these narratives are contested.

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<sup>34</sup> For example see “Voudouism Unveiled,” *Daily True Delta*, 31 July 1850; “The Voudous Again - Strange Circumstances - Half a Body Found,” *Daily Picayune*, 3 October 1863; “Dark Deeds a Graveyard Violated,” *Daily Picayune*, 1 May 1864; “Fetish Rites - Voudous on the Rampage,” *Daily Picayune*, 26 June 1870; and “Voudou Nonsense - a Plain, Unvarnished Account of the Lake Shore Revels - Full Particulars of the Hell-Broth and Orgies - a Played-Out Hoax,” *Daily Picayune*, 26 June 1874.

<sup>35</sup> Gordon, “Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans,” 768.

### Racializing Spaces and Viewing Voodoo

Saxon and Tallant's representations of Voodoo are inevitably interlinked with representations of African American culture and peoples. Descriptions of Voodoo become descriptions of the people who practice it. As mentioned previously, Botkin and Brown tried to ensure that across the guide series images of the United States were more inclusive and that 'African Americans were not totally ignored or always portrayed in unfavourable terms.'<sup>36</sup> Brown encouraged Federal Writers not to make generalisations about African American populations; instead he encouraged 'accuracy and fairness.'<sup>37</sup> Hirsch highlights the often discrepant views and approaches between the national office and individual units and workers, suggesting that while the views of national officials 'reflect[ed] the New Deal ethos, [they] did not represent the variety of views regarding race, ethnicity, and the definition of American identity that could be found among the general population and that were present among Federal Writers.'<sup>38</sup> Hirsch further explains that Brown monitored guidebook copy from numerous units and offered advice on their portrayal of African American populations. This continued monitoring and guidance demonstrates the tension between the narratives envisioned at the national office and those at the local level. In his correspondence with local offices, Brown frequently advocated for accuracy, claims that could be substantiated, and advised various units to avoid making blanket statements about African American communities.<sup>39</sup> Hirsch also notes that in most southern guidebooks, African Americans are almost always referred to in the third person. The *WPA Guide to New Orleans* is one example of this trend. The othering of African Americans in the guidebook reflects the way that

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<sup>36</sup> Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 122.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 122.



African American populations were viewed as inferior to, or at least excluded from, what FWP writers considered American identity.

In a similar way to the Creole guide, African Americans are othered throughout the “Folkways” part of the guidebook. The author imagines the tourist waking up to raised voices and looking out onto the street from their Vieux Carré studio:

You rub your eyes and stare at the extraordinary creature who is emitting these blood-curdling noises. He is a tall, unbelievably black Negro with crooked toes peeping out of shuffling shoes, non-descript trousers, a venerable frock-coat carrying the dirt of ages on its frayed threads, and cocked over one eye a stupendous top hat with most of the crown bashed in. He carries an unwieldy bundle containing a rope, a sheaf of broom straw, and several bunches of palmetto. Look at him closely. He is the last of his guild, a chimney sweeper; and it may be long time before you see him again for he and his *compère*, the coal peddler, who calls “Mah mule is white, mah face is black; Ah sells mah coal two bits a sack!” are rapidly being forced to retreat before the increasing popularity of the gas heat. *Adieu, ramoneur!*<sup>40</sup>

The above depiction of an ‘unbelievably black Negro’ confirms the existence of the relationship between white author and white tourist and their shared scrutiny of the chimney sweeper’s appearance, his voice, and his occupation illustrate the white gaze present in the *WPA Guide to New Orleans*. This gaze serves to other the African American man and the way in which the guidebook extends an invitation to the white tourist to ‘look at him closely’ reinforces racialized systems of power and

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<sup>40</sup> FWP, *The WPA Guide to New Orleans*, 56.

dominance that were present in the South during this time. bell hooks suggests that 'there is power in looking' especially in the context of African American history. She says that '[t]he politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that slaves were denied their right to gaze.'<sup>41</sup> As enslaved people were denied the right to gaze or gaze back, white people were free to look upon black people as they wished. In doing so, and in denying blacks permission to gaze back, whites asserted dominance over enslaved black people. Here, African Americans are denied their right to gaze in the *WPA Guide* and are instead gazed upon by white spectators reflecting the city and the nation's conceptions of racial hierarchy at this moment.

The African American chimney sweeper is also dehumanized in this passage. Instead of staring at "him" or "this person", the reader is encouraged to 'stare at the extraordinary creature'. Calling him a creature denotes that he is less than human. Accompanied by his 'blood-curdling noises' and his shabby appearance, the chimney sweeper is less a person and instead becomes a sight to be seen by the tourist visiting New Orleans. The description of his dishevelled appearance becomes a description of him as a whole: not only are his clothes 'carrying the dirt of ages', so is he. We are also told that the chimney sweeper is the last of his guild and that is part of the reason that the white reader is asked to look so closely at him – it may be one of the last chances to see him. The positioning of this African American man as a relic of a previous century and as part of a vanishing past suggests that the guidebook depicts African Americans as at odds with notions of modernity and refuses to construct images of a modern black America despite the inclusive aims of the WPA. Stewart suggests that the 'FWP viewed the homogenizing forces of modernization as contributing to the disappearance of unique folk tradition and

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<sup>41</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: race and representation* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1992), 115.

culture.’<sup>42</sup> It seems that the FWP writers were conflicted about how to depict African Americans and modernity. On the one hand, it seems that writers were fearful of the disappearance of black folk traditions yet images such as the chimney sweeper suggest that Louisiana FWP writers struggled to reconcile blackness with modernity and continued to depict African Americans as regressive.

The reader is encouraged to look at the chimney sweeper on account of his skin colour, his demeanour, and because he and his trade are becoming a rarity in modern New Orleans. He is something to be looked at and consumed by white eyes before it is too late. In constructing a relationship between the white authors and an imagined white reader, the guidebook denies African Americans the right to gaze. African Americans become a spectacle for the guidebook writer and reader and African American readers are excluded from participating in the gaze of the guide and therefore in configurations of national citizenry. The guidebook’s denial of the right of African Americans to gaze reflects the second-class status of African Americans’ political positions in the city and in the nation. Just as African Americans are denied various political rights, the guidebook confirms and supports the denial of African American rights in the cultural and social sphere too.

In contrast to Botkin and Brown’s aim to create an inclusive voice and to steer away from presenting a singular notion of American identity based on white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, the *WPA Guide to New Orleans* reinforces it. The guidebook not only portrays American identity as a white Anglo identity, it presents it as superior. It excludes non-white and non-Anglo-Americans from belonging to a national identity and positions them as less than American. Racial and ethnic groups that do not fit into this category are othered and become part of the spectacle of the

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<sup>42</sup> Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 37.

city, as exemplified in the guidebook's depiction of one of the city's Creole residents, as well as in the section titled 'Racial Distribution' which outlines the number of 'native whites' left in the city and describes how 'intermarriage has broken down distinctions and destroyed the boundaries of racial sections.'<sup>43</sup> Rather than being included in the gaze of the tourist, individuals outside of this identity are to be looked at by the white Anglo-American guidebook author and reader. In constructing a narrative then that portrays African Americans as sites of spectatorship rather than as included in the gaze of the guidebook, the *WPA Guide to New Orleans* excludes African Americans from images of national identity and views them as objects.

Additionally, depictions of African Americans become entangled with depictions of Voodoo in these publications. In the *WPA Guide to New Orleans*, *Voodoo in New Orleans* and *Fabulous New Orleans*, the reader is often encouraged to look at African Americans and to view them as different, as in this example. Voodoo too, like skin colour, becomes a marker of difference, a dehumanizing quality, and a spectacle to be looked at. The first part of the process that both Tallant and Saxon present in viewing Voodoo is the penetration of a barrier which they suggest separates spheres of blackness and whiteness. In order to consume the Voodoo spectacle, the onlooker must first transgress the barrier separating these two "worlds".

Saxon claims to have fully penetrated this barrier in his account of Voodoo in *Fabulous New Orleans*. Demonstrating his mobility between these spheres, he says, '[t]here are a great many people who will tell you that Voodoo or snake-worship among American negroes has ceased to exist. This is not true, for within the last year

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<sup>43</sup> FWP, *WPA Guide to New Orleans*, 43.

I have been an eye-witness at a secret Voodoo ceremony.’<sup>44</sup> Saxon tricks a contact of his, Robert, into taking him to a secret Voodoo ceremony. He lies to Robert and tells him that he is seeking revenge for another man stealing his lover in order to convince Robert to take him to see a Voodoo woman. Saxon arranges to meet Robert ‘[who] came out of the shadows without a word and motioned [Saxon] to follow him.’<sup>45</sup> Saxon must follow Robert back into the shadows in order to attend the ceremony and it becomes a journey that requires Robert’s inside knowledge. Robert stops at a gate in the wall of the street that they are walking along. Saxon says that the gate opens to Robert’s touch and they follow an alleyway ‘narrow and dark, but open to the sky.’<sup>46</sup> They follow it around a corridor lined by several doors. Robert leads Saxon to one of the ‘tight-shut’ doors and taps upon it lightly. Saxon continues, ‘[a]lmost instantly it was opened, and a dim light shone through the chink. A whispered consultation, and we were admitted.’<sup>47</sup> Here, Saxon presents Voodoo as shrouded in darkness and Robert acts as Saxon’s guide into the shadowy world of Voodoo. Only through darkness, a series of hidden entrances, secret conversations, and under the guidance of Robert, ‘a full-blooded Congo black man’, can Saxon gain admittance to the type of Voodoo that he claims is usually off-limits to white spectators.<sup>48</sup> The darkness of Robert’s skin and his ‘full-blooded Congo’ heritage acts as Saxon’s pass into the dark world of Voodoo. Under the protection of Robert’s blackness, Saxon’s whiteness becomes shadowed and he is permitted into the secret ceremony. The darkness of Robert’s and the Voodooists’ skin becomes intertwined with the darkness of African American spaces of worship and of Voodoo itself. Saxon’s manipulation of Robert allows him to journey into the shadows and move between

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<sup>44</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, [1928] 2004), 309.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

white and black spaces. It is through this journey that Saxon positions himself to offer an account of what he believes and presents as authentic Voodoo to a white audience. This creates the impression that he has fully penetrated the barrier between these racialized spaces in New Orleans and that the white gaze upon Voodoo is one that is masterful and omniscient.

In a similar fashion to Saxon's journey into the world of Voodoo and the "Folkways" section of the *WPA Guide to New Orleans*, the opening chapter of Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans* guides an assumed white reader through 'one of the most famous Negro thoroughfares of America', South Rampart Street. He compares South Rampart Street to Canal Street, noting that Canal Street occupies 'the usual crowd of city people, most of them white' whereas on South Rampart, which is also lined with similar places of business and entertainment, 'the faces of its people are much darker.'<sup>49</sup> It is down South Rampart Street that Tallant sets up a dichotomy between the African American population of New Orleans and the white observer. He creates an alluring and separate African American space for himself and the white reader to view. In the first instance, Tallant invites the assumed white reader to look upon African American people and experience their 'own particular sights and sounds and smells.'<sup>50</sup> Tallant presents the 'white man's' experience in South Rampart Street as that of a 'foreigner' and suggests that this is the only time that the 'white man' will feel this way.<sup>51</sup> He presents a physical divide between white and African American spaces and the transgression of this physical barrier, accompanied with the outsider experience that the observer feels as he passes into

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, [1946] 2012), 3.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 4.

this African American space, becomes part of Tallant's tour into the secret underworld of New Orleans Voodoo.

Again, similarly to the "Folkways" section of the *WPA Guide to New Orleans*, Tallant provides meticulous descriptions of the people who occupy the street, paying close attention to colour: 'When the white man turns he will look into the face of a young man who has light brown skin and the smoke-gray eyes quadroons sometimes have.'<sup>52</sup> Despite looking into the young man's face, Tallant makes no mention of the young man looking back at his own face. The choice of 'face' as opposed to 'eyes' suggests that the gaze is one way; that whites observe African Americans and that African Americans are denied the right to gaze back. The term quadroon and the close attention to the man's complexion highlights racial difference between the man and the tourist reminding the reader that they are transgressing a boundary between their own white space and African American spaces in the city.

In her reading of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, a novella published one year after Saxon's *Fabulous New Orleans* and often associated with Harlem Renaissance, Judith Butler outlines the process by which John Bellew, a racist white man and the husband of a light-skinned black woman who passes as white, constitutes his own whiteness through interaction with black people. Butler suggests it is through close proximity and interaction 'where "race" itself is figured as a contagion transmissible through proximity.'<sup>53</sup> Discussing Bellew's interactions with blacks, she argues that 'the added presumption is that if he were to associate with blacks, the boundaries of his own whiteness, and surely that of his children, would no longer be easily fixed.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993), 126.

Paradoxically, his own racist passion requires that association; he cannot be white without blacks and without the constant disavowal of his relation to them.<sup>54</sup> Here, Butler suggests that in interacting with blacks in close proximity, the boundaries of whiteness are challenged and affirmed at the same time. Similarly, it is through close interaction with this black resident of South Rampart Street, close enough to discern his eye colour, the exact hue of his skin, and to exchange a few words, that the tourist's whiteness is both affirmed and unsettled. It is this proximity to blackness that is equal parts exciting and unsettling for the white tourist in that as Tallant states, walking down South Rampart Street is one of the only times that a white man will become acutely aware of his own whiteness and feel out of place. This foray into South Rampart Street and the tourist's proximity to blackness positions New Orleans' black residents as a spectacle for tourists and a site in which whiteness is avowed.

Throughout this passage, Tallant returns to the idea of the white man looking into black spaces. Following his encounter with a young man with light brown skin and smoke-gray eyes, Tallant says that 'the white man will mumble some negative words and find himself walking away, without looking back, almost always until he is away from this street and is back in his own white world.'<sup>55</sup> This retreat from South Rampart Street back into his own white world, both physically and in looking away from the street, reinforces this physical barrier. Tallant suggests that the average white man might enter these African American spaces, but he may not necessarily be able to learn all he wanted to about Voodoo. Instead, Tallant says 'the white man' will have learned some things about Voodoo but '[i]t is so little that he will forget it quickly and will never realize what it is of which he has caught just the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 6.



merest glimpse.’<sup>56</sup> Tallant’s repeated references to looking and glimpsing throughout this passage suggest that African Americans, including their religious practices, are to be observed by whites but that the white gaze is not able to see everything it desires.

Whilst presenting Voodoo as a phenomenon to be observed, Tallant also frames Voodoo as secretive and suggests that to some degree it is protected from white observers by the African American Voodoo community. In contrast to Saxon’s account which suggested that his own gaze was able to fully penetrate Voodoo’s barriers and gain him access to a private ceremony, Tallant suggests that the white gaze upon Voodoo has limitations, that whites can only obtain mere glimpses into its rituals and that they will never learn the true secrets of Voodoo religious practice. Despite the ability to observe the sights and hear the sounds of South Rampart Street, ‘the white man’, Tallant says, will ultimately come up against a barrier. Whilst the white observer can look, Tallant asserts that ‘[h]e cannot cross the line beyond which lies the occultism of this South Rampart world. Everyone will be polite, but they will tell him nothing – unless he is known to be a white Voodoo.’<sup>57</sup> This protection from the white gaze and the white observer’s inability to penetrate the ‘occultism of this South Rampart world’ only serves to invigorate the assumed white reader’s desire to look further and more deeply at Voodoo in New Orleans.<sup>58</sup> The presentation of Voodoo as partially hidden invites the reader to continue with Tallant’s account in the hope that he will afford them more than the merest of glimpses. Tallant presents himself as somebody who can somewhat penetrate Voodoo’s racial barriers and move between the racialized spaces that he claims exist in the city, yet he also

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 5.

suggests that he is unable to see everything he desires. His positioning of himself as a white person who is aware and somewhat privy to Voodoo in the city invites the reader to observe Voodoo through the prism of Tallant's white eyes.

### The Voodoo Ceremony as Performance, Entertainment, and Spectacle

Tallant and Saxon present the viewing of a Voodoo ceremony as the most exciting display of Voodoo that can be found in the city. Where Saxon claims that he is able to gain access to a private ceremony, Tallant's account suggests that Voodooists resisted the gaze of white spectators and kept some ceremonies off-limits to outsiders. Each replicates racist imagery of Voodooists as animalistic and hypersexual, but Tallant's account also challenges these perceptions by suggesting that some of the more elaborate ceremonies are performances that are choreographed to satiate white spectators rather than being authentic Voodoo.

Following his journey through the darkness with Robert in *Fabulous New Orleans*, Saxon describes what he witnesses at the private Voodoo ceremony designed to enable him to take revenge upon another man for stealing his lover. Upon entering the home of a Voodoo priestess where the ceremony takes place, Saxon scrutinises every aspect of the place and people present. He surveys the appearance of the Voodooists in the closest of detail:

A woman and a man stood there. She was a light mulatto of about twenty-five years of age, the man was a very black negro of middle age. The girl would have been pretty had it not been for the deep smallpox scars on her face; she wore a guinea-blue wrapper and was

barefoot – a white cloth was tied around her head. The man was a burly fellow, barefoot and wearing only a pair of overalls which left his shoulders and chest bare; his face was mask-like and his eyes half-closed.<sup>59</sup>

Through his meticulous recounting of the setting and the participants, Saxon allows the reader to view the private Voodoo ceremony through the eyes of the guidebook. The most important detail that is relayed to the reader is the skin colour of the Voodoo practitioners. The first details that Saxon notes upon entering the ceremony is the ‘light mulatto’ skin of the girl and that the man was ‘very black’. This coupled with his classification of Robert as a ‘full blooded Congo black man’ others the Voodooists from the white readership and suggests that blackness and Voodooism are intertwined. His attention to the precise skin colour of the participants also echoes nineteenth-century rhetoric about gradations of blackness and percentages of blood, as reproduced in the WPA’s *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* (1941).<sup>60</sup> Saxon’s description of the Voodooists’ darker skin colour races Voodoo and conflates the nature of Voodooism with the nature of African American peoples. Saxon’s impression of Voodoo becomes an impression of the people who practise it.

His account of what happens during the ceremony suggests that the Voodoo practitioners are animalistic. At the start of the ceremony, Saxon is instructed to remove his clothes and wear only a robe that he is given. He meets an older Voodoo woman and her assistants who then progress with the ritual. He describes the performance thus:

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<sup>59</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 311.

<sup>60</sup> Workers of the Writer’s Program of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Louisiana, *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* (New York: Hastings House, 1941), 88.

She rose again, saliva dripping from her mouth, staggered, shrieked, and fell onto the floor. The negroes rose and swarmed around her, clutching her head, her arms, her legs and feet. She struggled, fought. Her clothes were ripped half from her fat body. She moaned and her eyes crossed. She quivered and ground her teeth together. She frothed at the mouth. Her limbs grew tense. Her heels beat a tattoo on the floor.<sup>61</sup>

The way in which Saxon says she froths at the mouth, loses control of her body, and shrieks out uncontrollably likens the woman to a rabid animal. Similarly, the other attendees at the ceremony are described as “swarm[ing]” around the woman when she falls to the ground. The use of the word “swarming”, a collective noun for insects rather than people, presents the Voodoo practitioners as a group of animals. Similarly, “swarm” suggests a frenzied movement and a lack of control or the ability to think rationally and implies that they had gone over to the woman instinctively rather than as a result of rational thought, suggesting again that the Voodooists are animalistic.

Following this frenzied scene, ‘[t]he old woman was relaxed now and lay upon her back, her red wrapper pulled over her knees. The floor around her was wet. A stench of latrines filled the room.’<sup>62</sup> Again, Saxon’s account denies the woman any sense of dignity as she has lost control of her body to the extent that she has urinated in front of him and the rest of the ceremony’s attendants. Voodooists, who Saxon stresses are black, are presented as animals and as lacking the capacity to think or behave rationally or respectably. This depiction of the Voodooists as

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<sup>61</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 318.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

undignified, animalistic, and frenzied echoes Henry Castellanos' assertion that Voodooists were "fanatics" in *New Orleans As It Was* and maintains the narrative that Voodooists, whose blackness is emphasised throughout, are inferior.

In contrast to Saxon's private ceremony, Tallant outlines the visibility of public Voodoo ceremonies in nineteenth century and contemporary New Orleans. He presents these ceremonies as a spectacle to be observed by white audiences and as a form of entertainment from their first inception as slave meetings. Weekly dances associated with Voodoo were held by the city's enslaved population in Congo Square and were often viewed by white audiences. Under the Louisiana Code Noir (1724) enslaved people were given Sundays off from working on the plantation.<sup>63</sup> In response to complaints about noise from the gatherings at various locations across the city, the mayor of New Orleans passed an ordinance in 1817 that restricted the gathering of enslaved people to Congo Square.<sup>64</sup> Tallant's account of these meetings suggests that they were as much an occasion for whites as they were for enslaved people. Recalling particular verses from songs sung at these ceremonies, Tallant writes: '[t]hese were the songs the white people heard when they came to Congo Square on Sunday afternoons; gay, childish, absolutely boastful words sung to savage rhythms. The white people watched and often laughed indulgently at the pleasure the slaves were having.'<sup>65</sup> Rather than presenting ceremonies at Congo

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<sup>63</sup> Article V of the Louisiana Code Noir states 'Sundays and holidays are to be strictly observed. All negroes found at work on these days are to be confiscated.': Benjamin Franklin French, *Historical Collections of Louisiana: Embracing Translations of Many Rare and Valuable Documents Relating to the Natural, Civil, and Political History of that State* (New York: D. Appleton, 1851) reproduced online at "Louisiana's Code Noir (1724)," Black Past, Accessed 28 May 2018, <http://www.blackpast.org/primary/louisianas-code-noir-1724>

<sup>64</sup> For further information on the history of gatherings of enslaved people at Congo Square see Gary A. Donaldson, "A Window on Slave Culture: Dances at Congo Square in New Orleans, 1800-1862," *The Journal of Negro History* 69, no.2 (1984): 63-72 and Jerah Johnson, "New Orleans's Congo Square: An Urban Setting for Early Afro-American Culture Formation," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 32, no.2 (1991): 117-157.

<sup>65</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 22.

Square as an important social activity in the enslaved community, Tallant instead frames them as an activity for white onlookers. Instead of focusing on the importance of these dances in the lives of New Orleans' enslaved, Tallant highlights the role they played in entertaining white New Orleanians. He claims that whites watched meetings at Congo Square and "laughed indulgently". Laughing at these ceremonies and songs not only suggests that they were a form of entertainment for the white community but additionally, it suggests that Voodoo was not taken seriously or respected by white New Orleanians. Their practices including beating drums, chanting, and dancing in circles, unlike worship in a church for example, drew in an audience seeking pleasure and entertainment. Voodoo, to white onlookers, was not a religion but a performance.

Larger ceremonies were also held at Lake Pontchartrain every year to celebrate St. John's Eve during the nineteenth century and continue today. During the ceremony, one of the city's prominent priests or priestesses presides over the ritual in what is the largest celebration in the Voodoo calendar. Morrow Long writes that the St. John's Eve ceremony 'became one of the "sights to see" in New Orleans.'<sup>66</sup> Tallant suggests that initially Voodooists tried to prevent white audiences from observing St. John's Eve and other ceremonies but he says, '[d]espite the attempted secrecy, more and more people seem now to have been locating and viewing the Voodoo ceremonies. Voodoo had become a topic of conversation of the lush drawing rooms of the Creoles and St. John Eve's seems to have been an occasion for groups to go searching for the gatherings.'<sup>67</sup> The Voodoo ceremony became not only something to watch but something that was discussed amongst New

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<sup>66</sup> Carolyn Morrow Long, *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 120.

<sup>67</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 27.

Orleans' white population. This suggests that the Voodoo ceremony was just as much an event in the social lives of New Orleans' white community as it was to the city's Voodooists. Voodoo persisted as a spectacle even outside the initial viewing of the ceremony. The discussion of Voodoo ceremonies by whites within the confines of their French Quarter drawing rooms meant that Voodoo was not only observed as a source of entertainment but was discussed amongst spectators long after the performance was over.

Evidence of the continuation of Voodoo as entertainment beyond the initial ceremony can also be found in the wealth of New Orleans newspaper reports on the ceremonies, some of which Tallant identified and reproduced in *Voodoo in New Orleans*. Tallant writes: 'By 1850 the New Orleans newspapers were defending the Voodoos, probably because the sect provided them with colorful copy more than any other reason.'<sup>68</sup> Here, he suggests that the main function of articles about Voodoo ceremonies was to entertain white readers and viewers. Tallant outlines numerous newspaper reports on Voodoo ceremonies and other Voodoo-related activities and instances within the city. He argues that the frequency with which these reports were printed declined during the 1860s due to heavy reporting of the Civil War but following the end of the war, reports on Voodoo activities picked back up again in the decades that followed. The frequency with which these sensational accounts and tales of depravity appear in New Orleans newspapers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggests that Voodoo acted as a spectacle beyond the initial ceremony. Tallant's inclusion of these reports demonstrates that Voodoo ceremonies and particularly white authored accounts of Voodoo ceremonies, in both written

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 24.

reports and stories told in the drawing rooms of New Orleans, were a common and widespread source of entertainment to whites.

In the mid-nineteenth century, when Marie Laveau was the city's leading priestess, Tallant claims that ceremonies by the lake on St. John's Eve underwent a significant change and that she began to engineer them knowing that they would be viewed by a white audience and as such, altered the content of the ceremony. They shifted from displays of authentic Voodoo and instead turned into somewhat of a show 'staged for the benefit of curious whites, particularly the police and the newspaper reporters...' <sup>69</sup> Despite now attempting to exert greater control of the way that Voodoo was viewed by whites, Tallant claims that Laveau's ceremonies retained the allure and mysticism of those which came before. He says that 'all the orthodox trappings of the spectacle were retained: the snake, the black cat, the roosters, the blood-drinking and the final fornication...' <sup>70</sup> Tallant presents Laveau's Voodoo ceremonies as structured performances that adhered to the expectations of a white audience. He suggests that the Voodoo performance consisted of specific elements designed to gratify a white audience: blood-drinking; animal sacrifice or at least some sort of animal presence; and a climatic sexual act. The first description of the ceremony exemplifies this structure:

Deep in a hidden place just outside New Orleans the black people gathered [...] They took oaths to die or to kill, if necessary, for their god [...] Papa picked Mamma up and stood her on top of the box containing the snake. Her jerking became more violent. She flung her arms towards the black night sky, and her head rolled on her

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 55.



shoulders as if her neck were broken [...] Papa presented Mamma with the bowl of warm blood from the sacrificed kid. She drank and handed it to each of the people as they whirled past. Her own lips drank the last drops. The dance grew faster now. They spun and gyrated and leaped into the air. They fell to their hands and knees, imitating the postures of animals, some chewing at the grass, shaking their posteriors violently. Their scanty garments were ripped away. The clouds broke and the moon came out and glowed upon naked black flesh. In pairs they fell upon the hot earth, still panting and gyrating. Some fell unconscious and were dragged away, into the deep darkness of the trees that edged the clearing.<sup>71</sup>

The images in this scene reproduce white stereotypes of African Americans based on notions of the savage and the hypersexual. Tallant introduces the Voodoo participants as black and reminds the reader of their blackness throughout the passage. The way in which he later says the moon shone upon their “naked black flesh” reiterates the blackness of the Voodooists and establishes difference between the assumed white reader and the blackness of the Voodoo ceremony and its participants. Tallant’s description of the darkness of the night sky and the woods becomes intertwined with the darkness of the Voodooists and their religious practices. The darkness of the ceremony, the setting, and the people become a descriptor of primitiveness and savagery. As Tallant’s description of the ceremony becomes more and more violent, the Voodoo participants become less people and more “black flesh”.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 6-8.

The first phase of the ceremony sees the Queen, referred to here as “Mamma”, drink the sacrificial blood of the goat. Toni Morrison suggests that blood is a fetish in white-authored literature and that the fetishization of blood, amongst other examples, ‘is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery.’<sup>72</sup> The warmth of the blood suggests that the Voodooists recently slaughtered the animal and were drinking the life out of it, thereby emphasising the savage nature of the Voodooists. Tallant describes the Voodooists sacrificing animals and blood at other ceremonies he has witnessed: ‘lips smeared with the blood of freshly slaughtered animals and fowl, they took their terrible oaths. Here was the snake, and here the breast was torn from a living chicken and presented to the queen.’<sup>73</sup> Again, he emphasises the immediacy of the killing and claims that there are a mixture of slaughtered and living animals at the ceremony. The juxtaposition of “freshly slaughtered” with “living” animals suggests that the Voodooists exert control over life and death, that killing and violence is a central part of Voodooism. This not only makes the Voodooists appear savage but powerful too. The way in which the line between the dead and the living is frequently crossed in these ceremonies presents the Voodooists as dark and dangerous.

Summarising the conventions of animal sacrifice that he has witnessed, Tallant says ‘[l]ive chickens and pigeons were sometimes introduced into the rites, to be torn to pieces with the fingers and teeth of the dancers. Sometimes they drew blood from each other, clawing and biting and falling to the ground in embraces of frenzied lust.’<sup>74</sup> He suggests that the Voodooists were savage and ruthless in their sacrificial killing of animals. The violence inherent in the “tearing” of living flesh

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<sup>72</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 68.

<sup>73</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 64.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

portrays the Voodooists as inhuman and, similarly to the ritualised drinking of the blood, suggests that the Voodooists are predatory animals. He presents their nature as so frenzied that they could not even distinguish between the tearing and biting of the flesh of animals and that of each other. Through the violent imagery in the killing of goats, chickens, and pigeons, coupled with the way in which Tallant presents the Voodooists' behaviour as instinctive, he casts the participants as animals and presents animal sacrifice as predatory and savage.

After drinking the blood, Tallant suggests that the Voodooists become more energised and as the ceremony progresses, they become less human and even more animalistic, as they do in Saxon's account. As their dancing grew faster, he says that they began to 'imitat[e] the postures of animals, some chewing at the grass, shaking their posteriors violently...' This dehumanises the Voodooists and explicitly invites the reader to view them as animals. In addition, the breaking of the clouds and the moon shining onto the backs of the participants implies that the Voodoo ceremony has a connection with nature and that the Voodooists are somewhat governed by natural occurrences, as animals are. Tallant suggests that the emergence of the moon from behind the clouds acts as a signal or a trigger for the Voodooists' behaviour, as it does for wild animals.

Additionally, Tallant's account proposes that the Voodoo ceremony usually concludes with sex. It is in this final phase that Tallant suggests that the Voodooists completely lose control and descend into animals, rather than imitating them as he suggests came in the earlier parts of the ceremony. The way in which they fall to the ground "panting and gyrating" signals their complete transition into an animal-like state. The transition into the sexual stage of the ceremony is also violent and savage. Instead of removing their clothes, Tallant claims that the Voodooists 'ripped' them

away. The sex seems to be the most offensive element of the ceremony to white onlookers. Tallant claimed that '[t]he white visitors would usually depart as the climax of sexual orgy began.'<sup>75</sup> The sexual aspect of the ceremony seems to be the pinnacle of the animalism that Tallant suggests is present in the Voodoo ceremony. His emphasis upon the skin colour of practitioners and his reminder to the reader of the Voodooists' "naked black flesh" highlights the relationship that he sees between Voodoo, African American people, and hypersexuality.

As mentioned earlier, Voodoo continued to be a source of entertainment to white New Orleanians in the days after the ceremony had finished. The newspaper reports that Tallant samples extracts from often sensationalised Voodoo ceremonies as well as fuelling white fantasies about black savagery, immorality, and hypersexuality. One excerpt from a report in *The Times* from 1872 describes a ceremony in which a white woman was 'whirled around the room in the arms of a negro blacker than the ace of spades.'<sup>76</sup> The report suggests that the white woman succumbed to 'the rapids of depravity' and abandoned any sense of social decency and morality. Cast as a 'wretched creature', the reporter writes that 'one after another the ebony suitors sought her hand; he [the reporter] saw her shrink out into the darkness, and more wanton than ever rush back to the revel...'<sup>77</sup> This newspaper report paints the ceremony as an almost frenzied event whereby even the most respectable of white women are susceptible to Voodoo's perceived depravity. This woman's descent from "white girl" to "wretched creature", quite literally swept up by a dark-skinned man, feeds into fantasies about imperilled white womanhood and stereotypes about black male sexuality. The stereotype or myth of the black rapist

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 26-27.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 27.

cast black men as innately hypersexual, predatory, and primitive.<sup>78</sup> Riché Richardson argues that it ‘was rooted in the growing panic about racial intermixture in the South that emerged after slavery ended, reflected the region’s obsession with protecting white womanhood to ensure the purity of the race, and served as a primary rationale for lynching in the region.’<sup>79</sup> Though this report does not suggest that the white woman was raped, the narrative of her “descent” is largely rooted in the same ideas about black male sexuality as the myth of the black rapist. This report of interracial sex and the hypersexuality of black men as part of the Voodoo ceremony indicates that Voodoo was perceived by whites as a threat to morality, respectability, and white womanhood.

The sexual nature of the ceremonies and the notion that they were an opportunity for participants to succumb to their sexual desires echoes Long’s argument that New Orleans acted as a “safety valve”. Furthermore, the way in which Tallant reports that white women were often involved in this final stage of the ceremony supports the notion that this “safety valve” facilitated what Long calls “sex across the color line”. Tallant also suggests that sex is a central component of Voodoo outside as well as inside the ceremony and that hypersexuality was prevalent amongst black female Voodooists as well as black males. He suggests that queens including Laveau were also brothel owners or brokers of sex, particularly interracial sex. He claims that alongside the shows that Laveau engineered for white spectators, she also orchestrated ‘hidden orgies to which white men with a liking for colored

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<sup>78</sup> For more on the stereotype of the black rapist see chapter titled, “Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist,” in Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 172-201.

<sup>79</sup> Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 3.

girls were welcome.’<sup>80</sup> The particular type of sex described suggests that Voodoo and the purported sexual disposition of the Voodooists, acted as a mechanism by which people could disregard societal expectations surrounding sex and race. The sexual nature of Voodoo, like New Orleans itself, as Long suggests, acts as a safety valve. It is perhaps here that descriptions of Voodoo echo those of the city most closely. The sexualised image associated with New Orleans became associated with Voodoo.

Both *Fabulous New Orleans* and *Voodoo in New Orleans* depicts Voodoo and African Americans who practice it as animalistic and hypersexual. These images of African Americans reproduce stereotypes of black people as primitive and bolster ideas about black inferiority. Their depictions of Voodoo, which become a proxy for the people who practise it, reflect theories of white racial supremacy and justified the ideology that underpinned legislation that denied African Americans equal status to whites in the Jim Crow South. However, where Saxon’s account suggests that whites were in complete control over viewing Voodoo and African Americans, Tallant complicates the notion of a masterful white gaze and suggests that Voodooists controlled what a white spectator could see and, in this way, resisted white dominance.

#### Voodoo as a Social Threat and Site of Resistance

In addition to acting as a form of entertainment and as a spectacle for white observers, Voodoo was also perceived as a site of resistance to racialized systems of power and as a threat to the safety and security of whites in the city. Tallant outlines

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 56.

the ways in which Voodoo was identified as a risk to the status quo in New Orleans during slavery: 'As early as 1782 Governor Gálvez of Louisiana prohibited the importation of Negroes from Martinique because he believed they would be steeped in Voodooism and that they "would make the lives of the citizens unsafe." A decade later Negroes from Santo Domingo were likewise banned.'<sup>81</sup> Politicians and enslavers believed that Voodoo had the capacity to challenge the institution of slavery which largely underpinned the economic and social structures of the U.S. South.

Tallant claims that enslaved people who came from the Caribbean islands had retained Voodoo more closely than those who entered New Orleans directly from Africa. Enslaved people from the Caribbean, he claims, were known to be 'a rebellious, more troublesome type...'<sup>82</sup> As such, the city took responsive measures to protect the status quo and banned the import of enslaved people from these areas. Though enslaved people who were thought to be steeped in Voodoo were banned from entering Louisiana, *Voodoo in New Orleans* suggests that there remained a perceived threat to the existing racial hierarchy and the elevated position of whites from Voodooists already in the city. Tallant writes: 'New Orleans had been an American city perhaps a decade when the dangerous aspects of Voodoo congregations began to impress the public officials. The idea of a racial uprising became important again. It was known that the Voodoos were stirring up hatred against their white masters and that some of their meetings were held for the purpose of working black magic against whites, if not to plot actual revolution.'<sup>83</sup> Tallant suggests that one of the primary functions of Voodooists was to plot against their

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<sup>81</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> Saxon, Dreyer, and Tallant, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, 224.

<sup>83</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 18.

oppressors and to ultimately overthrow the legal and social structures which placed whites in a superior position to African Americans. Even after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 though, Tallant's account suggests that the notion that Voodoo posed a threat to whites lingered on. Instead of challenging the institution of slavery, Voodooists challenged the inferior status of black people in society in the post-bellum era.

The figure of the Voodoo woman personifies the notion that Voodoo challenged racial hierarchies. The fact the many of them were not enslaved reinforced the idea that Voodooists had the power to overcome or rebel against overarching systems of racial oppression. Tallant claims that '[t]he current Voodoo queen was [...] the most elaborately dressed woman, the haughtiest and the most carefree. For the Voodoo queen was never a slave, but always a free woman of color who need fear neither curfew nor any of laws applied to slaves.'<sup>84</sup> In being the 'haughtiest' and 'most carefree' woman, the queen was a symbol of freedom. If Voodooists worshipped the queen then they inevitably admired the fact that she was free. As leader, the queen's freedom from slavery meant that Voodoo represented a challenge to hierarchies of race and systems of racial oppression. This image extended beyond slavery though, the figure of the queen and the freedom, resistance, and status that she represented endured after slavery was abolished.

Whilst Tallant's images of Voodoo ceremonies primarily present them as a spectacle and as a source of entertainment for white audiences, his narrative also suggests that there was an element of resistance to, or protection from, the white gaze. Tallant says that Laveau charged fees to white audiences and allowed them to view her ceremonies on St. John's Eve. Describing her as 'an excellent showman,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 19.



with a strong business sense', Tallant suggests that Laveau reinvented New Orleans Voodoo and for the first time 'put [Voodoo] on a paying basis.'<sup>85</sup> Under the rule of Laveau:

[t]he rites by the lake grew not only in size but also in popularity.

Marie extended invitations to many persons who had never witnessed the rites; she dismissed much of the secrecy regarding them, as being unnecessary. There were always, it is true, certain meetings to which outsiders were not invited and which they could never have found, but to the usual gatherings Marie invited the press, the police, the sporting world and any thrill-seekers ready to donate a fee for admission.<sup>86</sup>

Here, Tallant suggests that Laveau controlled the white consumption of Voodoo in the city. No longer were black people passive when they were viewed by white audiences, instead Tallant suggests that Laveau disrupts structures of power present in the spectatorship of Voodoo worship by controlling the way that black people performed Voodoo to white audiences. Not only does Laveau relax the secrecy surrounding the viewing of Voodoo ceremonies and thereby control the spectacle, she additionally capitalises on white spectatorship and uses the publicity surrounding these newly public ceremonies to elevate her status as queen. Tallant claims that she 'thrived on publicity' and that following the expansion of the audience to these ceremonies, 'legend after legend' spread about her.<sup>87</sup> During her time as what Tallant describes as the ruling queen of Voodoo in the city, he suggests that Laveau renegotiated the ways in which Voodoo worship was viewed and consumed by white

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 58.

audiences. Unlike the *WPA Guide to New Orleans*, *Voodoo in New Orleans* disrupts the white gaze. It unsettles the one-sided gaze presented in the official guidebook and suggests that there were moments when the power in the white viewing of black Voodooists shifted from white spectator to black subject. Tallant's descriptions of the people involved in the ceremony keeps them as objects of the white gaze but the framing of these ceremonies in the narrative about how Laveau empowered herself and others to resist the gaze means that the people involved are sometimes subjects with their own agency, rather than objects to be viewed, in Tallant's representation.

In retaining the "orthodox trappings" of the Voodoo ceremony and satisfying a white audience's expectations, Tallant's account suggests that Laveau resisted and controlled the white gaze. By acknowledging Laveau's showmanship and identifying her ceremonies as performances rather than authentic displays of Voodoo worship, Tallant addresses the limitations of the white gaze. His differentiation between the ceremonies that took place before Laveau's time, when spectators viewed the ceremony without invitation, and those which she advertised to the public, disrupts the absolute power of white spectatorship presented in the *WPA Guide to New Orleans*. It instead suggests that there were moments when power lay with the black performers rather than with the white voyeurs. Discussing resistance to the white gaze, hooks states:

[s]paces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance

struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating “awareness” politicizes “looking” relations – one learns to look a certain way in order to resist.<sup>88</sup>

In engineering a ceremony for the purpose of white viewing consumption, Laveau and the Voodooists “look” to one another identifying the white gaze upon them and adjusting the ceremony in response to the gaze. Thereby, as hooks says, the process of “claiming and cultivating” awareness becomes a way to resist the white gaze. The Voodooists “look” to Laveau and her to them to perform in a certain way in order that the white gaze is limited and they become empowered. The acknowledgement of the white gaze, the identification of it by the Voodooists, and the steps taken by Laveau to control what can be gazed upon is a form of resistance towards the power asserted over black people through the viewing of them by white audiences. In addition, Laveau’s commodification of the ceremony and the profit that the Voodooists make from the white gaze also signals a shift in power. Whilst presenting these performances primarily as a spectacle and in acknowledging Laveau’s showmanship, Tallant’s account of her direction problematizes racialized systems of power and dominance and suggests that the power in looking shifted from white spectator to black performer through the process of “looking” to each other and in capitalising on the white gaze.

Similarly, throughout *Voodoo in New Orleans*, Tallant insists that the dances in Congo Square and the ceremonies by the lake were only part of what took place on the New Orleans Voodoo scene. He claims that Laveau had different arenas of Voodoo worship, those which were available to the primarily white viewing public and those which were private and only available to the city’s inner circle of

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<sup>88</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 116.

Voodooists. According to Tallant, the cottage Laveau owned on St. Ann Street, known as the Maison Blanche, was ‘undoubtedly the scene of some of the Voodoo rites from which non-members were excluded.’<sup>89</sup> Tallant upholds that despite mass viewings of Voodoo ceremonies, there was always an element of worship or practice that was off-limits to outsiders.

In addition to restricting access to private ceremonies and controlling the viewing of public Voodoo ceremonies during her tenure as Queen, there is evidence to suggest that Laveau not only resisted the gaze but she also subverted it. In both *Voodoo in New Orleans* and *Fabulous New Orleans*, Tallant and Saxon claim that Laveau learned the secrets of New Orleans’ wealthy white elite using a number of strategies. One of the ways in which Tallant suggests that Laveau exerted influence over New Orleans’ elite was through her work as a hairdresser. In her capacity as a beautician, Laveau entered the homes of New Orleans’ wealthy women and ‘the ladies talked and Marie listened.’<sup>90</sup> According to Tallant, ‘all of the family’s secrets must have come out to dance for Marie: the family with a strain of insanity and the strange aunt kept locked in a room upstairs; the public officials who were stealing the public funds; the family that was always in fear of someone discovering its strain of Negro blood.’<sup>91</sup> It is in this way he claims that Laveau accumulated influence over the city’s most prominent politicians and police officials. Similarly, Saxon suggests that Laveau directed a network of spies, mostly domestic servants to listen around the homes that they worked in. Saxon describes a sophisticated network and method of communication that existed between Laveau’s spies. He claims that through this network of domestic servants ‘a message could be conveyed from one end of the city

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<sup>89</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 65.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

to another in a single day without one white person being aware of it.’<sup>92</sup> Saxon suggests that this network was used to convey messages about Voodoo meetings but that it was also an effective way for Laveau to learn what was happening across numerous New Orleans households. Although Saxon and Tallant both primarily present Voodoo as something to be viewed and consumed by white audiences, their accounts of Laveau learning about the activities of white households suggests that the white gaze was disrupted and that the Voodooists also gazed back and therefore represented a serious threat to the status quo.

Tallant writes, ‘[h]ow much influence the Widow Paris [Laveau] exercised over the city’s politicians during that period can never be estimated, but certainly it was very extensive.’<sup>93</sup> Due to her intimate knowledge of several of New Orleans’ elites, Tallant suggests that Laveau was able to exert a significant amount of influence over the city’s officials. He claims that due to her reputation ‘for wisdom and magical powers’ prominent businessmen and other city officials sought Laveau’s advice and that she even advised the city’s most influential attorney.<sup>94</sup> Ina Fandrich, who has authored the first scholarly study of Marie Laveau since this period, confirms Tallant’s suggestion and claims that ‘narratives and eyewitness accounts seem to indicate that it was [Laveau] who reigned over the city, not the municipal authorities.’<sup>95</sup> Laveau’s renegotiation of the ways in which ceremonies were viewed, her efforts to monitor white households, and her influence of city officials suggests that Laveau subverted the white gaze. She and other Voodooists resisted and looked back at white spectators and therefore challenged modes of oppression and the status of African Americans in New Orleans.

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<sup>92</sup> Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans*, 242.

<sup>93</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 60.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen*, 1.

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The images of Voodoo found in *Fabulous New Orleans*, the *WPA Guide to New Orleans* and *Voodoo in New Orleans* have had a significant impact upon how Voodoo has been configured in the cultural imagination and largely comprise two central images: Voodoo as a spectacle and Voodoo as a threat to white superiority. Their presentation of Voodoo as a spectacle encompasses those attributes which lay claim to the city's image as exceptional. The allure of Voodoo as a spectacle rests on notions of it as distinctive, sensual, and magical but it also rests on the notion of Voodoo as different, as both religious and racial other. This process of othering is mostly seen at play in Saxon and Tallant's othering of the Voodooists themselves. They draw on stereotypes of African Americans, including images of the savage and the hypersexual, to other and make a spectacle of Voodooists and Voodoo practices. In this way, Voodoo becomes a marker of racial inferiority. Their depictions of the Voodoo ceremony in particular and its participants as animalistic uphold ideas about white supremacy. They present the ceremony as a source of entertainment for New Orleans' white community and as a focal point for the spectatorship of Voodoo and of African American people and culture. The cumulative effect of this spectatorship is the reinforcement of whites' superior status in the city to blacks. Looking and inviting an assumed white readership to look at Voodoo in this manner reinforces the racial politics and systems of oppression that were present in the city and more widely across the South and the rest of the nation. To gaze at Voodoo in the way that Saxon and Tallant encourage is a display of dominance over those who are gazed upon. The power dynamic in looking and being looked at reflects the racialized power dynamic in New Orleans during this moment.

On the other hand, Tallant's suggestion that there was resistance to these systems and Tallant and Saxon's depiction of Voodoo as a potential threat to the superior status of whites in the city unsettles this power dynamic. Primarily through the figure of Laveau, Tallant presents Voodoo as a site in which racialized systems of power were challenged and resisted. His accounts of the performative nature of Laveau's ceremonies suggest that Voodooists resisted the gaze and therefore the power exerted over them by whites in the city. These texts and their depictions of Voodoo uphold and reflect ideologies about white racial superiority, but Tallant also identifies Voodoo as a site of resistance to these ideologies, disrupting racialized systems of power and dominance in the city and exposing white fragility. While scholars have previously dismissed *Voodoo in New Orleans* as a 'racist classic', it also represents a shift in commentary on New Orleans Voodoo and in that respect it resembles the growing wave of narratives that refuted this sort of racist imagery during the 1930s and 40s.

## **Chapter 2: Renegotiating the Primitive in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men***

In 1927 and 1928, Zora Neale Hurston collected folklore and conjure tales for her first major ethnographic collection, *Mules and Men*, published in 1935. The collection comprises two distinct sections: the first contains folklore from various locations in Florida, including Hurston's hometown Eatonville, and the second is concerned with hoodoo from New Orleans. The hoodoo section consists of seven chapters that chronicle the time that Hurston spent with various hoodoo doctors in the city and each chapter is devoted to her time with one or two doctors. The second section is a revision of Hurston's earlier article, 'Hoodoo in America', which appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1931. Hurston changed the names of the doctors between the two publications, but the stories remained largely the same. Hurston employed a participant-observer role to conduct her research and became embedded within New Orleans' hoodoo community. She recalls rituals that she observed and participated in, including several initiation ceremonies, and reveals how she became part of New Orleans' inner circle of hoodooists. This chapter will discuss the observations that Hurston made about how hoodoo functioned in New Orleans as a belief system responsive to the social and political circumstances of its practitioners; the representation of rituals, in particular how Hurston celebrated African and African American culture and signalled a departure from images historically associated with the primitive as a marker of inferiority; and the methods that Hurston utilized to self-authorize and authenticate her account. I argue that *Mules and Men* represents both a challenge to the status quo and a counter narrative to dominant narratives of hoodoo as a marker of racial and cultural inferiority that came before.



As an insider and as a trained anthropologist, Hurston utilised a double gaze to observe and interpret hoodoo in New Orleans from a different vantage point than the city's travel literature. By becoming a part of the community, Hurston was able to identify the ways in which hoodoo functioned as complex system of belief, explanation, and guidance in the daily lives of New Orleans' African American community. She observed how it was used as a counter measure to racial prejudice and inequality in the city as well as a system by which people navigated an array of personal problems. Hurston created a narrative of hoodoo that challenged derogatory depictions of African American folk culture, exposed it as a belief system that informed the lives of many black Americans, and celebrated African American traditions.

#### Hoodoo in New Orleans' African American Community

Hurston presents hoodoo as a central part of the fabric of black life in New Orleans and claims that its flame continues to burn in the United States 'with all the intensity of a suppressed religion.'<sup>1</sup> Franz Boas, often referred to as the father of modern anthropology and Hurston's mentor, commends her in the preface to *Mules and Men* for capturing 'the Negro's reaction to everyday events, his emotional life, his humor and passions' and believed that Hurston's account of black folk culture stood apart from those that had appeared before.<sup>2</sup> He remarks: 'Negro tales, songs and sayings without end, as well as descriptions of Negro magic and voodoo, have appeared; but in all of them the intimate setting in the social life of the Negro has been given very

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<sup>1</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, (New York: Harper Perennial, [1935] 1990), 183.

<sup>2</sup> Franz Boas, Preface to *Mules and Men*, xiii.

inadequately.’<sup>3</sup> It was Hurston’s position in the ‘intimate setting in the social life’ of New Orleans’ African American community that enabled her to reveal the myriad ways in which hoodoo functioned in the daily lives of those who believed in and practised it. In her interactions with doctors and clients, she learns that hoodoo operated as a system by which people explained and navigated their daily lives and as a means through which practitioners sought to assert or regain control in a multitude of circumstances. Clients visited doctors for various reasons including those seeking justice and retribution; help with marital, emotional, and personal relationship problems; treatment for mental and physical ailments; and for luck in business and money matters. They often called on spirits to assist them and mingled hoodoo rituals with their Christian faith. Contrary to fears that folk cultures were fading in the wake of advances in modern technology, industrialisation, and urbanisation, Hurston’s account of hoodoo in New Orleans in the early twentieth century suggests that it continued to thrive in the city and evolved alongside these rapid changes.

The ease with which Hurston identified prominent hoodooists in New Orleans, and the success of their businesses, conflicts with the notion of conjure as a fading tradition during the 1920s and 1930s. Under the supervision of Boas, Hurston was aware that there was a sense amongst anthropologists that local and regional traditions, particularly African American and Native American, were disappearing. Due to shifting social and economic structures, anthropologists, folklorists, and artists became concerned with salvaging ‘what were imagined to be the last remnants of older “primitive” cultures quickly disappearing in the wake of the homogenizing

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

forces of modern industrial culture.’<sup>4</sup> Boas and his students undertook a number of projects aimed at producing a record of both Native American and African American traditions. George Stocking writes that the aims of Boas’ ethnographies ‘[...] were those of traditional humanistic scholarship: to create for a preliterate people with no historical records a body of primary materials analogous to those by which European scholars studied the earlier phases of their own cultural history.’<sup>5</sup> These projects were part of what Margaret Mead would later come to call the ‘giant rescue operation’ and informed the context for Hurston’s *Mules and Men*.<sup>6</sup> Alice Gambrell suggests that: ‘according to the “rescue” mentality, those [African American and Native American] traditions were not simply experiencing inevitable historical change (as, in fact, they had always done, though admittedly not with this rapidity) to the contrary, they were disappearing completely, incorporating themselves into a broader national tradition that was itself inextricably mixed.’<sup>7</sup> The rapidity, as Gambrell says, with which the nation’s economic and social structures were changing meant that the task to document local and regional cultures was acute amongst anthropologists during this moment.

In a letter to Alain Locke, Hurston says that she was just ‘in the nick of time’ to collect the material as the greatest era of conjure had passed about forty years prior to her trip.<sup>8</sup> In letters to her colleagues, Hurston seems to acknowledge her role in the “giant rescue operation” but her presentation of conjure and folklore in *Mules and Men* suggests that these traditions did not need rescuing at all. Instead

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Cotera, *Native Speakers: Ella Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston, Jovita Gonzalez, and the Poetics of Culture* (Austin: University Press of Texas, 2008), 32.

<sup>5</sup> George W. Stocking, *The Ethnographer’s Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 62.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Mead quoted in Cotera, *Native Speakers*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Alice Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference: Transatlantic Culture, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 102.

<sup>8</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Alain Locke, October 15, 1928, in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 128.

of observing the complete disappearance of folk traditions, Hurston notices shifts in hoodoo practice. When she recalls her time studying with a practitioner named Dr Duke, she describes him as a ‘member of a disappearing school of folk magic’, because he went out to the swamps to collect his own roots and herbs.<sup>9</sup> She says that very few doctors did that anymore and instead they sourced their materials from supply houses. Whilst the modes of production and distribution may have changed, the rituals that Hurston reports from the other “modern” conjurers remain recognisable as hoodoo. Indeed, her inclusion of them in the collection suggests that she too recognised their work as hoodoo despite the rapid and drastic changes in materials and methods of procurement over the last forty years. Hurston stressed: ‘[i]t is the meaning, not the material that counts.’<sup>10</sup> Though Hurston said in the letters discussed above that the greatest era of conjure had passed, her account in *Mules and Men* suggests that while it may not have been practised in the same way and with the same methods as it was forty years before, these traditions endured, evolved, and were still alive in New Orleans during the 1920s.

Hurston’s account highlights the ways in which hoodoo evolved amid a shifting social and economic landscape, yet she also recognised the impact that contact with whiteness had upon African American folklore and culture and felt that it was in some ways corroding it. In another letter to Boas during her collecting trip, Hurston writes, ‘It is fortunate that it is being collected now, for a great many people say, “I used to know some of that old stuff, but I done forgot it all.” You see, the negro is not living his lore to the extent of the Indian. He is not on a reservation being kept pure. His negroness is being rubbed off by close contact with white

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<sup>9</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 223.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

culture.’<sup>11</sup> Though Hurston understood the folklore she collected had been suppressed and diluted or tainted by its interaction with white culture, the stories she presents and the ways in which hoodoo was used in the late 1920s suggests that it adapted to the racial dynamics and politics of the city and that its flame was still very much burning. Despite her feeling that some black folk culture had been “rubbed off” by contact with white culture, the creativity, endurance, and adaptability of hoodoo rituals that she found when collecting material for *Mules and Men* demonstrate that hoodoo continued to inform the lives of black New Orleanians during this period. Far from disappearing, Hurston claims that ‘negro folklore [was] still in the making a new kind [was] crowding out the old.’<sup>12</sup> This comment contrasts with her earlier statement that the greatest era had passed and instead suggests that what Hurston found in New Orleans was an adaptable and evolving set of folk tales and practices, refuting the notion that African American communities were at odds with notions of modernity.

Hurston presents accounts of rituals to rebalance power in a variety of social situations that, as Boas claims in the preface, offer a portrait of the ‘intimate setting of the social life’ of New Orleans’ black community. She presents numerous instances of practices aimed at solving personal problems between lovers, neighbours, and rivals. These range from causing illness or bad luck to rituals to bring about a person’s death. In perhaps the most chilling tale of the collection, a client visits Anatol Pierre (a prominent Catholic hoodoo doctor under whom Hurston studied) and asks that the husband of the woman he was having an affair with be killed. The husband had vowed to kill the client and so knowing that one of them would die, the client asks Pierre to kill the husband before he kills him. Pierre

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<sup>11</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Franz Boas, March 29, 1927, in *A Life in Letters*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, April 12, 1928, in *A Life in Letters*, 116.

suggests that the man leave town instead but the client could not afford to leave his 'good trucking business' behind and so, reluctantly, he agrees to do the work for the sum of \$250.<sup>13</sup> The ritual involves the entombment of a live chicken and cat for a month, the burial of a doll that represents the target of the spell, and the burning of black candles for ninety days. Death is called upon at Pierre's altar to ensure the husband would not live beyond the ninety days for which the candles burned. For the duration of the ritual Pierre sleeps in a black draped coffin and Hurston confirms that the ritual worked and the man died.

She also recalls a story about a feud between two women who used hoodoo to try to hurt each other. The feud escalated over the coming weeks and days; the women threw War Powder at each other's doors, tried to draw blood from one another to conduct harming rituals, and engaged in various other acts hoping to hurt the other person. Eventually it ended when one of the two women cut open a live chicken with a razor blade and thrust her hand inside, 'the hot blood and entrails enveloped her hand, she went into sort of a frenzy, shouting: "I got her, I got her, I got her now!"'<sup>14</sup> Hurston did not disclose what happened after this but the story, like Pierre's ritual to kill the husband of his client's lover, demonstrates that rituals were used amongst the African American community to settle disputes. Hurston's representation of hoodoo suggests that it were used as a means to shift, rebalance, and assert power. Hoodoo offered a clear framework of explanation for everyday occurrences as well as a set of guidelines for how to respond in certain situations and circumstances.

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<sup>13</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 208.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

This also becomes evident in several of Hurston's tales that focus on addressing relationship issues between lovers. A conjure woman by the name of Kitty Brown, the final hoodoo practitioner that Hurston features in *Mules and Men*, specialises in relationships and 'liked to make marriages and put lovers together.'<sup>15</sup> Hurston says there was plenty for Brown to work on in New Orleans concerning love and relationships and that she had built up a regular client list. She spent a lot of her time advising clients how to keep their husbands or wives from straying and how to get them back if they did. She sometimes advised them to use love potions and "drawing agents" to attract people to each other and clients were usually given instructions to carry out their own rituals at home. Alongside putting together couples, Kitty also assisted one of her clients in getting revenge for her lover marrying another and stealing her money. She arranged a hoodoo dance to bring about the death of the man who had betrayed her client. Five days following the dance, Hurston claims that the man realised his ex-lover had put a fix on him and returned to her. The client asked Kitty for the spell to be removed and the man lived.

Hurston recalls one of Brown's regular clients and says that she usually visited her because she was anxious about keeping her husband faithful. On one occasion her husband had gone to Mobile with a construction gang and she was scared that he would not return to her. Brown instructed her to write the name of her husband six times on a piece of paper and place it in a glass full of water and add two tablespoons of quicksilver. She was then told to write his name again three times each on six candles and to burn one per day during the daytime on a window sill for six days. This, Brown assured her, would ensure his safe and timely return.<sup>16</sup> The client returned a week later worried that her husband still had not returned so Brown

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 244.

prescribed ritual after ritual until he came home. During one of her client's visits to request a ritual to make her husband's love 'more stronger', Brown told her: 'Alright, Minnie, I'll do it, but you ain't got no reason to be so unsettled with me behind you. Do like I say and you'll be alright.'<sup>17</sup> Even though Brown's rituals were not a success every time, as with Minnie's stray husband in Mobile, Brown's services both calmed her clients' fears and made them feel like they had some control over situations that they perhaps did not. Knowing that they had the support of a hoodoo doctor was often enough to ease clients' worries and to give them the strength to navigate their problems. Kitty Brown and other doctors that Hurston encountered in New Orleans conducted much of their business to help their clients navigate their personal and social lives. This included settling disputes as well as remedying familial and relationship struggles. The outcome of these rituals, whether they were aimed at banishing a troublesome family member or keeping a spouse faithful, was always to allay the fears or concerns of clients as well as granting them a sense of agency over their lives. It is perhaps in this way that hoodoo as a belief system is most evident. The way in which clients repeatedly consulted hoodoo doctors for explanations, guidance, and reassurances in their faith echoes the ways in which other belief systems function. As the blending of institutionalised faiths with hoodoo by multiple doctors that Hurston encountered demonstrates, hoodoo functioned as a religious system and the doctor operated in a similar capacity to a member of the clergy. Clients viewed hoodoo as a belief system, or as part of a belief system, that explained the world they lived in and doctors assisted them in their navigation of it.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 243.



In addition to the main body of the text, *Mules and Men* features an appendix divided into four parts: 'Negro Songs with Music', 'Formulae of Hoodoo Doctors', 'Paraphernalia of Conjure', and 'Prescriptions of Root Doctors'. The second and third parts offer further specifics on how to conduct rituals for a wide variety of needs from 'court scrapes' to how to rent a house to breaking up love affairs as well as a list of the uses of various materials and substances. The final appendix details how roots are used by doctors to heal illness. Hurston claims: 'Folk medicine is practised by a great number of persons. On the "jobs," that is, in the sawmill camps, the turpentine stills, mining camps and among the lowly generally, doctors are not generally called to prescribe for illnesses, certainly, not for the social diseases.'<sup>18</sup> In the absence of access to western medical doctors, as was the case during slavery, African Americans as well as whites turned to root doctors for treatment. Hurston's inclusion of this section suggests that root medicine also continued to act as a system of healthcare for those who could not afford or who did not have access to western medicine in the twentieth century. Though this section appears outside of the main narrative, the systematic and extensive lists of materials and medical ailments that Hurston provides demonstrates the extent to which hoodoo functioned as a well-established, successful, and effective healthcare system in the black community.

One of the main surviving functions of hoodoo, as demonstrated in *Mules and Men*, is to alleviate and combat the effects of systemic racism and racial violence. Hoodoo's ways of resisting racism demonstrate its capacity as a responsive social system sensitive to the politics of the moment. Out of the seven hoodoo chapters that comprise *Mules and Men*, all of them feature a tale that includes a harming ritual. Yvonne Chireau suggests that rituals to harm were mostly protective

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 281.

and originated as methods of self-defence, resistance, and revenge under slavery.<sup>19</sup> Some of these themes recur in *Mules and Men* and Hurston's tales suggest that harming rituals as methods of defence or as a reaction to oppressive circumstances continued beyond the abolition of slavery. For example, Hurston recalls a story about an 'unreconstructed' white planter in Georgia who regarded the family of black servants who worked for him as inferior.<sup>20</sup> One night during dinner, the planter picked up a beef rib from the table and struck a young girl, hitting her in the temple and murdering her instantly. The father was known to practice hoodoo from time to time. Like the plantation conjurer during the slave period, '[t]he Negroes around both depended upon him and feared him.'<sup>21</sup> Before scrubbing away his daughter's blood, he was said to have soaked his handkerchief in it and then put it into his pocket. In the years that followed, the story goes that the planter saw the girl's father near his house on numerous occasions even after he had moved. Each time he saw the father a member of his family went insane and eventually his wife, daughter, and son were committed to institutions for the mentally ill or criminally insane.

Hurston's story suggests that hoodoo was conceived of and used by the black community as a means to secure justice for racially motivated violence. The white planter was not brought to justice by the authorities and so her father turned to hoodoo in the hope of obtaining retribution for the murder of his daughter. According to the story, the planter suffered and lost his family as a result of the girl's father's hoodoo practices. The circulation of stories such as these provided a way for African Americans to feel that justice was available to them when they were failed

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<sup>19</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 60.

<sup>20</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 234.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

by the state and that hoodoo was a means by which justice and retribution for racially motivated violence and oppression could be obtained.

Hurston also recalls her own work under the guidance of a doctor named Father Watson in a case concerning a young black man who had been shot and wounded. His assailant was said to have ‘good white folks back of him and [was] going to be let loose soon as the case [was] tried.’<sup>22</sup> Father Watson promised the client: ‘That man will be punished. When we get through with him, white folks or no white folks, he’ll find a tough jury sitting on his case.’<sup>23</sup> He then told Hurston it was a simple task to bring justice or punishment to a person who was already indicted. Under his mentorship, Hurston conducted a ritual using various ingredients and repeated actions to keep the shooter imprisoned.

She also recalls other rituals she learned from various doctors aimed at securing justice for clients and identified trends in what should be done in certain situations. For instance, Hurston claims that there were two certain ways to catch a murderer if the law was unable (or unwilling) to. The first was placing an egg in the open palm of the victim. She suggests that the egg represents life and an egg in a victim’s hand represented the life of the murderer. He would not be able to stray far from the murder scene and could therefore be identified. The second method, Hurston states, was to bury the victim in a sitting position. She says that a victim sitting before the throne (in the next world) was able to demand justice, but a victim in a lying position could not. If a victim was buried in this manner, she contends that ‘the murderer would be speedily brought to justice.’<sup>24</sup> The way in which Hurston identifies the logic of long-standing rituals attests to the existence of hoodoo as a

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<sup>22</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 218.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 229.

belief system and a set of practices that responded both to the material circumstances of the community and to an underlying set of beliefs.

She also identifies ways in which hoodoo doctors helped clients when they were in trouble with the law. In particular, she spent time with Dr Duke (the doctor who still collected his own herbs and roots) who specialised in law cases amongst other things. His reputation for work in this area stretched beyond New Orleans and clients would visit him from great distances and pay large sums of money for his services. So frequently was Dr Duke retained for his services assisting in legal troubles, Hurston claims that she was able to practice all the established methods of winning court cases during her time with him. These included rituals to sway judges, silence witnesses, and ensure a good verdict from the jury. The frequency with which Hurston records doctors who assisted with legal cases as well as her identification of long-standing methods to identify offenders and secure justice demonstrates that one of the main functions of hoodoo was to resist imbalances of power.

Hurston's tales posit that hoodoo continued to be used as a means to fight racial injustice and violence in the 1920s as it had been when it was first brought to the U.S. under slavery. Doctors acted as arbiters of social justice taking on the role of lawyer, judge, and police officer to ensure that their clients got justice and to combat prejudicial treatment suffered by African Americans at the hands of the city's authorities. Instead of declining after the abolition of slavery, Hurston's accounts of harming rituals suggest that hoodoo evolved as systems of oppression did. Hoodoo was no longer used to protect enslaved people from their white enslavers, but it was used to combat other means of racial injustice and as a way for African Americans in New Orleans to reassert a sense of control over their lives when they were faced with

difficult circumstances. This evolution of practices concomitant with shifting circumstances demonstrates that hoodoo was a responsive, logical, structured, and creative system that worked to serve the needs of its community.

Hurston's account of the numerous social functions that hoodoo played in the community suggests that hoodoo acted as a means for a disenfranchised people to feel as though they had control over their lives and that they were able to push back against the effects of their experiences of systemic racism and oppression. It also suggests that the conjurer maintained an important role in African American society numerous decades after the break-up of plantation life and illustrates that the conjurer often acted as a spiritual leader, lawyer, counsellor, mediator, and in some cases judge for the African American community. *Mules and Men* depicts hoodoo as a system by which doctors offered services when social structures and institutions failed disenfranchised and oppressed communities of black people. Hoodoo also acted as a system of explanation and as a means to assert power in other areas of social life. Like the treatment of illnesses and ailments, rituals that remedied these types of problems acted to calm anxieties and to give clients a greater sense of control over their daily lives. All these functions demonstrate that hoodoo informed many of the major aspects of believers' daily lives and that it had adapted in the wake of social and economic change.

Hurston's assessment of hoodoo as a 'supressed religion' is apt; it functioned in many of the same ways as unsuppressed religions. Hurston frequently drew parallels between hoodoo and Christianity throughout the text and her discussion of the two suggests that she saw them as equal. As discussed in the introduction, in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century, anthropologists subscribed to Darwinian notions of cultural evolution and culture was used as a way to measure the progress

of groups and communities of people. However, due to the influence of anthropologists such as Boas, conceptions of culture underwent dramatic shifts during this period. James Clifford claims:

In the twentieth century [...] plural, anthropological definitions of culture (lower-case *c* with the possibility of a final *s*) emerged as a liberal alternative to racist classifications of human diversity. It was a sensitive means for understanding different and dispersed “whole ways of life” in a high colonial context of unprecedented global interconnection. Culture in its full evolutionary richness and authenticity, formerly reserved for the best creations of modern Europe, could now be extended to all of the world’s populations. In the anthropological vision of Boas’ generation “cultures” were of equal value.<sup>25</sup>

As a student of Boas, Hurston rejected notions of cultural evolution and the inferior position of folk and oral cultures that it implied and instead subscribed to theories of cultural relativism – the notion that all cultures should be understood on their own terms rather than in comparison to others and that any evaluation of a cultural practice has to take into account the cultural system of which it is a part without comparison to other cultures.<sup>26</sup> She saw hoodoo and Christianity as two systems, both being a part of culture, that often intermingled with one another and the variety of functions of hoodoo revealed in *Mules and Men* supports this assessment. Hurston argues that hoodoo ‘adapts itself like Christianity to its locale, reclaiming some of its

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<sup>25</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 234.

<sup>26</sup> For more on cultural relativism see George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), particularly chapter 9 titled “Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective,” 195-233.

borrowed characteristics of itself, such as fire-worship as signified in the Christian church by the altar and the candles and the belief in the power of water to sanctify as in baptism.’<sup>27</sup> She also retells the creation story as an account of the time when hoodoo began: she claims that God used ‘magic spells’ to create the world in six days and only showed his magic to Moses, enabling him to become the world’s first hoodooist.<sup>28</sup> James and Lerhonda Manigault-Bryant suggest that Hurston’s presentation of Christianity as a force that ‘conjure sits within, rides alongside, and selectively inserts itself into’ disrupts ideas of Christian normativity and becomes another way ‘for envisioning Black spiritual and religious life anew.’<sup>29</sup> Hurston’s biblical introduction to hoodoo’s origins and her observance of its myriad religious functions in the community – as a system of explanation, guidance, comfort, and empowerment – not only disrupts ideas about Christian normativity, it also refutes racist depictions of African American culture as inferior and exposes it as a complex, creative, responsive, and deeply ingrained system of belief.

### Modernist Primitivism and the Aesthetics of Hoodoo Rituals

Primitivist modernist aesthetics were employed by both black and white artists in the early twentieth century for a variety of reasons, as discussed in the introduction. Due to primitivism’s association with nature and simplicity, white modernist artists such as Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Paul Gauguin amongst numerous others, often utilised primitivist sensibilities in their art as an antidote to the rapid forces of

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<sup>27</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 183.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 183-185.

<sup>29</sup> James A. Manigault-Bryant and Lerhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, “Conjuring Pasts and Ethnographic Presents in Zora Neale Hurston’s Modernity,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 4, no. 2 (2016): 226-7.

modernization, celebration of rationality, and rejection of religion in modern science that was occurring in the world around them. David Murray argues that:

‘[w]orking counter to the accepted narrative of progress developed by early anthropologists and comparative religionists, in which there was a movement from magic to religion to science, Modernist artists insisted that art took us back to the beginning in connecting us with a world that had not been disenchanted.’<sup>30</sup>

Though Hurston was taught by some of these anthropologists, she was also part of this artistic movement that looked to the primitive as a mode of connection to ‘a world that had not been disenchanted.’<sup>31</sup> Modernist artists’ invocation of primitivism often appeared as an African presence and was presented as an encounter between Africa and Europe. Hurston’s depiction of hoodoo in *Mules and Men* also appears this way: as an account of the interaction between African-originated hoodoo traditions and the west, as exemplified in the way that hoodoo functions and evolves in reaction to social conditions in the U.S. It is to the aesthetics of Hurston’s portrayal of this encounter that I now turn for further examination and to demonstrate that Hurston employed images of the primitive as a way to highlight and celebrate the continuities between African and African American culture.

African American modernists were aware of the appropriation of African aesthetics in white artists’ work during this moment. Black artists, including Hurston, also included primitivist aesthetics and African presences in their work but often with different motivations to their white modernist counterparts. Whilst some

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<sup>30</sup> David Murray, *Matter, Magic, and Spirit: Representing Indian and African American Belief* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 71.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



also utilised images of the primitive as an antidote or in opposition to modernization, many also used primitivist aesthetics to emphasise the creative and complex contributions that Africans and African Americans made to American art, culture, and society. However, there was a hesitation amongst some black artists about the use of primitivist imagery due to an uncertainty about how readers and the general public would perceive these images given the historical associations and connotations of the primitive. Murray asserts this was: '[...] an ambivalence about primitivism itself, and the degree to which the use of the folk, vernacular, or African materials was an expression of continuity and strength or a reinforcement of damaging stereotypes.'<sup>32</sup> This problem with interpretation and the perception of images of Africa, the folk, and the primitive extended to ethnographic studies. Marianna Torgovnick explains that '[m]any ethnographers, including Boas and Malinowski himself, intended their work to be antievolutionist in thrust. But they could not always control the way their ideas would be used by other scholars or received by the general public.'<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Patrick Mullen concurs that the concept of primitivism 'was such a strong force in intellectual thought that it continued to exist after cultural evolution had been superseded by cultural relativism and functionalism in anthropology and folklore studies.'<sup>34</sup> Whether or not Hurston was ambivalent about her use of primitivist imagery is unclear but she certainly did face this problem of perception in her rendering of hoodoo in *Mules and Men*. Though Hurston was a firm believer in cultural relativism, she could not control how her audiences would interpret her presentation of hoodoo rituals and whether or not they would read the primitivist aesthetics of her account as an indication and confirmation of harmful

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<sup>32</sup> Murray, *Matter, Magic, and Spirit*, 81.

<sup>33</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>34</sup> Patrick B. Mullen, *The Man who Adores the Negro: Race and American Folklore* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 43.

stereotypes or as evidence of the continuity, strength, and creativity of African traditions.

Charlotte Osgood Mason, a white philanthropist who provided patronage to Hurston and other African American artists, was eager to promote primitive images of black culture. Catherine Stewart writes that ‘Mason was a firm believer in essentialist notions of black racial identity and frequently chided her protégés if she felt they were betraying their ancestral African roots. She expected African American writers like Hughes and Hurston to “be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive.”’<sup>35</sup> However, as Murray points out, ‘for most African American artists, Africa was an idea more than an experienced reality and was thus subject to the same exoticisms as it was for the dominant white culture.’<sup>36</sup> Thus, Hurston’s portrayal of African-based traditions can appear to be promoting harmful stereotypes because Hurston was part of a moment and movement that utilised primitivist imagery which historically had come to signify inferiority and because to some degree, the practices she was encountering were unfamiliar to her.

Hurston’s depiction of hoodoo ceremonies includes many of the ‘primitive qualities’ as identified by Clifford: ‘magic, ritualism, closeness to nature, mythic or cosmological aims’, amongst others.<sup>37</sup> The first ceremony that Hurston relays to the reader is an initiation ceremony with a doctor named Luke Turner. It provides the reader with a powerful first impression of hoodoo in New Orleans and includes all of Clifford’s components as well as blood drinking, animal sacrifice, and nudity. In order to become Turner’s apprentice, Hurston undergoes a complex process of initiation so that she can be accepted as his student and into the world of New

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<sup>35</sup> Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 153.

<sup>36</sup> Murray, *Matter, Magic, and Spirit*, 80.

<sup>37</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 201.

Orleans hoodoo. First, she is instructed to lay naked on a sofa for sixty-nine hours, only partially covered by a snakeskin. After Hurston has lain on the sofa for almost three days during which she claimed she had five psychic experiences, Turner brings two other hoodoo leaders into the room and paints a lightning bolt onto Hurston's body and eyes onto her cheeks to indicate that she could 'see in more ways than one.'<sup>38</sup> Turner then cuts Hurston's finger and collects her blood in a cup mixed with wine then cuts his own finger and the fingers of the five leaders now present and mixes their bloods with wine in a separate cup. The leaders drink Hurston's blood and she drinks theirs.<sup>39</sup> Turner then calls on the Spirit to take Hurston and crowns her with a consecrated snakeskin to mark the end of this phase of the initiation. The ritual passing around and drinking of Hurston's blood, like the ritual passing of the blood in ceremonies in *Voodoo in New Orleans*, can appear to play into white expectations of hoodoo based on established nineteenth-century notions of the primitive.

The final phase of the initiation takes place at midnight and involves ritualised animal sacrifice in a clearing out in the swamps near Lake Pontchartrain. Four candles are placed in the four corners of the clearing to represent 'the four corners of the world and the four winds.'<sup>40</sup> Hurston describes the sound of the water lapping and the whispered chants of the participants as they collect twigs to construct a broom. As the chanting gets louder, a black sheep is brought into the clearing:

The head and the withers of the sheep were stroked as the chanting went on. Turner became more and more voluble. At last he seized the straw and stuffed some into the sheep's nostrils. The animal

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<sup>38</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 200.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 201.

struggled. A knife flashed and the sheep dropped to its knees, then fell prone with its mouth open in a weak cry. My petition was thrust into its throat that he might cry it to the Great One. The broom was seized and dipped in the blood of the slit throat and the ground swept vigorously – back and forth, back and forth – the length of the dying sheep. It was swept from the four winds towards the center. The sweeping went on as long as the blood gushed.<sup>41</sup>

The conclusion of the initiation is a moment in which the hoodooists experience a close connection to nature and call upon nature's forces as well as the spirit of 'The Great One' to assist them in achieving their cosmological aims; a clear example of the primitivist qualities that were described by Clifford and utilised by modernist artists during this moment. Although Hurston's depiction of the ceremony is matter-of-fact and detailed, as befits the professionalism of the ethnographer, the subject matter of her ritual is open to being perceived as savage by the reader, due to their cultural sensibilities about animals and their use in ritual as well as their exposure to historical narratives that have depicted sacrifice as primitive. Though Hurston is viewing the ceremony and the sacrifice through the lens of her academic training in cultural relativism and with an awareness of new modes of depicting primitivism popularised by modernists, to an outsider unfamiliar with these concepts, the ceremony may appear savage and uncivilised.

As *Mules and Men* progresses and as Hurston gains more training and experience with New Orleans hoodooists, she becomes a participant in these rituals rather than just an observer. During her time with two other New Orleans hoodooists, Anatol Pierre and Father Watson, Hurston kills animals as part of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 202.

various rituals. As mentioned earlier, she entombed a live cat and chicken for a month with Pierre to bring about the death of a man and she boiled a live cat to obtain a black cat bone under the supervision of Watson.<sup>42</sup> The black cat bone is believed to be a magical bone that allows its possessors to become invisible.<sup>43</sup> Hurston says that retrieving the black cat bone was ‘the most terrible of experiences’. She describes it thus:

When the water boiled I was made to toss in the terrified, trembling cat. When he screamed, I was told to curse him. He screamed three times, the last weak and resigned. The lid was clamped down, the fire kept vigorously alive. At midnight the lid was lifted. Here was the moment! The bones of the cat must be passed through my mouth until one tasted bitter.

Suddenly, the Rooster [Father Watson] and Mary rushed in close to the pot and he cried, “Look out! This is liable to kill you. Hold your nerve!” They both looked fearfully around the circle. They communicated some unearthly terror to me. Maybe I went off in a trance. Great beast-like creatures thundered up to the circle from all sides. Indescribable noises, sights, feelings. Death was at hand! Seemed unavoidable! I don’t know. Many times I have thought and felt, but I always have to say the same thing. I don’t know. I don’t know.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 210 and 221.

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey Anderson, *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 4.

Before day I was home, with a small white bone for me to carry.<sup>44</sup>

Like the tale about the sacrifice of the sheep, the ritual to retrieve the black cat bone utilises images of the primitive. The ‘unearthly terror’ at the appearance of ‘great beast-like’ spirits demonstrates hoodoo’s cosmological and supernatural connection to otherworldly forces and locates it as a “primitive” culture. Like the initiation ritual, though she acknowledges and notes the suffering of the animal, she presents it as a necessary part of the ceremony. In both cases, Hurston relays the details of the ceremony in a matter-of-fact manner and though she describes it as ‘terrible’ she does not attempt to tone down or offer a justification or explanation of the violence inherent in the ritual. Discussing Hurston’s representation of Eatonville residents in the first part of *Mules and Men*, Cheryl Wall has claimed:

The cultural relativity of anthropology freed Hurston from the need to defend her subjects’ alleged inferiority. She could discard behavioural explanations drawn from racial mythology. Eatonville blacks were neither exotic nor primitive; they had simply selected different characteristics from what Ruth Benedict, another pioneering anthropologist trained by Boas, called the “great arc of human potentialities.”<sup>45</sup>

This interpretation of Hurston’s tone and unapologetic retelling can also be applied to her presentation of hoodoo and the ceremonies that she describes. As Wall suggests, Hurston is liberated by theories that resist ordering cultures enabling her to

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<sup>44</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 221.

<sup>45</sup> Cheryl Wall, “Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words,” in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), 79.

‘[present] the lore not to patronize or demean but to affirm and celebrate.’<sup>46</sup> Her gaze as a trained anthropologist and as an insider therefore allows her to discuss animal sacrifice as a rational and necessary part of the ritual rather than a cruel, uncivilised, and barbaric act; though the memory of historical depictions of sacrifice as a signifier of savagery in the west may mean that her readers do not interpret it that way. Hurston is aware of how these images of blood drinking and animal sacrifice played into derogatory stereotypes of black culture, yet she includes them in her account. This suggests that as well as having a different viewpoint on what these components signified, Hurston also perhaps had a different motivation for giving animal sacrifice such a prominent and visible place in her narrative of hoodoo.

Yvonne Chireau suggests that conjure was often identified by its ‘distinctive “Africanness”’ and that many early accounts identified conjurers by their ‘African ways’ such as style of dress, filed teeth, or facial scarification.<sup>47</sup> She and Hazzard-Donald suggest that animal sacrifice too was a distinctly African-based ritual. They claim that remarkably, accounts of animal sacrifice were still recorded until as late as the 1890s but Hazzard-Donald suggests that during the period from Reconstruction to World War II, some African elements of conjure, including animal sacrifice, began to decline and were eventually lost or discarded.<sup>48</sup> Contrary to Chireau and Hazzard-Donald’s assessment of the prevalence of animal sacrifice in the U.S. during this period, a significant number of Hurston’s tales feature accounts of animal sacrifice. By giving it a prominent place in her narrative of hoodoo, Hurston demonstrates the continuities and survival of African-based traditions in modern conjuring practices.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Chireau, *Black Magic*, 55.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. and Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’*, 93.

Several scholars have argued that one of Hurston's primary motivations in *Mules and Men*, and in her other anthropological and fictional writing, was to demonstrate the continuity, reinvention, and regeneration of African and African American traditions. Henry Louis Gates suggests that *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are 'speakerly texts' in which black oral narration is both theorized and represented. He concludes that Hurston not only represents black oral traditions but that she was also the first to 'represent the ritual itself.'<sup>49</sup> Hurston not only preserves black folklore but the tradition, which Gates calls ritual, of storytelling by which folklore is kept alive and transmitted from one generation to the next. Concurring with Gates' assessment, Lynda Marion Hill proposes that Hurston 'created performative language to emphasize that ritualized behaviour is preeminent in the black culture she studied, which led her to conclude that drama is the ultimate quality of life among blacks "the world over".'<sup>50</sup> The performative style of Hurston's language is what they argue characterises her writing and informs her approaches to conducting ethnography. Kurt Eisen suggests that her creative approach and immersion as a participant observer, as opposed to a more academic outsider observer, allowed Hurston to put the performance of stories at the forefront of her accounts. He proposes that 'Hurston's ethnography emphasizes performance as the very means by which tradition is kept alive and connected to identity.'<sup>51</sup> I argue then that Hurston's performances of rituals are a part of her mode of placing performance at the heart of her representations of black culture.

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<sup>49</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 196.

<sup>50</sup> Lynda Marion Hill, *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1996), xx.

<sup>51</sup> Kurt Eisen, "Theatrical Ethnography and Modernist Primitivism in Eugene O'Neill and Zora Neale Hurston," *South Central Review* 25, no.1 (2008): 65.



Hurston performs the rituals and her role as hoodooist for the reader through the language she uses. Her exclamatory and declamatory tone expressed through short then incomplete sentences at the end of the black cat bone story not only describes the disorientation she experiences but enacts those feelings for the reader. Her repetition of 'I don't know' leaves the reader wanting to understand what is happening, just as Hurston also seeks to understand what she is experiencing during the ritual. Murray has explained Hurston's reticence to offer a final representation in other instances, for example when she uses phrases such as "we will never know" or "no-one can tell", as 'not so much the adoption of an insider folk attitude toward mystery, as a rhetorical trope to suggest something that is beyond expression.'<sup>52</sup> He questions whether this silence or reticence is 'the equivalent of the invocation of the Romantic sublime?'<sup>53</sup> It is the view here that Hurston undergoes several experiences that are beyond expression, as Murray suggests, and she uses language that conveys the mood and tone of the ritual rather than descriptive language which perhaps would not adequately convey her experience. In doing so, she centres the performance of the ritual for the reader thereby placing at the forefront of her account the mode by which tradition is preserved and transmitted in the African American community.

Hurston's performance of ritual, like her inclusion of images of what had before come to signify the primitive such as animal sacrifice, blood drinking, and communion with the spirit world, are a means by which she demonstrates the survival and vibrancy of African cultural identity in modern hoodoo performance and contemporary black life. The way in which Hurston tells these stories candidly and without explanation represents a resistance to older, outdated "scientific" and

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<sup>52</sup> Murray, *Matter, Magic, and Spirit*, 93.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

anthropological concepts, based on the colonial encounter, which have deemed African-based traditions inferior. Though the aesthetics of Hurston's rituals may on the surface appear to echo popular stereotypes, her accounts are performances of black cultural survival and creativity.

### Authority and Authenticity

Hurston continuously negotiated her position between discipline, place, race, and class. Her collections of folklore and novels are sites in which tensions can be traced and are particularly visible in her representation of conjure. Reflecting on Hurston's complexity as a writer and her ambiguous place in black literary history, Gates suggests that she 'embodied a more or less harmonious but nevertheless problematic unity of opposites.'<sup>54</sup> He claims that Hurston's fiction does not easily fit into distinct categories; "conservative" or "radical", "revolutionary" or "Uncle Tom", for example. Her anthropology also does not easily fit within these binary classifications. In interpreting and presenting conjure, Hurston contended with the disciplinary demands of anthropology, the expectations of her mentors, her position as a black woman educated in the North and working in the South, her affiliation with other artists who sought to rewrite black folk traditions, and the challenges of her dual role as both storyteller and collector. She also faced the difficulties of a shifting economic landscape as well as the systematized racism that plagued and continues to plague the nation.

Without the official sponsorship of the state that the FWP writers enjoyed, Hurston employed a variety of strategies to self-authorize and authenticate her

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<sup>54</sup> Henry Louis Gates, 'Afterword, Zora Neale Hurston: A Negro Way of Saying' in Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 288.

collection. Her primary method was to portray herself as both insider and as a trained ethnographer. She sets up this dual authority in the opening paragraphs of *Mules and Men*. Hurston writes that when she was born, she ‘landed in the crib of Negroism’ and grew up hearing and knowing black folk tales. Her immersion in black folklore ‘[fit her] like a tight chemise’ and she says she ‘couldn’t see for wearing it.’ Only after moving North to college and being out of her ‘native surroundings’, Hurston says she was able to ‘see [herself] like somebody else and stand off and look at [her] garment.’ Here, she makes plain the two lenses that she employs to examine black folk culture. First, she looks at folk traditions from the inside as a member of the community she is studying and second, she observes from the outside using ‘the spy-glass of Anthropology.’<sup>55</sup> The gaze shifts between these two positions throughout *Mules and Men*. This shift establishes authority, but it is also an illustration of the tensions that Hurston experienced.

She suggests that hoodoo is shrouded in secrecy and that it is only through her position as insider that readers can access authentic conjure tales:

Nobody knows for sure how many thousands in America are warmed by the fire of hoodoo, because the worship is bound in secrecy. It is not the accepted theology of the Nation and so believers conceal their faith. Brother from sister, husband from wife. Nobody can say where it begins or ends. Mouths don’t empty themselves unless the ears are sympathetic and knowing.<sup>56</sup>

Here, Hurston positions herself as interlocutor of black folk magic. Only because her own ears are ‘sympathetic and knowing’ is the reader afforded this unique glimpse

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<sup>55</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

into the secretive world of hoodoo in New Orleans. This tactic rests on emphasising three aspects of her identity: her race, her southern heritage, and her status as a practising hoodooist.

Hurston augments a difference between her own work and that of white collectors in order to elevate the authenticity of her collection. She suggests that white ethnographers were incapable of accessing black folk culture and unskilled at interpreting, understanding, and presenting it. She expresses her disdain for white folklorists who attempted to interpret black folk culture in several pieces of correspondence to friends. In a letter to Langston Hughes, Hurston complains, 'It makes me sick to see how these cheap white folks are grabbing our stuff and ruining it. I am almost sick – my one consolation being that they never do it right and so there is still a chance for us.'<sup>57</sup> She also expresses frustration in a letter to Alain Locke upon receiving a copy of Howard Odom and Guy Johnson's *The Negro and his Songs* (1926), claiming that 'they evidently know nothing of the how folk-songs grow.'<sup>58</sup> Hurston grew increasingly frustrated with the ways in which white folklorists and artists collected and represented black culture. She and other Harlem Renaissance artists were conscious to re-represent black folk traditions and construct a new narrative of authentic black folklore that resisted and provided a counter narrative to years of white-authored derogatory misrepresentations of black life.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, September 20, 1928, in *A Life in Letters*, 127.

<sup>58</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Alain Locke, May 10, 1928 in *A Life in Letters*, 119.

<sup>59</sup> In her essay "What White Publishers Won't Print", Hurston expressed her frustration with how white publishers have represented black and minority peoples. She said that 'Literature and other arts are supposed to hold up the mirror to nature' and that thus far, publishers and producers have not sufficiently portrayed 'the internal lives and emotions of the Negroes' and instead have always reverted to representing 'a type'. In doing so, she claims that '[a] great principle of national art has been violated' and calls on fellow artists and writers to correct this and 'let there be light!' Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print (1950)" in *I Love Myself When I am Laughing*, ed. Alice Walker (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1979), 169-173. Alain Locke also wrote that for generations the African American had been 'more a formula than a human being [...] to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden' and that this

Stewart points to an unpublished article titled ‘You Don’t Know Us Negroes’ written by Hurston for *American Mercury* in 1934 in which she uses black stereotypes drawn from the tradition of blackface minstrelsy to highlight her criticism of the widespread acceptance by whites of white ethnographers’ work as fact rather than fiction. In the article, Hurston suggests that white portrayals of black culture and accurate depictions of black culture were similar to margarine and butter, in that margarine often looked and tasted like butter but it was not butter. White portrayals of black people and black life resulted in what she termed the ‘Margarine Negro’: on the surface they appeared to represent black life but ‘they had everything in them except Negroness.’<sup>60</sup> Stewart describes Hurston’s comic depiction of stereotypes as ‘a strategic attempt to undermine white writers (mis)representations and validate her own collection of black folk culture using the concept of “authenticity.”’<sup>61</sup> Hurston employs this tactic in *Mules and Men*. She weaves comments through the collection that assert that whites are incapable of accurately depicting black folk traditions. She claims that:

That is why these voodoo ritualistic orgies of Broadway and popular fiction are so laughable. The profound silence of the initiated remains

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new generation, ‘the new Negro’, were ‘transforming what has been a perennial problem into progressive phases of contemporary Negro life.’ Alain Locke, “The New Negro (1925),” in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York, Penguin Books, 1994), 46-47. Similarly, Langston Hughes wrote that ‘We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.’ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain (1926),” in *The Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 95.

<sup>60</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, “You Don’t Know Us Negroes,” unpublished article for *American Mercury*, 1934, 1. Lawrence Spivak Papers, Container 37 “Subject File,” Folder “American Mercury – Articles Killed,” Manuscript Division, Library of Congress quoted in Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 143.

<sup>61</sup> Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 143 and Susan Willis, “Wandering: Hurston’s Search for Self and Method,” in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), 110-129.

what it is. Hoodoo is not drum beating and dancing. There are no moon-worshippers among the Negroes in America.<sup>62</sup>

Hurston ridicules white attempts at portraying black culture in popular fiction and drama and dismisses them as ‘laughable’. By saying that the ‘silence of the initiated remains what it is’, she suggests that white authors and producers have not successfully penetrated the secret practices of the hoodooists. Without access to or understanding of authentic conjure, Hurston argues that their depictions of hoodoo are primarily offensive to the black community but are also so inaccurate that they are comic to those who “know” hoodoo. In the introduction to the hoodoo section, Hurston introduces her subject matter: ‘Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites...’<sup>63</sup> Within the first few paragraphs of the section, Hurston tells the reader that whites cannot even get the pronunciation correct. This dismissal of white-authored works serves to legitimize her own collection and casts Hurston as a translator between “real” black folk culture and misinformed white perceptions of it. She acts as a mediator between these two understandings of African American folk traditions: the authentic perspective that she claims can only be offered by black authors and the misinformed representation and perpetuation of stereotypes offered by whites. In doing so, she privileges her own collection of folklore and positions herself as an authoritative voice on black folk culture. Though, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, Hurston’s accounts of ritual were not always a complete departure from the aesthetics of these stereotypes, she did expose the important social and political functions of hoodoo ritual and in doing so refuted popular white misrepresentations of it as “moon-worship” and set her own work apart from this stream of popular misrepresentation.

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<sup>62</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 185.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

Hurston suggests that one of the central problems with white-authored accounts of black folklore is the inability of white collectors to access authentic conjure tales. She says, in the introduction to *Mules and Men*, that the black community offers the white collector an incomplete tale: ‘We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what is missing. [...] The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.’<sup>64</sup> The featherbed resistance she describes is an act of subversion whereby in recounting stories to ethnographers, African Americans mask much more about their lore than they offer and therefore resist white ‘probing’ of black culture. Hurston claims that white ethnographers were only able to obtain mere glimpses into black folk culture and that her blackness and insider gaze afforded her a deeper and more authentic understanding of hoodoo. She suggests that black interviewees perform superficial tales for white ethnographers and do not allow them access to real black folk culture. In privileging her position as black, Hurston discredits the work of white collectors and suggests that it is unreliable, thereby elevating the value and authenticity of her own collection.

Furthermore, in this passage Hurston’s voice slips from insider to ethnographer and back again. The ‘we’ that she refers to here is the black community and by making explicit her belonging to this community, she disconnects herself from white-authored accounts of black folk culture. Yet, Hurston also shifts back to an outsider academic voice when she says “The Negro”. This phrase distances Hurston from the group that she is studying and disrupts the narrative of belonging that she constructs. Her shift from insider to observer suggests that she also

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

employed her status as a scholar to establish authority. This rapid shift reinforces Hurston's dual authority and double gaze as insider and as an academic.

Gates also observes Hurston's shifts in language to emphasise and deemphasise certain aspects of her identity. He describes Hurston's writing, particularly in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, thus:

Her representation of her sources of language seems to be her principal concern, as she constantly shifts back and forth between her "literate" narrator's voice and a highly idiomatic black voice found in wonderful passages of free indirect discourse. [...] It is the usage of a *divided* voice, a double voice unreconciled, that strikes me as her great achievement, a verbal analogue of her double experiences as a woman in a male-dominated world and as a black person in a nonblack world, a woman writer's revision of W.E.B DuBois's metaphor of "double consciousness" for the hyphenated African-American.<sup>65</sup>

Gates suggests that not only does Hurston's use of language accentuate her blackness and belonging in certain passages, but her shift in narrative voice also allows her to adopt the role of "literate" narrator'. Her "double-voice" evident in *Mules and Men* not only serves to establish Hurston's dual authority but is symptomatic of the two motivations that Hurston straddled: re-presenting black folk tradition and anthropological inquiry. Hurston's shift in pronouns reveals the conflict between these two modes of speaking and looking. She was driven by a sense of responsibility to correct white misrepresentations of black folklore, but she was also

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<sup>65</sup> Gates, 'Afterword' in *Mules and Men*, 294.



acutely aware that she must do so within an environment that constructed and promoted these representations. Hurston was in a precarious position in that she sought to refute and challenge white perceptions, but she also relied on the mentorship and patronage of whites to produce and publish a revised representation of black folk traditions. Her shift in pronouns and narrative voice are symptomatic of this tension – she belonged to both black folk culture and the white dominated world of academia. In addition to Gates' suggestion that Hurston's shifting voice serves as a mode of expressing her alienation from authority and experiences as a black woman, it also illustrates the perspective from which she is able to provide an authentic account of conjure and with that, her divided voice itself carries a sense of authority.

Hurston also establishes herself as an insider through her identity as a southerner. In the introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston claims to have intimate knowledge of the South because of her upbringing in Florida. She says that Florida 'attracts Negroes from every Southern state' and that she chose to collect folklore there first because she knew that she could get a 'cross section of the Negro South in one state.'<sup>66</sup> She uses southern phrases – and signposts them to the reader – to establish herself as a southerner. For example Hurston says, 'I was just Lucy Hurston's daughter Zora, and even if I had – to use one of our down-home expressions – had a Kaiser baby [...] I'd still be just Zora to the neighbors.'<sup>67</sup> Hurston's inclusion and signposting of southern idiom and the view of herself she offers from the neighbours' perspective signals to the reader that despite her time in the North at college, she retained her identity as a southerner and still belongs to the community.

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<sup>66</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 2.

In the years since Alice Walker's rediscovery of Hurston in her 1975 landmark essay "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston", several scholars have questioned Hurston's rigour as an academically trained ethnographer. The accusations of plagiarism that 'Hoodoo in America' has encountered are particularly problematic. Both Jeffrey Anderson and Carolyn Morrow Long have claimed that up to a quarter of 'Hoodoo in America' is plagiarized from a spell book entitled *The Life and Works of Marie Laveau*.<sup>68</sup> Morrow Long argues that Hurston used a series of vignettes from the spell book but stated that she learned them from one of her mentors who claimed to be the great-nephew of Marie Laveau.<sup>69</sup> In the introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston states that a lot of the hoodooists she initially spoke with in New Orleans 'claimed some knowledge and link with Marie Laveau.'<sup>70</sup> Claims to a connection to Laveau were made to elevate the status of hoodooists. Being connected to the city's most famous conjure queen bolstered their own claims to power and Hurston was aware of this tactic. Though Hurston does not reprint the Laveau rituals in *Mules and Men*, she does claim to have been trained by the great-nephew of Laveau – the hoodoo doctor who here is named Luke Turner but appears as Samuel Thompson in 'Hoodoo in America'. In having direct access to the knowledge of Laveau through her descendant, Hurston implies that she was able to penetrate the city's inner circle of famous hoodooists and authenticates her position as a hoodoo insider.

Perhaps the most important tactic Hurston uses to authenticate her collection is her depiction of herself as a hoodoo insider. Hurston wrote in September 1928: 'Things are beginning to go well now. I am getting on top of the profession. I know

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<sup>68</sup> See Jeffrey Anderson, "Voodoo in Black and White," in *Southern Character: Essays in Honor of Bertram Wyatt-Brown*, eds., Lisa Tendrich Frank and Daniel Kilbride (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 148-159 and Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 123.

<sup>69</sup> Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 123.

<sup>70</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 191.

18 tasks, including how to crown the spirit of death, and kill.’<sup>71</sup> Claiming that she held the knowledge to kill suggests that Hurston believed she was indeed at the top of the profession and was privy to the most complex and dangerous of hoodoo rituals. Being not only black and southern but also a hoodoo practitioner at the height of the profession, Hurston is able to suggest that she alone amongst other ethnographers has the authority to represent hoodoo accurately.

In *Mules and Men*, Hurston tells the story that explains how she came to hold this coveted position. Hurston’s time with Luke Turner is the second hoodoo story she tells, thereby firmly establishing her authority and position as a hoodoo insider from the beginning. In this story, Hurston portrays herself as New Orleans’ rising conjure queen. She recalls how she had to visit Turner four times before she gained his trust: ‘He was very cold. In fact he showed no eagerness even to talk to me. He feels sure of his powers and seeks no one. He refused to take me as a pupil and in addition to his habitual indifference I could see he had no faith in my sincerity.’<sup>72</sup> She says it took a while before he trusted her and allowed her access to his hoodoo practices as an apprentice. Yet by the end of their time together, Hurston writes that Turner ‘wanted [her] to stay and work with him as a partner. He said that soon I would be in possession of the entire business, for the spirit had spoken to him and told him that I was the last doctor that he would make [...] he wanted me to stay with him to the end.’<sup>73</sup> In her short time in New Orleans, Hurston claims to have risen from an outsider to the city she called the “Hoodoo Capital of America” to the last apprentice of the great-nephew of Laveau.

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<sup>71</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, September 20, 1928, in *A Life in Letters*, 127.

<sup>72</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 191-2.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

Hurston's story of Turner's initiation not only establishes her authority as an insider; it also depicts entry into the world of hoodoo as an experience that is dangerous and shrouded in mystery. As discussed earlier, as part of the initiation ceremony, Hurston was instructed to lay naked on a sofa for sixty-nine hours, only partially covered by a snakeskin. This image of Hurston establishes her position as a powerful hoodooist because it mirrors popular images of Laveau. Martha Ward, the historical biographer of Laveau, argued that 'hysterical reporters in the nineteenth century accused the Laveaus of wizardry, heresy, and dancing naked with snakes.'<sup>74</sup> It is widely believed that Laveau kept a snake at her altar and often danced with it at popular public ceremonies in Congo Square. Early reports of these instances exoticise and sensationalise the use of snakes in hoodoo performance. Legends about Laveau suggest that she named the spirit who spoke to her during these rituals Li Grand Zombi (also referred to as The Great Serpent spirit) and that her own giant snake was thought to be a conduit for the spirit.<sup>75</sup> Some saw Li Grand Zombi as an evil spirit but Laveau's snake was a symbol of her power. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston relays Turner's story of Laveau's snake. He first tells Hurston how a rattlesnake came to Laveau as a child and told her to go and train to become a hoodoo priestess like her mother and grandmother. Turner recalls the power of the snake:

“The rattlesnake that had come to her a little one when she was also young was very huge. He piled high upon his altar and took nothing from the food set before him. One night he sang and Marie Leveau [sic] called me from my sleep to look at him and see. ‘Look well, Turner,’ she told me. ‘No one shall hear and see such as this for many

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<sup>74</sup> Ward, *The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau*, ix.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 91.

centuries.’ [...] ‘The next morning, the great snake was not at his altar. His hide was before the Great Altar stuffed with spices and things of power. Never did I know what became of his flesh. It is said that the snake went off to the woods alone after the death of Marie Leveau, but they don’t know. This is his skin that I wear about my shoulders whenever I reach for power.’<sup>76</sup>

Hurston knew of the importance of the snake to Laveau’s reputation. The snake represented Laveau’s power and status as the most gifted hoodoo practitioner in the United States. By lying with a snakeskin, Hurston casts herself in the image of Laveau and confirms her own power as a hoodoo priestess. In doing so she authenticates her account and establishes her collection as unique amongst contemporaneous projects on hoodoo.

Hurston employs these tactics to simultaneously refute the work of white ethnographers who perpetuate offensive stereotypes of black folk culture and to authenticate her own image of hoodoo in New Orleans. As an insider, Hurston speaks with authority and suggests that she understands what she sees in New Orleans in a way that white ethnographers cannot. Hurston uses both her insider gaze and her ethnographic gaze to bolster her claims to authority in *Mules and Men* and her representations are characteristic of her double gaze. It is integral to Hurston that she emphasises the authority that comes with both ways of seeing so that she can authenticate the two central narratives that hoodoo in *Mules and Men* focalises: hoodoo as a system for explaining, resisting, and challenging social conditions in New Orleans’ African American community and as a means of demonstrating and celebrating African cultural survival.

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<sup>76</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 194.

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*Mules and Men* is one of the most well-known treatments of African American folk traditions in the United States. It paints a complex portrait of hoodoo and acts as a site in which narratives about race, religion, and primitivism intersect and interact. Hurston's account offers a counter narrative to the multitude of misinformed and derogatory depictions of hoodoo that precede it and it is partly for this reason, and Hurston's position as a black woman author in a white, male dominated world and profession, that she had to work so hard to authenticate and authorize her account. She consistently reminds the reader of both her expertise as an anthropologist and her unique vantage point as a black southern hoodooist to validate this counter narrative in the hope of beginning to change the formulation of hoodoo in the American cultural imagination.

Hurston's collection of tales illustrates the myriad ways in which hoodoo was used by New Orleans' African American community and exposes it as a complex belief system that responded to and evolved with the social, political, and racial politics of the period. Her relationships with various doctors and her immersion in New Orleans' hoodoo community meant that she was able to see beyond the commercial, public ceremonies presented in the likes of the city's popular travel literature. As an insider, Hurston learned first-hand that hoodoo functioned as a religion for many of its practitioners. Often blended with their Christian faiths, hoodoo operated as a means of explanation and spiritual guidance, and its rituals (much like prayer) allowed its adherents to regain a sense of control and comfort in their lives. Through these rituals and in consultation with doctors, Hurston demonstrates how New Orleanians sought to remedy a range of social, economic,

and personal issues for which hoodoo provided a clear system of explanation and map for navigating these problems.

Though the aesthetics of these rituals may on the surface appear to echo some of the stereotypes that she sought to refute, her positioning of performance and African-based traditions at the centre of the narrative, as well as the prominence she gives to the ways in which hoodoo was used as a means of resistance and survival, presents hoodoo as a means through which African and African American culture was reinvented and regenerated in modern New Orleans. Despite in some ways aesthetically mirroring images traditionally associated with primitivism in relation to concepts of social evolution, Hurston was very much writing against the grain. Her reassignment of these images to highlight and celebrate African and African American culture was a challenge both to scientific notions of evolution and to popular stereotypes based on notions of the primitive. Her showcasing of methodical, creative, and socially and politically responsive rituals to combat numerous real-world problems contests the association of African-based rituals with notions of the primitive and uncivilised. Hurston instead signifies that these images are indicative of the endurance of a complex system of belief and of the creativity and adaptability of African and African American traditions and peoples. *Mules and Men* represents one of the first narratives of hoodoo to challenge demeaning nineteenth-century stereotypes and rescript black folk culture in the cultural imagination.

### **Chapter 3: Hoodoo and Power: Interviews with New Orleans Practitioners in Harry M. Hyatt's *Hoodoo Conjuraton Witchcraft Rootwork***

Between 1971 and 1979, the Anglican minister Harry M. Hyatt published a five-volume study of folklore: *Hoodoo Conjuraton Witchcraft Rootwork* (hereafter referred to as *Hoodoo*).<sup>1</sup> Each volume of *Hoodoo* contains interviews with believers and practitioners that were conducted by Hyatt between 1936 and 1940. Taken in its entirety, *Hoodoo* stands as a compilation of hoodoo rites and beliefs from across the United States that were not only gathered into a single collection but preserved. Drawing upon correspondence and documents from Hyatt's archival collections housed at Quincy University, Illinois, this chapter explores his motivations and methods for the project; discusses the scholarly reception of Hyatt's collection; examines how the collection represents the people and communities Hyatt interviewed; and analyses the narratives generated in a sample of interviews conducted with individuals he identified as hoodoo doctors in New Orleans.

Similarly to *Mules and Men*, *Hoodoo* presents a counter narrative to dominant images of African-based belief systems. In contrast to accounts of New Orleans Voodoo seen in chapter one and to those that circulated during the nineteenth century, Hyatt's informants presented hoodoo primarily as a reaction to, and method of coping with, various problems that arose from conditions of social inequality. The collection offers an explanation of a system which believers used to gain control and power over their own and others' lives through faith and action. In particular, Hyatt's informants articulate the ways in which hoodoo acted as a means to obtain legal defence and avoid police harassment; access healthcare that addresses

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from *Hoodoo* have been copied correctly. A number of them have errors in grammar, syntax, and spelling as well as words that are capitalised or italicised without explanation. All of those that are reproduced here are as they appear in *Hoodoo*.



both physical and mental ailments; combat economic hardship and inequality; and navigate an array of personal relationships.

Scholars who are familiar with *Hoodoo*, most notably Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Michael Bell, claim that the value of Hyatt's work lies in its showcasing of hoodoo 'as the complex philosophical system it is.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Bell's doctoral thesis uses testimony that Hyatt collected to argue that within hoodoo there is a deep and complex structure that informs the rituals that hoodoo practitioners prescribe to clients and underpins their explanations for why and how things happen.<sup>3</sup> Whilst this is a significant facet of the *Hoodoo* collection, I further argue that it highlights the intricacies and patterns of hoodoo practices and more importantly does so from the perspective and through the words of practitioners themselves. Not entirely dissimilar to the work conducted by the FWP to collect slave narratives during these years, Hyatt's vast collection of first-person testimony is one of the first publications where accounts of hoodoo are offered by those who believe and practise it, revealing insights into how it functions in their daily lives, the social and economic circumstances under which hoodoo is practised, and how it often interacts with and works alongside their Christian faith.

### Hyatt's Purpose, Perspectives, and Practices

Born in Quincy, Illinois in 1896, Hyatt was a priest of the Episcopal Church who over the course of his life published various collections of folklore and family history. Shortly after graduating from high school in 1917, Hyatt was recognised as a

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<sup>2</sup> Correspondence from Henry Louis Gates Jr to Harry Hyatt, 25 May 1978, Box 2, Folder 1, Hyatt Folklore Collection [hereafter HFC], Quincy University Archives, Quincy, Illinois [hereafter QUA].

<sup>3</sup> Michael E. Bell "Pattern, Structure, and Logic in Afro-American Hoodoo Performance" (PhD diss., University of Indiana, 1980), 30.

Postulant for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Church. In the same year, Hyatt also enrolled at the Western Theological Seminary in Chicago and after spending two years at the institution, left because he had failed several courses. However, this was not time wasted and his experience there would inform practices that would shape his life's work. During the summer months, Hyatt worked as a field secretary in some of Chicago's poorest and most deprived areas. He said that in order to counsel people to the best of his ability, he needed to understand the types of problems they faced and this experience would allow him to further understand the communities he served.<sup>4</sup> Here, Hyatt built up experience of interviewing people from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and experimented with interview techniques which would later prove valuable experience when he began collecting folklore. After that, Hyatt enrolled in the divinity program at Kenyon College where he graduated in 1920. Hyatt would also go on to gain a Bachelor of Arts degree in theology from Oxford University in 1926. Once Hyatt's formal education was over, he spent most of his life working for the Church in New York City and on various amateur folklore projects. Hyatt's service in the church as well as the type of folklore he was interested in, those related to faith and conditions of the soul, were all motivated by, as Bell phrases it, Hyatt's "quest for the essence of human spirit".<sup>5</sup>

Prior to collecting material for *Hoodoo*, Hyatt published *The Church of Abyssinia* (1928), a study of the Ethiopic Church which, due to health reasons, he was forced to conduct from a distance and without the inclusion of any fieldwork. Hyatt also had a keen interest in genealogical history which culminated in the publication of *The Millers of Millersburg, Kentucky* (1929), an investigation into

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Bell, "Harry Middleton Hyatt's Quest for the Essence of Human Spirit," *Journal of American Folklore* 16, no.1/2 (1979): 6.

<sup>5</sup> Quotation taken from the title of Bell's article cited in the previous footnote.

Hyatt's maternal lineage. In 1932, after several years working as an honorary curate of the Church of the Holy Spirit in New York City, Hyatt became restless and sought opportunities to conduct work outside of his profession. With the financial support of his wife, Alma Egan Hyatt, Hyatt concluded that a study involving original fieldwork into American folklore would be the focus of his next project. Working closely with his sister, Minnie Hyatt Small, Hyatt collected around 11,000 pieces of folktales, spells, superstitions, herbal remedies, and folk-magic beliefs from his home county and collated them in the what he would self-publish as the first volume of *Folklore from Adams County, Illinois* (1935). This then grew to over 16, 000 for the second volume which was published in 1965.

The final collection that Hyatt produced was *Hoodoo*. It is the largest collection of testimony relating to hoodoo in existence and the most ambitious of Hyatt's projects. From his experience collecting material in Adams County, Hyatt believed that there were a significant number of people who believed in "witchcraft" in America. He was fascinated with the testimony he had collected so far and in particular that which he had collected from the African American population of Adams County. Michael Bell, who interviewed Hyatt towards the end of his life, commented that '[h]e singled out the black community as his target because he believed that the Negro material he had collected in Adams County was by far the most interesting and diverse in relation to witchcraft practices.'<sup>6</sup> Hyatt spoke with people from twelve states along the Eastern Seaboard and across the South over a period of four years to amass a collection of testimony from over 1600 people. The only exception is a set of interviews conducted in Florida in the early 1970s, which Hyatt decided to undertake in preparation for the publication of the final volume in

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<sup>6</sup> Bell, "Harry Middleton Hyatt's Quest for the Essence of Human Spirit," 14.

1979. Hyatt's wife funded his research trips and the publication of the collection meaning that he was free to design, conduct, and present his project without having to consider the desires of editors, publishers, and financiers in the way folklorists like Hurston did. Additionally, Hyatt's isolation from the scholarly community at this point also meant that he did not take into consideration where his work fitted with debates in anthropology and trends in ethnographic practice as he designed and conducted his research. This total freedom over the conception of the project, method of collection, and production of the final publication resulted in a collection that is vastly different to others produced during this period, both in terms of content and presentation.

Due to the minimal place that Hyatt gives his own voice in *Hoodoo*, it is difficult to discern what his perspectives were and how he conceptualised the project. The collection mostly comprises transcriptions of excerpts from interviews that Hyatt conducted with hoodoo believers, as well as whole interviews that he conducted with those he identified as doctors. The transcriptions provide a record of conversations but rarely include any additional comment from Hyatt. However, one of the few places that the reader is granted a glimpse into Hyatt's thoughts is in the brief introductions included in three of the five volumes of *Hoodoo*. Within those pages, Hyatt offers a candid account of the project including his motivations and hopes for *Hoodoo*, insights into how he conducted his research and what he observed during the four years of collecting, and an overview of some the problems that he encountered. It seems from these reflections that Hyatt had two primary motivations for conducting his *Hoodoo* project: to create an archive of material that could be mined by future scholars interested in hoodoo and to highlight the social and economic disadvantages that existed in the communities he interviewed.

In the introduction to volume three, Hyatt describes *Hoodoo* as ‘an archive to be studied, a quarry to be used in research, and not a logical presentation of subject matter.’<sup>7</sup> Here, Hyatt reveals his first motivation for the collection and also recognises one of its main shortcomings – what Alan Dundes has described as its ‘cumbersome’ presentation.<sup>8</sup> Hyatt clearly demarcated his own words from his informants’ and tried to ensure that *Hoodoo* was primarily a space to contain the voices of his informants and record how they used and understood hoodoo in their daily lives. He writes of the collection:

we have a living text – one vast quotation, a dialogue interrupted only by titles and occasional explanatory note. To identify these ever-present two speakers – ALL PARENTHESES AND BRACKETS ENCLOSE MY WORDS; the former indicating question or comment during actual interview, the latter denoting subsequent editorial matter. EVERYTHING ELSE BELONGS TO THE INFORMANTS.<sup>9</sup>

It seems then that Hyatt envisioned *Hoodoo* as a bank of evidence from which future scholars could construct narratives about hoodoo. He saw his role as a facilitator of future studies on conjure rather than as a producer of narratives. This statement, that the words ‘belong’ to his informants, speaks to the value of the collection; it is one of the first instances where hoodoo believers themselves are afforded the space and power to disseminate their own experiences and understanding of their belief system.

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<sup>7</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo Conjuraton Witchcraft Rootwork*, Volume 3 (New York: Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation, 1973), XV.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Dundes, “Suggestions for Further Reading in American Negro Folklore,” in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, [1973] 1990), 674.

<sup>9</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo Conjuraton Witchcraft Rootwork*, Volume 1 (New York: Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation, 1970), 1.

Discussing his approach to fieldwork in the introduction to volume five of *Hoodoo*, Hyatt stated, '[i]t probably would be fair to say that I was a self-taught fieldworker, perhaps as much as Vance Randolph and others of our generation were. In fieldwork, one must make his own way the best he can – the proverbial phrase that “experience is the best teacher” is very apropos.’<sup>10</sup> Hyatt’s methods, which he admits were flawed and which have come under due criticism, included concealing recording equipment and information about who he was and his position in the Church.<sup>11</sup> In order to access the people who believed and practised hoodoo, Hyatt employed a contact man, often a taxi driver or someone who knew the area well. He described the role of the contact man as twofold: ‘He could determine who could be of value to my hoodoo work, and he also could size up potential informants in terms of their character and the possibility of any threat to my safety.’<sup>12</sup> This practice of vetting his informants was paramount to Hyatt’s approach: he wanted to ensure the authenticity of his informants and the stories they told him. Hyatt states that he and his contact men were able to identify the ‘genuine, *good* informants’ and ‘the *fakes*’.<sup>13</sup> He includes material he deems to be authentic and filters out interviews that he thought were inauthentic. He concludes:

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<sup>10</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo Conjuraton Witchcraft Rootwork*, Volume 5 (New York: Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation, 1979), I. Vance Randolph was a folklorist who documented songs, ballads, and folktales from the Ozark Mountains region. Like Hyatt, Randolph had several degrees of higher education (in biology and psychology) but no formal training in folklore, yet his collections remain invaluable to scholars of folklore and the Ozark region.

<sup>11</sup> Hyatt states ‘[the] microphone in plain view seemed to bring out the actor in them; many began to perform as if on stage, thus destroying the more natural context I wished to preserve. Therefore, I began to keep my microphone in my old black hat at side of machine, a practice for which I have been justly criticized...I did not wear my clericals, and it was fine with me if they saw me as the mystery man’ in Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, IV. Hyatt also noted ‘Edward [his contact man], though he had been with me a long time, had no idea that I myself was a preacher.’ Hyatt’s field notes, 6 March 1939, Box 5, Folder 28, HFC, QUA.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, II. Hyatt’s field notes also contain numerous examples of Hyatt’s assessment of informants. He writes in his notes: ‘This girl who was just in here was something of a prodigy. She says she is seventeen but I doubt it very much. She certainly has a good gift of talk. I don’t think there’s really anything I can use – maybe one or two of the things – some of them were all right. But at least it was very interesting’ and ‘This man was no good at all, he made up things - long winded and drove me crazy.’ Hyatt’s field notes, no dates given, Box 5, Folders 27 and 28 respectively, HFC, QUA.

the main difference between these two types [was] that the outstanding *doctors* could make up a ritual to fit a novel situation – and the rite would be logical in relation to the system within which it was working. The improvised rites of the fake sounded just like lies, for they were out of harmony with the underlying theory of hoodoo.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst the materials and exact actions fluctuated from doctor to doctor, Hyatt believed that practices tended to fit into an overarching structure and it was their understanding of this that Hyatt judged his informants on.<sup>15</sup> He believed that there was one central theory that underpinned hoodoo practices:

[t]he major underlying concept which runs throughout hoodoo is the dual division of the world of causes: There is a physical cause and existence for every object and action, but there also is a spiritual counterpart. To deal only with the physical reality is to miss half of the treatment. For example, a man working on a grinding machine receives a steel splinter in his eye and goes to a medical doctor for treatment; the splinter itself is removed but the eye still seems irritated. The reason for the continued malady is that a medical doctor deals only with the physical cause (in this case the splinter) without attending to the spirit still residing within the eye. A root doctor or conjure or *two-header* must deal with the spiritual reality. Only when the lingering spirits are exorcised can a person be healed completely. Of course, the shadowy world of spirits is used to cause as well as

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<sup>14</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, II.

<sup>15</sup> See Michael E. Bell “Pattern, Structure, and Logic in Afro-American Hoodoo Performance” (PhD diss., University of Indiana, 1980) for an analysis of pattern and structure within hoodoo performance..

cure numerous conditions, such as attraction, banishment, good luck and success, or any of many physical harms. A related idea is that thoughts and words have power to influence the spirits of things, hence one must talk to spirits. On the surface, it may appear that one is speaking to a dumb creature, such as an ant, or to an inanimate object, such as a piece of lodestone, but such a conclusion ignores the spiritual dimension inherent in all things.<sup>16</sup>

Hyatt's understanding of hoodoo rested on the notion that it addressed the spiritual ills of the client and not just physical ailments. He ascertained that hoodoo practitioners understood that there was a spiritual component to all things including illnesses and objects, and if spirits could be communicated with then they had the power to influence and bring about change in believers' lives. He claims that though on the surface hoodoo may seem to be perplexing or illogical, his informants' stories set forth the complex underlying system by which believers enacted rituals and which Hyatt proposes make sense when understood through the framework of the 'dual division of causes'. He suggests that the doctors have a mastery of theories surrounding treatment of the spirits and the spiritual aspects of life and objects. Indeed, it seems that Hyatt understood the importance of treating the ills of the mind and soul as well as physical problems, perhaps because of his own faith and work in the church.

Reflecting on his fieldwork and the stories his informants told, Hyatt questioned whether '[...] some of these black informants [told] me a white man lies? A few did, but I tossed out their material.'<sup>17</sup> This comment and the comments woven

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<sup>16</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, IX.

<sup>17</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 3, XVII.



into Hyatt's field notes about the reliability of informants demonstrate Hyatt's faith in his ability to identify authentic informants and his understanding of hoodoo. As such, Hyatt became somewhat of a custodian of African American beliefs and practices, he admitted testimony that he believed conformed to the underlying theory of hoodoo into the collection and excluded those that did not.

Once Hyatt identified material that he felt should be included in *Hoodoo*, he edited interviews so that the collection could be arranged by rite. He divided the majority of interviews into distinct sections as they related to different themes or practices so that the contents pages could be arranged by various categories. *Hoodoo's* categories are arranged by theme such as ghostlore or folk medicine, and by object used in ritual including animals, candles, and altars amongst numerous others. His methodology for presenting the material involved extracting sections of interviews that directly address these categories, rather than preserving the entire conversation. The effect of extracting sections from full interviews means that those using Hyatt's collection only have access to the material that Hyatt classified as relevant and are left with little indication of what came before and after these segments of interview. We are therefore forced to view the collection through three layers of filtering: Hyatt's identification of the material as authentic; the arrangement of the contents by theme; and finally Hyatt's identification of segments of interview he deemed relevant to those themes. So, even though Hyatt was reticent to offer conclusions about hoodoo, his role as fieldworker and curator of an archive still impacted how hoodoo was presented in the collection as well as how much and how easily future researchers could access material.

Deborah Gordon suggests that during the first half of the twentieth century there was an older generation of ethnographers that became increasingly demoted in

favour of Boasian approaches that stressed ‘folklore should be cast as part of a larger whole called “culture.”’<sup>18</sup> She discusses the fieldwork of Charlotte Osgood Mason and the publication of her materials by Natalie Curtis as part of this older generation. Curtis’ collection on Plains Indians, Gordon suggests, was ‘dominated by the transcribing of collected materials with no references to a broader cultural meaning.’<sup>19</sup> She claims that this approach produced a ‘documentary effect [...] in the portrayal not of a “culture,” but of a collection of diverse materials.’<sup>20</sup> Without commentary on what the ethnographic material reveals, Hyatt’s approach, like Curtis’, creates this documentary effect. The arrangement of raw interview material in *Hoodoo* produces what Gordon calls the more popular style of representing culture during the period: the ‘laying out of objects as if an art museum.’<sup>21</sup>

After graduating from Oxford, Hyatt remained on the periphery of the academic community until later in his life. He believed fundamentally in the value of fieldwork and was certain that experience working amongst people in a community setting was paramount to producing worthwhile conclusions. He argued that ‘[...] theories without a solid foundation of fieldwork are not of lasting value. For this reason (among other good ones), I feel folklorists need to get out in the field among people, at least periodically. Truth (however you define it) is not the private preserve of libraries and academic institutions.’<sup>22</sup> Hyatt’s approach to the study and collection of folklore is characterised by the emphasis he placed on collecting a rich bank of

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<sup>18</sup> Deborah Gordon, “The Politics of Ethnographic Authority: Race and Writing in the Ethnography of Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston,” in *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text*, ed. Marc Manganaro (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 159-160.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, IX.

source material; ‘as for academic theories concerning hoodoo and related practices: [he would] leave that for the scholars who use these volumes.’<sup>23</sup>

### The Scholarly Reception of *Hoodoo*

*Hoodoo* is acknowledged by scholars as a unique and important work in the field of black folklore. Hyatt’s collection of private letters is filled with words of praise and recognition from some of the nation’s foremost scholars of black folk culture, literature, and history. In 1976, Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote in a letter to colleagues at Yale University, John Blassingame (Chair of Yale University’s Afro-American Studies Department) and Robert Thompson (Professor of African Art History):

Harry Hyatt has published the most remarkable and complete compilation of research about the “folk” religion of black Americans in his four volume encyclopaedia of Hoodoo, aptly named *Hoodoo, Conjuraton, Witchcraft, and Rootwork*. As a reference tool, it is incomparable, as a living, breathing testimony to the religious practice of millions of black people it is indispensable to scholarship.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, Richard Dorson (Director of the Folklore Institute at Indiana University) proposed that Hyatt’s work ‘is the most important single source of black folklore ever published in the United States’ and Bruce Jackson (Director of the Center for Studies in American Culture at SUNY Buffalo) wrote that ‘[t]here is no collection of black American custom and belief and medicine that approaches his for

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Correspondence from Henry Louis Gates Jr to John Blassingame and Robert Thompson, 20 October 1976, Box 2, Folder 1, HFC, QUA.

scope.’<sup>25</sup> Yet sustained analysis, interpretation, and even awareness of the existence of the collection remain limited.

This is largely due to the presentation and organisation of the material. Several leading academics expressed their frustration with the composition of Hyatt’s materials and the extent to which it impeded the use of such an important work. Bruce Jackson lamented ‘that the lack of an index makes much of its contents virtually inaccessible...The work was enormously frustrating because although there was clearly an enormous amount of useful material in those thick volumes, his seriatum presentation of data left the work almost useless for anyone without a great deal of spare time.’<sup>26</sup> As George Simpson points out, the lack of an index makes *Hoodoo* very difficult to navigate. This coupled with the lack of biographical data, contextual information about the conditions in which the interview took place, and missing segments of interview, make these pieces of testimony difficult for the researcher to both locate and interpret. Whilst Hyatt’s collection remains one of the most exhaustive and valuable resources for scholars interested in African American folk beliefs, the difficulty of navigating it means that it is not utilised to its full potential and that the perspectives and narratives of hoodoo practitioners themselves remain mostly buried within *Hoodoo*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Correspondence from Richard Dorson to Wayland Hand, 15 February 1975 and correspondence from Bruce Jackson to Wayland Hand, 18 December 1974, Box 2, Folder 3, HFC, QUA, respectively.

<sup>26</sup> Correspondence from Bruce Jackson to Wayland Hand, 18 December 1974, Box 2, Folder 3, HFC, QUA. Similarly, Gates writes ‘The sheer mass and redundancy bristling from every volume makes Hyatt’s life work potentially intimidating – except for the more hungry and committed of Afro-Americanists’ and George Simpson states ‘Hyatt’s work is of extraordinary value. There is nothing like it, and yet in its present state (I am speaking of volumes 1-3 it is very difficult to use. Hyatt recorded interviews with dozens of informants over a long period of years, but these interviews duplicate each other to some extent and the same subjects are covered.’ Correspondence from Henry Louis Gates Jr to Sheldon Meyer, 26 October 1976 and correspondence from George B. Simpson to Wayland Hand, 16 December 1976, Box 2, Folder 1, HFC, QUA, respectively.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Katrina Hazzard-Donald, Jeffrey Anderson, and Carolyn Morrow Long each reference Hyatt’s *Hoodoo* interview materials in support of their research but these references are

However, there have been several attempts since Hyatt's publication of the first volume of *Hoodoo* in 1970 to widen the reach and impact of *Hoodoo* on discourses of African-based beliefs in the United States. Henry Louis Gates Jr., one of the most renowned scholars of African American literature and culture, visited with Hyatt on behalf of Yale University in an effort to produce a more accessible publication of Hyatt's primary material as well as to obtain Hyatt's supplementary documents including his field notes and journals, for what was hoped would become the Harry Hyatt collection housed at Yale University. Before beginning discussions about the transfer of Hyatt's papers to Yale, Gates remarked: 'I think you have the most amazing collection of primary data on hoodoo that exists in the entire world.'<sup>28</sup>

Gates recognised the importance and value of Hyatt's work but he was also aware of the problems inherent in the current state of the collection. He knew that they would need to be dealt with in order for *Hoodoo* to have the impact on African American Studies that he and other scholars envisioned. In a letter to Oxford University Press discussing the possibility of publishing Hyatt's work, Gates proposed 'a way out of the bewildering repetitions' and a solution to the void produced by the lack of historical and cultural context 'so that the more important findings can be put forward to advance the field':

We propose to streamline the four volumes into one by means of the following strategies of cultural portraiture. [...] Thus, to liberate the potential of these volumes as a primary document in black cultural history, we propose the following outline of our introduction: a) a

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usually cursory rather than indicative of a sustained or thorough exploration of *Hoodoo* or of a study concerned with the testimony contained within the collection.

<sup>28</sup> Harry Hyatt, "Tape 1 of Recorded Personal Interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr.," Quincy IL, no date given, HFC, QUA.

short introductory section outlining the nature of Kongo and Angolan religions; b) essential data on the Atlantic Trade linking the ports of Kongo and Angola to Annapolis, Charleston and New Orleans [...] c) the volume proper in which nine main motifs of West Bantu thought and iconicity are signalled, explained, and used as convenient didactic devices around which to cluster meaningfully the more African-tinged pieces of data in Hyatt's texts; d) a "control" section, to balance the Kongo bias, in which other European and American sources are assessed and sounded as possible reinforcing powers in the historical process; e) conclusion: the significance of the volume as a sample of a process as vital as the transformation of the East Anglian structure into New England frame house, or the diffusion of the Swedish log-build habitation as the "pioneer log-cabin" of early American architecture.<sup>29</sup>

Gates' vision for *Hoodoo* included introductory sections that laid out the African origins of hoodoo, its journey to the United States, and how its practices were adapted in the New World, as well as sections on European and other influences. Though it was not Hyatt's aim to offer this type of history or analysis, Hyatt's approach to the collection and curation of hoodoo rites somewhat diminishes these aspects and as Gates suggested, made the experience of understanding the material somewhat bewildering for the researcher. This disparity represents the difference between the generation of folklorists that Hyatt saw himself as part of, a generation that privileged documentation and "objective" presentation, and the professionalization of the study of folklore that emphasized the importance of the

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<sup>29</sup> Correspondence from Henry Louis Gates Jr to Sheldon Meyer at Oxford University Press, 26 October 1976, Box 2, Folder 1, HFC, QUA.

study of culture and of interpretive and contextual work, that Gates represented. Though Hyatt acknowledges hoodoo as a living belief system and as a reaction to the specific circumstances of communities in early twentieth-century America, without the type of mediation that Gates proposes, the documentary style of presentation in *Hoodoo* renders it ahistorical and limits its efficacy in the study of black folk culture and spirituality.

Gates also requested of John Blassingame that he and Robert Thompson be permitted to hire a person to index Hyatt's volumes so that they could 'employ a more balanced and considered judgment to decide what to include in our volume, so that it is of maximum use, remains interesting and is easily accessible.'<sup>30</sup> He also suggested that the index could be published separately later once the edited volume was completed. It was envisioned that the volume would be no more than 450 pages in length so that readers could 'handle it' and so that it could be used as a textbook for college classes. Gates and Hyatt also discussed the importance of selling the volume at an affordable price so that it could be read by as many people as possible, especially college students and graduate researchers.<sup>31</sup> In addition to the publication and archive that Gates proposed, he and Hyatt also made plans for the creation of a Harry Hyatt Scholarship at Yale to fund students interested in the study of American folklore, and particularly those interested in hoodoo. Hyatt insisted that any money he would make from the sale of his materials to Yale should go towards this fund.<sup>32</sup> The type of intervention that Gates and Yale University offered was to be paramount to the impact of *Hoodoo* on scholarship and would transform Hyatt's collection of unedited and unorganized material into what was hoped to be one of the most

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<sup>30</sup> Correspondence from Henry Louis Gates Jr to John Blassingame and Robert Thompson, 20 October 1976, Box 2, Folder 1, HFC, QUA.

<sup>31</sup> Hyatt and Gates, interview.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

significant, and widely accessible, publications in the field of African American Studies.

Unfortunately, the collection that Gates planned, the publication with Oxford as well as the archival collection and scholarship at Yale, never came to fruition. It remains unclear why Hyatt's deal with Yale fell through but it is certain that the plans he and Gates made were not realised and that Hyatt's unique and important data on hoodoo remains contained within the original five volumes that were self-published. Instead, the majority of Hyatt's papers are housed in Quincy University's Special Collections in Hyatt's hometown, and the rest were sent to UCLA's Centre for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology.<sup>33</sup> Though the impact of Hyatt's data and the accessibility of the collection is not as widespread as was hoped in the 1970s, Gates maintained that even in the state that the collection was self-published, '[Hyatt] earned a singular position in American Arts and Letters, [and] forced the academy to see hoodoo as the complex philosophical system it is.'<sup>34</sup> Gates' comments suggest that Hyatt's work had the capacity to change the current discourse on African-based beliefs which, up until this point, was still influenced by nineteenth-century narratives of them as primitive.

The only other attempt to organize Hyatt's collection is the work of Michael Bell during the late 1970s. Bell was a doctoral student in the University of Indiana's folklore programme when he came across Hyatt's work on hoodoo. His doctoral thesis, titled 'Pattern, Structure and Logic in Afro-American Hoodoo Performance' is the only prolonged treatment of the collection and remains the only study to offer

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<sup>33</sup> UCLA's Centre for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology has since closed and I was unable to locate a record of where the Hyatt materials were transferred to.

<sup>34</sup> Correspondence from Henry Louis Gates Jr to Harry Hyatt, 25 May 1978, Box 2, Folder 1, HFC, QUA.



‘an organized legitimating analysis [of] the vast uninterpreted collection of Hoodoo informants’ interviews in Hyatt’s five volumes.’<sup>35</sup> It utilises Hyatt’s material to identify what Bell terms the ‘deep structure’ of hoodoo including the identification of repeated patterns in practice and the underlying logic that underpins the design of rituals. In part one of his thesis, Bell tests the hypothesis that a complex structure exists within hoodoo by examining various categories of hoodoo performances including specific physical ailments, mental and emotional health, domestic pursuits, business pursuits, and the law and legal problems to identify common practices within these categories. Bell’s method to identify similarities between practices yields a set of patterns and trends in hoodoo practice that Bell claims illustrates that there is a deep structure of logic that underpins and informs the choices that doctors make about various aspects of the ritual including materials, time, and location. Part two builds on this and focuses on what he calls the agents (materials), actions (prayer for example), and temporal and spatial frameworks (the time and location in which actions for the ritual should take place) within the hoodoo performance complex. Bell identifies frequently used agents, actions, and temporal and spatial frameworks, and the reasons for these choices. Based on the testimony that Hyatt collected, Bell argues that all hoodoo performances adhere to five interrelated components (intended result, agents, actions, a spatial framework, and a temporal framework). He suggests that though hoodoo may at first sight appear to be haphazard and illogical, there is in fact a set of well-established rules, as well as a complex system of logic underpinning those rules, which in turn create recognisable patterns within hoodoo performance that demonstrate its complexity as a belief system. Bell concludes that ‘[h]oodoo is therefore an elaborate structure for explaining why and how things

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<sup>35</sup> Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’*, 11.

happen’ but suggests that understanding the universe is not the goal of hoodooists; ‘the point of knowing is to control.’<sup>36</sup>

The conclusions made in Bell’s thesis are a testament to what Gates suggested was the real value in the collection: to prompt scholars to see hoodoo as a complex philosophical and religious system and to thereby challenge pre-existing impressions of hoodoo as primitive. Furthermore, Bell’s assertion that the primary function of hoodoo is to control speaks to the notion that hoodoo operated as a means of shifting power and a mode of resistance to systems of racial oppression. His research and interpretation of Hyatt’s material supports the conclusion that hoodoo functioned logically and sits in opposition to discourses of hoodoo that feed narratives about people of African descent as primitive, hypersexual, and irrational. It is an example of the value of the interviews and potential of *Hoodoo* to change dominant discourses of black spirituality that existed at the time.

#### Interviewing and Representing New Orleans Hoodoo Community

Hyatt tried to ensure that he did not come to his subject matter with prejudice nor with an agenda to present it in a certain way. Instead, he wanted his informants’ words to take prominence within the collection. He stated, ‘I would like to make it very clear that I did not begin with preconceived theories. Rather, I let my informants tell what they knew, believed and practiced. I merely asked the questions.’<sup>37</sup> Due to Hyatt’s understanding of himself as a fieldworker rather than a scholar of folklore, the testimony contained within *Hoodoo* primarily offers a narrative of hoodoo from the perspective of those who practice it and Hyatt’s voice

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<sup>36</sup> Bell, “Pattern, Structure, and Logic,” 30.

<sup>37</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, 1.

is secondary. His collection offers a fresh perspective on hoodoo and contrasts with those found in the likes of New Orleans travel literature and nineteenth-century accounts which tend to offer an account of African-based beliefs from an outsider's perspective. Similarly, even though Hurston's *Mules and Men* purports to take an insider look at hoodoo in New Orleans, the account is still influenced by Hurston's double gaze approach as insider/outsider. Unlike these accounts, the central viewpoint that surfaces in Hyatt's collection is that of New Orleans hoodooists making this collection a unique and important work amongst its contemporaries.

Hyatt was aware of accounts that scripted hoodoo as a marker of inferiority or lack of intellect and was sceptical of these publications and understandings of folk culture. He commented: 'A few years before [*Folklore from Adams County*] appeared, a book of American superstitions treated the beliefs within as pieces of misinformation, quaint relics rapidly disappearing before the light of education. Unfortunately the problem is not that simple. A person can be a scholar of international repute, possess vast stores of knowledge, and yet believe fervently in every aspect of witchcraft.'<sup>38</sup> This suggests that Hyatt did not view hoodoo as a marker of intellectual and racial inferiority or as rapidly disappearing as a casualty of modernity as some of his contemporaries did. Yet his choice to use the more pejorative terms 'superstition' and 'witchcraft', that hold connotations that the beliefs he refers to are irrational, is perhaps symptomatic of Hyatt's ambivalence towards the notion of hoodoo as a religious, or at least spiritual, system of beliefs. Though his comments suggest that he saw no correlation between intellect and 'superstition', he did identify a relationship between belief in hoodoo and a lack of access to resources.

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<sup>38</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 1, VII.

The second of Hyatt's motivations in publishing *Hoodoo* was to highlight the failures of the government to care for deprived populations. Reflecting on *Hoodoo*, he stated, '[t]hese two volumes are also a protest showing how society failed to educate underprivileged people, black and white.'<sup>39</sup> Though Hyatt resists offering a sustained analysis or commentary on hoodoo practices, his brief reflections support the narrative that hoodoo was a reaction to and means to survive social and racial injustice. Hyatt wrote several times in his introductions that his informants were often underprivileged and suffered hardships because of a lack of access to education, healthcare, and economic security:

I found most of my informants to be fundamentally decent, hard-working and able. Many were lonely and needed human contact – some interested person who could listen and understand. Most needed money, and many came to me seeking employment... there were times (at New Orleans, for example) when informants actually lined up outside the room to wait for an interview...In short, whenever and wherever people needed money, I found an abundance of good informants.<sup>40</sup>

Hyatt's account of hoodoo practitioners paints a very different picture than that created in New Orleans travel literature. In contrast to the caricatured, animalistic, and hypersexual Voodoo practitioner found in other publications, Hyatt claims that his informants were ordinary Americans who worked hard to survive in difficult circumstances and who often utilised hoodoo to do so. Hyatt maintained that an integral part of his role as fieldworker was to respect his informants, regardless of

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., XLII.

<sup>40</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, III.

their personal backgrounds: '[f]olklorist, anthropologist, ethnologist, sociologist and psychologist know that superstition influences the mind regardless of race, nationality or creed; that the person investigating this complicated subject is not "making fun of" or degrading the people investigated.'<sup>41</sup> In this important way, Hyatt's work sits in opposition to that of several of his contemporaries and predecessors whose accounts did degrade or mock the beliefs of the people they investigated. Rather, Hyatt treated hoodoo and hoodoo believers with respect and ultimately recognised it as a belief system that functioned in a way that was not entirely dissimilar from his own. Though he initially seems sceptical of the beliefs he hears and refers to them as 'superstition', throughout the collection he identifies similarities between the way that hoodoo and Christianity function and sees analogues of his own beliefs in the beliefs of his informants. On several occasions he draws parallels between the two belief systems, for example, he remarks, '...we must realize that not every believer in hoodoo believes the same thing, or believes with the same intensity. This of course is also true of Christians.'<sup>42</sup> Hyatt frequently tries to ensure that hoodoo is not presented as an inferior belief system; instead he often highlights the connections between hoodoo and the Christian faith and maintains that his informants' methods of worship were respectable and rational.

One of the key differences between Hyatt's presentation of practitioners and those found elsewhere during this period is Hyatt's insistence that hoodoo was not an exclusively black phenomenon. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, Voodoo and hoodoo in New Orleans were frequently portrayed as a practice that only the black community engaged in. In doing so, images of Voodoo were racialized; presentations of Voodoo as savage and hypersexual became presentations of African

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<sup>41</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 1, IV.

<sup>42</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 3, XV.

Americans as savage and hypersexual. Hyatt's account of what he encountered in New Orleans challenges these impressions as he frequently reminds the reader that hoodoo was as prevalent in the white community as it was in the black community. He even gave the collection the subtitle, *Beliefs Accepted by Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites* to demonstrate that these types of practices were not racially exclusive.

On the opening pages of the first introduction, Hyatt also offers several excerpts of testimony in which his informants comment on the multiracial profile of hoodoo believers. Hyatt suggests that rather than offering his own opinion on the 'ratio between *coloreds* and *whites*', it is better that the reader receives 'the opinions of professional men and women engaged in hoodoo work' on this matter.<sup>43</sup> One informant from Norfolk, Virginia suggests that 'we do find in the South that 90 percent of Negroes is been trained under that hoodooism and 40 percent whites believe in hoodooism.'<sup>44</sup> Another from Arkansas speculates 'de white race, ah would give it an even break, 50 out of ev'ry 100; an' in de colored, 9 outa ev'ry 10.'<sup>45</sup> As Kodi Roberts points out, even though Voodoo (and hoodoo) were perhaps practised more frequently in black communities and were analogues to other African-based belief systems, they did indeed permeate the colour line and were not insular belief systems confined to the African American community in New Orleans.<sup>46</sup> Hyatt's emphasis on this point works to challenge both the notion that hoodoo was exclusively black and the accompanying narrative that it was a marker of intellectual and racial inferiority. Additionally, Hyatt's deference to the responses of his

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<sup>43</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 1, II.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*, 6-7.

informants is further evidence of the way in which practitioners' voices and perspectives are privileged in this collection over those of the outsider observer.

Instead of proposing that hoodoo was an indication of intellectual deficit, Hyatt highlights the relationship between its practice, access to education, and social and economic opportunity. Thinking about the contribution that his informants made, Hyatt writes, '[h]ere I pause in memory, stop and thank those many lowly and uneducated and underprivileged people who came to me – sometimes in fear, often in hunger. They are my co-authors.'<sup>47</sup> There are also several other occasions within Hyatt's introductions where he refers to his informants as uneducated or underprivileged. Hyatt's observation suggests not that hoodoo is innately racialized, but that it was linked to a lack of access to resources and because black communities were generally more deprived than their white counterparts during this period, hoodoo was more prevalent in black communities. Hyatt's observation suggests that hoodoo was ultimately a reaction to social inequality and because black communities were often both targeted and neglected by various institutions, hoodoo was a method by which believers resisted and coped with the effects of systemic racism and inequality.

Despite Hyatt's stress on the racial diversity of hoodoo believers, only one informant out of the 1606 that he interviewed was white. His reasoning for this supports the observations he makes about the relationship between hoodoo and social justice as well as addressing some practical concerns of his own:

Why did I limit Hoodoo to black people? (1) What little hoodoo I gathered among the blacks of Adams County Illinois was not enough

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<sup>47</sup> Hyatt, Preface to *Hoodoo* Volume 1, n.p.

to indicate much of anything. (2) I wanted to collect down the Atlantic Coast so that my wife could be with me occasionally (*see* v.1, Intro, p.XV, paragraph 5) and this meant Southern States. At this time, 1936, I doubted whether I could work among blacks and whites simultaneously as I had done in Quincy, Adams County, Illinois. Remember, all my collecting among blacks of the South occurred in the homes or hotels of blacks. (3) I theorized that blacks, with less educational opportunities than whites, would preserve more witchcraft traditions and current practices. (4) Blacks were chosen *because of their special concentration in or near cities, or in country districts* (*see* v.1, p.XV, par. 6). (5) My preliminary experience with those first ten informants, interviewed in my New York City study, indicated that witchcraft could be found in the South.<sup>48</sup>

Hyatt's rationale for selecting primarily African American informants appears to be due to both practical limitations and because of Hyatt's theory about the link between hoodoo, education, access to resources, and the black community. He claims that he could not afford the cost of travelling between white and black communities, that African Americans lived in concentrated areas and it was therefore easier to access more people from one location, and that he wanted to be able to see his wife and he could do so from the locations he selected. Hyatt's explanation suggests that his interviewing of African Americans rather than whites was a way to resolve some of the logistical problems that his project posed but also because he recognised that urban black communities were generally more deprived than white

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<sup>48</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 3, XIV.



communities and so he believed he would find a greater concentration of hoodoo practitioners in those areas.

Despite Hyatt's efforts to remain impartial and his insistence that there is no correlation between intelligence, superstition, and race, his proposal that there instead existed a link between hoodoo, education, and resources suggests that he viewed hoodoo as an indicator of how developed a community or person was. The less educated or more deprived a community was, the more likely Hyatt believed he would be to find hoodoo practised there. Though Hyatt may have been unfamiliar with the concept due to his lack of academic training in folklore, it seems that he subscribed to theories of cultural evolution. When discussing the efficacy of hoodoo in treating various problems he said: '[t]hese, I believe, are without exceptions problems of a psychological or psychosomatic nature: The ailments that faith, belief, and confidence can help overcome' and went on to say that hoodoo was in many ways a 'precursor to the modern psychologist or psychiatrist.'<sup>49</sup> The designation of hoodoo as a precursor to modernity or in some ways "behind" suggests that though he may not have recognized his own views as such, Hyatt, as several folklorists of his generation did, viewed culture and belief as a way to measure the progress of groups of people. He therefore implicitly suggested that because hoodoo was more prevalent in black communities, black people were less developed than their white counterparts whom Hyatt observed did not practise hoodoo at the same rate. Though it might seem logical to dismiss Hyatt's work as another example of an anthropological study that promotes theories of cultural evolution and racial hierarchy from the perspective of the twenty-first century, to do so would be to overlook Hyatt's efforts to create a source where black voices could be recorded,

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<sup>49</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, VIII-IX.

preserved, and later used to construct academic narratives about hoodoo and black life in early twentieth-century United States. Though the conception and curation of *Hoodoo* is fraught with the complexities of the racial politics of the 1930s and framed as a testament to the lack of education amongst black communities, the content of the interviews and the perspectives of hundreds of informants contained within them make Hyatt's collection worth further examination.

Whilst *Hoodoo* is undoubtedly a fertile source for scholars, as an investigation in itself, *Hoodoo*'s presentation of African American folk beliefs is limited due to its lack of commentary on historical and cultural context, as Gates pointed out. Hyatt's emphasis on conjure as non-racially specific perhaps means that to some degree he overlooked the cultural heritage of hoodoo practice and the link to an African heritage that it also represents. The conjuring traditions that Hyatt collects originate in specific historical and cultural contexts and in the case of the interviews examined here, they originate within the racial dynamics of New Orleans, the South, and the nation more broadly as well as within the longer history of Africans and African Americans in the U.S. Though Hyatt acknowledges the relationship between race and social inequality, he does not make explicit that black communities were more impacted by these inequalities nor does he acknowledge or interrogate the institutional and systemic racism at play in the creation of these inequalities.

A unique characteristic of *Hoodoo* is how Hyatt and his transcriber aimed to preserve the dialect of his informants. The way that black speech is recorded in *Hoodoo* was a deliberate choice that Hyatt made and of which he offered the following explanation:

At all times, we attempted to render the speech just as we heard it, without idealizing what was being spoken and how it was being spoken. That is why the reader will find *de* in place of *the* or *do* instead of *door* and so on. But neither I nor my transcriber were trained descriptive linguists or dialecticians, and therefore I have doubts as to the potential value of the transcriptions to scholars interested in speech variation – though, certainly, studies of lexicon seem feasible.<sup>50</sup>

This demonstrates Hyatt's ever-present concern for the future scholar and his candid attitude towards some of the difficulties of the collection, including how to render the words of his informants. Lawrence Levine notes that folklorists of this period, many of whom were white, tended to record black dialect as they expected it to sound. He suggests that transcriptions of black speech were usually a 'mélange of accuracy and fantasy, of sensitivity and stereotype, of empathy and racism.'<sup>51</sup> The effect of this distortion of speech by folklorists, he says, is that 'for all its manifold mistakes and inaccuracies, it does have the ultimate effect of conveying the enduring distinctiveness and creativity of black speech.'<sup>52</sup> Though Hyatt and his transcriber's rendering of speech may have been impacted by a subconscious reflex to record what they expected to hear, 'what stereotype and predisposition have prepared them to hear', it seems that Hyatt's choice to portray black speech in this way stemmed from a sincere attempt to record the words of his informants accurately, rather than to stereotype them as Levine suggests several of his contemporaries did during this

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<sup>50</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, VIII.

<sup>51</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, xxix.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

period.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Hyatt was criticised for transcribing his interviews in an “‘Uncle Remus” type dialect’ in a review for *American Anthropologist* but others have defended his rendering of black dialect.<sup>54</sup> William Stewart (Professor of Linguistics at City University of New York) and J. L. Dillard (author of *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (1973)) commended Hyatt for the ‘surprisingly accurate transcriptions of [his] informants’ linguistic usage.’<sup>55</sup> In the letter, Stewart stated that *Hoodoo* represents a ‘highly useful but as yet unappreciated archive of linguistic material’ further demonstrating the potential that scholars of African American Studies saw in the collection.<sup>56</sup> Again, this also speaks to the importance of Hyatt’s collection during this period in that even though his transcriptions were problematic, he made real efforts to capture and preserve the voices of his informants.

As mentioned, Hyatt describes the interviews as ‘one vast quotation’ and suggests that there are only ever ‘two speakers’.<sup>57</sup> His identification of all of the informants in his collection as one collective voice in dialogue with his own means that the voices of the individual informants somewhat merge into one homogenous black voice in *Hoodoo*. Amongst the dissected interviews, it is difficult to discern the individual voices of Hyatt’s informants. His style of presentation differentiates only between his voice and theirs but not between informants. Without the “explanatory notes” about location in the collection, it would be impossible to differentiate one speaker from another. The mode of presenting rites coupled with the way that black speech is rendered produces an anonymising effect in the collection. The effect of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Weston La Barre, “Review of H. M. Hyatt, *Hoodoo Conjuraton Witchcraft Rootwork*,” *American Anthropologist* 73, no.4 (1971): 900-901.

<sup>55</sup> Correspondence from William Stewart to Harry Hyatt, 29 June 1976, Box 2, HHC, QUA.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 1, I.

this and the lack of individuality in the collection perhaps serve to support Hyatt's protest about the government's failure to provide for underprivileged communities. Instead of offering individual anecdotal evidence, Hyatt offers a vast collection of testimony from an entire community which strengthens one of the primary aims of his project: to demonstrate the impact of social injustice in large, poor, and mostly black communities.

### Narratives from New Orleans' Hoodoo Doctors

The accessibility and presentation of Hyatt's dissected interviews with believers pose a challenge to the researcher because there is very little sustained dialogue and it is impossible to know the wider context of conversations when we are often only offered snippets. Without a flowing conversation, the interviews with believers rarely reveal any insight into how hoodoo operated in the city, rather they provide specifics on how to perform certain rites. The only exceptions to Hyatt's dissection of interviews are his conversations with those he classified as hoodoo doctors, as opposed to believers and clients of doctors. Interviews with hoodoo doctors, mostly found in volumes two and three, are presented in full. It seems that for these interviews, Hyatt's focus of study was the doctor him/herself rather than on individual rites. He writes '[t]hough HOODOO is full of magic rites and cures, always I sought the professional operator, the doctor, his appearance, personal mannerisms, origins of his power, possible descent from his predecessor, activities, beliefs, methods, and the atmosphere surrounding him. This later also meant a study of his clients.'<sup>58</sup> It therefore seems that though the dissected interviews comprise most of the collection, they were of secondary concern to Hyatt. Instead, he was

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<sup>58</sup> Correspondence from Harry Hyatt to Bruce Jackson, 20 August 1973, Box 2, HFC, QUA.

much more interested in the figure of the doctor and the power and knowledge they represented. If as Bell claimed, ‘the point of knowing was to control’ then the doctor represented the person with the knowledge to control and shift power.<sup>59</sup> Hyatt observed:

The better doctors were also able to incorporate new concepts and technological innovations into their repertoires and still retain the aura of traditional hoodoo. The key notions here are faith and confidence: I cannot overemphasize the importance of the ability of a doctor to gain the belief of his clients... he – the good doctor – was a mysterious, elusive figure, and gave the impression that he had more clients than he was able to handle. He was a super salesman exuding a confidence which was contagious.<sup>60</sup>

This account of the doctor almost echoes that of a priest and it seems that perhaps Hyatt saw similarities between his own profession and that of the hoodoo doctor. Though hoodoo is not a formal religion, many of its practices were religious and represented a system by which believers understood their world and their daily lives. The hoodoo doctor was a key figure in the community and often, due to the syncretic nature of belief in New Orleans, also acted as a preacher and offered spiritual guidance to their clients. As Hyatt’s interviews reveal, many hoodoo doctors fused elements of Christianity with hoodoo and did not see their practices as belonging to two separate systems of faith, a testament to hoodoo as a religious system that interacted and intermingled with others. By preserving their testimony in full, Hyatt preserved the role of the doctor as a spiritual guide and community leader. The full

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<sup>59</sup> Bell, “Pattern, Structure, and Logic,” 30.

<sup>60</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, II.

interviews with New Orleans' hoodoo doctors go beyond the dissected interviews and their testimony offers several accounts of hoodoo's origins that locate it in an African American past and identify the contemporary role that it plays in New Orleans' black community.

Though Hyatt does not offer a discussion of the broader cultural contexts of the rites he collects nor much by way of conclusions, the content of *Hoodoo's* interviews with doctors evoke this context and present narratives about the ways in which informants' conceptualized their beliefs and how hoodoo functioned in the lives of black New Orleanians during the 1930s. The discussion that follows is based on Hyatt's interviews with New Orleans hoodoo doctors. The explanations they offer challenge perceptions of hoodoo as illogical, irrational, and inferior. Instead, they demonstrate how hoodoo acted as a set of beliefs that provided both explanation and a means to reassert control and power for those who found themselves in difficult circumstances. The stories captured here attest to hoodoo as a system that was sensitive and responsive to the social and political climate that its believers found themselves in. The way in which doctors adapted rituals and prescribed spiritual guidance under challenging and rapidly changing social circumstances demonstrates the sophistication and adaptability of conjure as a modern belief system.

In 1938, Hyatt collected the testimony of a hoodoo doctor in New Orleans whom he referred to as "Hoodoo Book Man". The informant states that '*Hoodooism* started way back in de time dat Moses days, back in ole ancient times, nine thousand years ago. Now you see, Moses, he was a prophet jis' like Peter, Paul an' James. Am' den he quit bein' a prophet an' started de *hoodooism* – what we call de *Seven*

*Book of Moses.*<sup>61</sup> *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* is understood to be a collection of lost biblical texts that ‘explain the magic whereby Moses won the biblical magic contest with the Egyptian priest-magicians, parted the Red Sea, and other miraculous feats.’<sup>62</sup> Morrow Long states that despite low levels of literacy amongst African Americans in this period, *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* is cited as the most commonly used magic book amongst African Americans in both Hyatt’s collection and in Federal Writers’ Project interviews.<sup>63</sup> Hyatt also notes the prevalence of the text in his interviews, claiming that ‘many uneducated Negroes as well as white persons [consider] it a part of the Bible.’<sup>64</sup> The prevalence with which it was read and the way in which many black New Orleanians believed it to be part of the Bible further demonstrates the relationship between hoodoo and Christianity and how many people saw hoodoo as part of their religion.

Moses has long been an important figure in the African American church, especially during the nineteenth century, because of the importance of the Exodus myth to the African American struggle for freedom. The story of Exodus is a tale in which Moses, under the direction of God, leads the enslaved Israelites across the parted Red Sea, escaping the Pharaoh’s army and delivering them from a lifetime of slavery. Enslaved African Americans identified with the Exodus myth and hoped that one day, like the Israelites, they would be delivered from slavery. Albert Raboteau argues that the ‘appropriation of the Exodus story was for the slaves a way of articulating their sense of historical identity as a people.’<sup>65</sup> He claims that

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<sup>61</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo Conjuraton Witchcraft Rootwork*, Volume 2 (New York: Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation, 1970), 1758.

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Peterson, “Foreword,” in *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses Or Moses’ Magical Spirit-Art*, ed. Joseph Peterson (Lake Worth: Ibis Press, 2008), XII.

<sup>63</sup> Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 122.

<sup>64</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 1, VIII.

<sup>65</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 311.



enslaved people incorporated the story ‘as part of *their* mythic past.’<sup>66</sup> Moses was collectively viewed by African Americans as a great leader. Michael Lackey posits that ‘so instrumental was Moses in the project of emancipating blacks that he has been considered almost as important as Jesus...’<sup>67</sup> He claims that this view of Moses as the ideal leader was problematized in twentieth-century African American literature but prior to this, Moses was almost always thought of as the model leader of enslaved blacks. Hyatt’s “Hoodoo Book Man” and other informants that claimed to use *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, recognise the miracles that Moses’ performed in the Bible as hoodoo. The identification of Moses as a conjurer and the interpretation of miracles performed by him as hoodoo locate the story of Exodus in an African American past. Though Hyatt does not explicitly make the link in his reflections, his informants situate conjure in one of the most significant Christian stories, thereby offering a long and recognisable history of the origins of hoodooism as part of a broader system of Christian faith. The narratives offered by Hyatt’s informants about the syncretism of Christianity and hoodoo challenges claims that hoodoo is “dark magic” and instead proposes that hoodoo functions within, or in dialogue with, Christianity.

Several of Hyatt’s informants also claim that saints are frequently called upon in their practices. In an interview entitled ‘A Woman and her Three Saints’, Hyatt asks his informant about the function of saints in hoodoo practices. Amongst other saints, she tells him that St. Michael will keep your enemies away, St. Joseph

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Lackey, “Moses, Man of Oppression: A Twentieth-Century African American Critique of Western Theocracy,” *African American Review* 43, no.4 (2009): 577. For more on the significance of the Exodus narrative in the history of the African American freedom struggle see Anna Hartnell, *Rewriting Exodus: American Futures from DuBois to Obama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) and David W. Kling, *The Bible in History: How the Texts Have Shaped the Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially chapter six entitled ““Let My People Go”: Exodus in the African American Experience,” 193-230.

will give you bread if you are hungry and that St. Raymond will give you money and help you with your husband, depending on which colour candle you burn for him.<sup>68</sup> Another informant whom Hyatt claims considers hoodoo a science, identifies St. Raymond as a ‘*do* saint and a *undo* saint. He’s de saint dat dey goes tuh fer all our favourite *isms*. All *hoodooism*, yo’ go tuh ‘im fur dat.’<sup>69</sup> As well as the incorporation of saints into hoodoo routines, another of Hyatt’s informants tells him about the inclusion of prayer in hoodoo ritual. He recalls one in particular that involves reciting the Lord’s Prayer and calling upon St. Michael to counteract any candles that other people might be burning to harm clients.<sup>70</sup> Numerous other New Orleans informants attest to the frequency with which hoodoo doctors called upon saints for their help.<sup>71</sup> The inclusion of prayer and the incorporation of Catholic saints into routines demonstrate the amalgamation of these two belief systems in New Orleans.

Hoodoo’s biblical origins and its fusion with Catholicism as explained by these informants, refute interpretations of it as superstition or devil-worshipping, as it was commonly identified in the nineteenth century. The location of hoodoo in stories which serve as the foundation for institutionalised religions prompts readers to recognise hoodoo as something more than a set of irrational beliefs. The blending of Christianity and hoodoo that is present in these interviews challenges Hyatt’s earlier designation of hoodoo as superstition and compels him to recognise that ‘[h]oodoo is a religion for many believers.’<sup>72</sup> The melding of beliefs in their testimony offers a legitimising perspective on hoodoo in comparison to

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<sup>68</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2, 1406.

<sup>69</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 3, 2285.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 1979.

<sup>71</sup> See for example New Orleans interviews entitled ‘Boy-Girl or Girl-Boy’, ‘“Doctor” Caffrey’, ‘First Informant in New Orleans’ and ‘Gifted Medium’ in Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2. These interviews discuss the roles of saints in New Orleans hoodoo.

<sup>72</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 3, XV.

contemporaneous accounts and challenges narratives about hoodoo as an invalid belief system.

Hyatt's interviews with hoodoo doctors in New Orleans also reveal that African American communities turned to hoodoo for help with social, personal, and economic problems. Many of the people that Hyatt interviewed were living in poverty and only offered him testimony because they 'were in dire need of money in order to survive.'<sup>73</sup> As Hyatt himself acknowledges, in many ways, the success of his project depended on the level of poverty in African American communities: '[i]n short, whenever and wherever people needed money, I found an abundance of good informants.'<sup>74</sup> The testimony of his informants provides a narrative of the socio-economic problems faced by black communities in the city and the ways in which hoodoo played a role in their survival under these circumstances. Their testimony offers insight into the ways in which black communities were victims of historical racial oppression and illustrates how hoodoo was used as a means to address imbalances of power.

Perhaps the most recurring social issue, which appears in almost all of the New Orleans interviews, is the relationship between the African American community, the judicial system, and the police. There are numerous interviews where informants say that they use hoodoo to evade trouble with the police, to influence court proceedings, and to get loved ones out of jail. The frequency with which these problems recur in the interviews demonstrate how widespread both the fear and risk of becoming part of the justice system was in African American communities. Jeffrey Adler observes that during the 1930s there was a crime-panic

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<sup>73</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, IV.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., III.

in New Orleans despite a significant dip in the number of crimes committed since a surge in the 1920s. He says that though the number of crimes committed dropped significantly, policy makers and municipal officials continued ‘a crusade that assumed a life of its own, increasingly detached from actual crime.’<sup>75</sup> As a result of this panic, African Americans were cast as predators and became the target of a newly invigorated war on crime. The police and prosecutors’ racially targeted dragnet tactics, Adler suggests, ‘calmed white fears of social disorder, and funneled African American men into police stations and penal facilities’ as well as exacerbated the disproportionate prosecution and incarceration rates of black New Orleanians during these years.<sup>76</sup> This targeting of African Americans by the judicial system is evident in the statistics from the inmate population in Louisiana’s Angola State Penal Farm. During the 1930s, ‘the prison’s white population rose by 39 percent while the African American inmate population increased by 143 percent’ and despite the number of crimes decreasing, the proportion of suspects killed while in police custody and the number of confessions obtained spiked.<sup>77</sup> With a disproportionate number of African Americans in the criminal justice system, evidence that attests to mistreatment while under the care of the police, and a distrust of judicial procedure, many of Hyatt’s informants turned to hoodoo as a means to defend themselves from being caught up in the judicial system.<sup>78</sup> Hoodoo was used as a compensatory system for legal protection and as a way to resist the unfair targeting of African Americans by the police and prosecutors.

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<sup>75</sup> Jeffrey S. Adler, “Less Crime, More Punishment: Violence, Race, and Criminal Justice in Early Twentieth-Century America,” *Journal of American History* 102, no.1 (2015): 40.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>78</sup> For more on police mistreatment and murder of African Americans in New Orleans during this period see Jeffrey S. Adler, ““The Killer Behind the Badge”: Race and Police Homicide in New Orleans, 1925-1945,” *Law and History Review* 30, no.2 (2012): 495-531.

Several doctors describe rituals to keep the police away or to ensure that clients stay out of trouble with the law. For example, one informant suggests that her clients should make a glass of sweet water and keep it behind their doors. She says in order to keep the police away, every morning clients should sprinkle the water outside their door and recite: 'In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, let the policeman walk on, keep the policeman walking on, keep him goin' on.'<sup>79</sup> There are several other examples of hoodoo practices in the collection aimed at preventing the police from harassing clients.<sup>80</sup> On one occasion, Hyatt shares some of the trouble that he encountered with the law while he was collecting testimony for *Hoodoo* with an informant named Doctor Caffrey. On several occasions during his time in the South, Hyatt was questioned by police because they were suspicious of a white man attracting large crowds of black people to hotels in various cities. He says that often authorities thought that he was engaged in illicit activities and that he 'occasionally had to deal with apparent *stool pigeons* or undercover agents from the police who posed as informants in order to monitor my activities.'<sup>81</sup> Hyatt asked Doctor Caffrey what to do if 'the law is bothering you.'<sup>82</sup> His advice to Hyatt was to obtain three candles; red, white, and blue. He should then light all three at nine in the morning, read the 35<sup>th</sup>, 37<sup>th</sup>, and 70<sup>th</sup> Psalm, and repeat the name of the officer who had been bothering him three times per day. If he did this, Doctor Caffrey assured him that within less than three weeks, the officer would be off the force.<sup>83</sup> The frequency with which this problem appears and the readiness with which doctors had methods to address this issue suggests that relations with the police were a significant problem

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<sup>79</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2, 1408.

<sup>80</sup> For further examples of interviews that discuss rituals to keep the police away see interviews entitled 'Doctor Caffrey', 'First Informant in New Orleans', 'Boy-Girl or Girl-Boy', 'Havana Man' and 'Mind Reader' in Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2.

<sup>81</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, IV.

<sup>82</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2, 1467.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

in the black community and that in the absence of protection from police harassment and disproportionate targeting, people turned to hoodoo for protection from the law.

In addition to keeping the police away, Hyatt also talked to informants whose clients were sometimes guilty of committing crimes and whose families turned to hoodoo doctors for help with their court cases. One hoodoo doctor told Hyatt about his own court case from several years earlier. He does not reveal what he was accused of but says his wife went to see a hoodoo woman for help with his case while he was in jail awaiting trial. The hoodoo woman instructed his wife to buy a beef heart, stick it full of needles and bury it, and bring some of her husband's clothes to her so that she could 'fix 'em up in some stuff she had.'<sup>84</sup> The next day his wife took his clothes to him to wear in court. The informant recalled, '[d]ey [the jury] come outa de box an' found me not guilty. Ah was guilty, jis' as guilty as ah'm settin' in dis chair.'<sup>85</sup> This interview is one of many in which hoodooists and their clients used conjuring traditions to assist with legal affairs.<sup>86</sup> Numerous other interviews discuss various methods of influencing the legal system such as ways to sway witnesses, the jury, and the police including the common practice of chewing John the Conquer root in the courtroom to influence the judge and ensure that the court case turned out favourably for the client.

Often clients would use more conventional ways of dealing with legal trouble, such as hiring a lawyer, in conjunction with hoodoo. One informant, whose interview is entitled 'She Foresaw Author in a Dream', recalls how she would hire a

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<sup>84</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2, 1756.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> For further examples of interview that discuss the use of hoodoo to assist with legal affairs see interviews entitled 'Man to the Manner Born', 'Havana Man', 'She Foresaw Author in a Dream', 'A Woman and her Three Saints', 'A Woman named Ida', 'Mind Reader', 'Black-Cat-Lucky-Bone Maker Advises Author', 'The Skeleton was not in a Closet but Near a Well' and "'Dat's Accordin' Tuh Science: Science is Great' in Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volumes 2 and 3.

lawyer and supplement the lawyer's work with hoodoo to ensure a good outcome. She says her method is to instruct clients to hire a lawyer then take a piece of paper and write the names of the accused, the lawyer, and the arresting officer on it. Next, they take the paper, wrap it around a silver dime, stuff both into a hole in a veal tongue, and repeat the process three times. Once the client has done that, while the court proceedings are happening she instructs them to put the tongue in a bucket of water surrounded by ice and nine brown and white candles — brown for St. Anthony and 'white is clear – clear your case' — and then they must pray to St. Anthony: '[i]n the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, send your child back to you.'<sup>87</sup> According to the hoodoo doctor, the ice will 'chill' the witness who is planned to speak against the accused, confuse the person who made the charge, and then the judge will not pay attention to what the police officer says and will subsequently throw the case out of court. In a similar way to the blending of Christianity and hoodoo, several doctors advocate for the blending of hoodoo with more conventional forms of legal aid to defend themselves and their loved ones in court.

Similarly, the volume of interviews that discuss how to identify a murderer suggests that there was distrust between the police and the African American community and a lack of faith in the police to get justice for murdered African Americans. Adler's study confirms that there was a disregard for black lives amongst police and crime officials in New Orleans during this period. He quotes a Louisiana African American newspaper editor in 1929 who explained: 'So long as [African American assailants] do not kill white men, everything is all right. But it is 'just another nigger gone' when a colored man is killed.'<sup>88</sup> In the absence of care from the police, there were well-established rituals amongst hoodooists for how to identify or

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<sup>87</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2, 1092-3.

<sup>88</sup> Adler, "Less Crime, More Punishment," 38.

catch a murderer. These rituals almost always included the use of eggs. There are reported variations on what to do with the eggs but the most frequent ritual involves placing one or two eggs in the open palm of the victim which will reportedly make the murderer return to the scene or to the murdered person.<sup>89</sup> One of Hyatt's informants states that once the murderer has returned 'the law goin' to get 'em', and goes on to explain, '[t]hey got many of them like that right there in the parish prison right now in jail – goin' to send them up the road or somewhere. Ah don't know they goin' to send them, but there's many of them done that. No longer than week before last there was a man caught like that – killed a woman's daughter.'<sup>90</sup> For many of Hyatt's informants this was a tried and tested method to safeguard the community against injustice. The prevalence of this type of ritual suggests that faith was placed in conjure rather than in the police to ensure that the correct person was apprehended. It seems that once in the hands of the police, doctors were confident that assailants would be prosecuted but they had less faith that the right person would be prosecuted in the first instance.

The volume of interviews dealing with legal affairs and interactions with the police, coupled with disproportionate numbers of African Americans convicted and imprisoned in the area, reveals that the black community in New Orleans was unfairly targeted by police and the judicial system during this moment. In response, testimony suggests that members of the community turned to hoodoo as a means to reassert control over their lives and to combat this form of racial injustice. In a similar manner to the way that hoodoo became part of a broader Christian faith for several of Hyatt's informants, it seems that it also often acted as a way to supplement

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<sup>89</sup> For examples of interviews that discuss this rite see interviews entitled 'A Woman and her Three Saints', 'First Informant in New Orleans', 'Man to the Manner Born' and 'Mind Reader' in Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2.

<sup>90</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2, 1638.



or work in conjunction with other forms of resistance, demonstrating the complex and myriad ways in which hoodoo functioned in the New Orleans African American community.

Hyatt's conversations with hoodooists in New Orleans also attest to the reliance on conjure for help with health problems. Numerous interviews discuss the use of hoodoo for medical issues including remedies for headaches, rheumatism, and asthma.<sup>91</sup> To treat asthma, one informant told Hyatt that he should 'take chicken feathers and you can burn 'em. You can hold a person's head over it [smoke] and that will clear up the asme.'<sup>92</sup> Another doctor, who Hyatt describes as 'primarily a *healer*, relying little on hoodoo-manual remedies and rites', and warns the reader 'do not underestimate him – he is *professional*', offers ways to remedy a variety of ailments.<sup>93</sup> To treat a headache he says that clients should draw a glass of water at nine in the morning and leave it out until three in the afternoon, say Our Father Prayers over the water three times, and blow over the water three times reciting 'the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'<sup>94</sup> The doctor then places his hand over the client's head and has the client make a wish to 'the four parts of the land' and '[he'll] guarantee you those lights will go out in three hours time, and the headache condition dat they are suffering with, it shall be moved.'<sup>95</sup> Similarly, he also offers cures for injuries or ailments he suggests might be caused by a 'bad environment', a condition that has been caused by somebody else seeking to do his client harm. He orders the client to purchase several products from the drug store including ammonia, asafoetida, antiseptic, and bay rum, stir it all together to create a

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 1817-1830.

<sup>92</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2, 1828.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 1459.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 1460.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

‘great environment’, and bury it in the ground for nine days. After the ninth day, the client must rub the mixture into the affected area (a leg in this example) for nine mornings at six o’clock. Once they have done this, the doctor assures Hyatt that the ‘evil environment’ shall be moved.<sup>96</sup> He also provides numerous other examples of methods to remove conditions that others wishing to cause harm may have inflicted upon clients, often prescribing treatments that blend prayer with topical and herbal treatments as well as with more identifiable hoodoo practices such as the burying of objects or candle lighting. Additionally, hoodooists also offered advice for inducing a miscarriage or abortion which usually involved the consumption of roots or herbs in combination with other actions such as the burning of certain candles or taking the pregnant woman’s linen and tying it in knots.<sup>97</sup>

Hyatt observed that ‘hostility towards Doctors of Medicine has lingered on and is everywhere in HOODOO.’<sup>98</sup> The treatment of medical issues in these interviews supports the notion that hoodoo acted as a healthcare system when there was a lack of access to or distrust of western medicine. In *Working Cures*, Sharla Fett argues that African American distrust of western medical institutions has deep historical roots. She outlines the medical abuse of enslaved and freed African Americans stretching back to non-consensual experimentation on enslaved people, displays of black bodies as medical specimens, forced sterilization of women, and the infamous Tuskegee study as evidence of the historical medical abuse African Americans endured at the hands of western medicine. She states that African American distrust of medical institutions was in many ways a “sensible rational

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 1461.

<sup>97</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 2, 1827.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 1781.

act””.<sup>99</sup> Though the New Orleans interviews do not reveal much insight into why clients chose to seek healthcare advice from hoodooists rather than western doctors of medicine, it is evident that hoodooists acted as primary healthcare providers to the African American community in many instances. As Hyatt observed in the theory of hoodoo he offers in his introduction, doctors treated the physical and spiritual aspects of illness and injury. As such, healers’ instructions were often a blending of actions to treat the physical ailments and spiritual acts to treat to the “evil environments” that caused them.

Though the discourse on hoodoo had already begun to change by the time Hyatt self-published the collection, it remains an important collection that is distinct from those of his contemporaries. Despite Hyatt’s dissection of interviews and the issues with the way interviews were transcribed, his collection represents one of the only occasions where the subjects of the study were able to speak for themselves and give direct accounts of their experiences and understandings of hoodoo in the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike accounts by Hurston, Tallant, Saxon, and those found in newspapers of the nineteenth century, Hyatt’s collection afforded hoodoo practitioners a voice and the space to record their own narratives about their belief systems. While Hyatt has been credited in the scholarly community by figures like Gates and Bell for creating this bank of material and for collating testimony that illustrates the complex nature of hoodoo, the contributions of his informants should not be overlooked and cannot be understated. Their words construct a narrative of hoodoo as a lived religion, as a response to systemic racism in the city, and provide a crucial counter narrative to impressions of hoodoo as superstitious or primitive.

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<sup>99</sup> Fett, *Working Cures*, 2.

The narratives generated by New Orleans' hoodoo doctors attest to the prevalence of hoodoo in the city's African American community and the various ways in which it was used. The primary ways in which it functions—as a way avoid police harassment, to defend oneself against prosecution and prison, and as a healthcare system—suggest that hoodoo was a mechanism by which people coped with and resisted the effects of historical and systemic racism, poverty, and social inequity. It acted as a means to address racial and social imbalances of power and to regain control. Furthermore, the way in which hoodoo was integrated with believers' Christian faiths and often blended with more conventional methods of care, such as hiring legal aid or treating injuries with topical and herbal medicines, suggests that it was less an othered and isolated system of belief, and instead a set of practices which supplemented and interacted with other modes of faith, care, and healing. The diversity of reasons for which hoodoo was utilised, and the sophisticated and creative ways that doctors interpreted scenarios and prescribed rituals, also demonstrates the complexity of it both as a set of practices and a belief system. This collection represents one of the first occasions in which hoodooists were afforded the space to generate their own narratives about the beliefs and practices that informed their world and their testimony presents conjure as a powerful tool of resistance, survival, and power.

## **Chapter 4: Ishmael Reed, Neo-HooDoo, and the Challenge for Cultural Sovereignty**

The publication of Hyatt's collection, over thirty years after the fieldwork was completed, came at a moment when academic and popular interest in hoodoo peaked again and when discourse on African-based belief systems was shifting. Evidence of this revitalised interest and flowering of work on hoodoo can be found within Hyatt's letters as well as in the literature and popular culture of this period. As part of Gates' planned one-volume publication, he had contacted novelist and poet Ishmael Reed to write a foreword for the collection. In his letter to Oxford University Press, Gates wrote: 'Ishmael Reed, in addition, who has used Hoodoo as a sustained metaphoric system in his fiction, has willingly agreed to write a "Foreword" for our volume, [and] offers a "legitimacy" of another, important sort.'<sup>1</sup> Gates also told Hyatt that Reed 'knows of your work, and draws on it from libraries for his novels.'<sup>2</sup> By the mid-1970s Reed had published several works of fiction and poetry which, as Gates states, employed hoodoo as a metaphoric system. Amongst other African American artists and writers, Reed drew on the works of folklorists like Hurston and Hyatt to once again rescript African-based beliefs in the wake of black liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s.

Conducting an examination of Ishmael Reed's writing that is informed by what he calls the Neo-HooDoo literary aesthetic, this chapter will explore how images of African-based beliefs evolved in the wake of political change and in the context of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. It will first examine Reed's poems 'Neo-HooDoo Manifesto' and 'The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic' from his 1972

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence from Henry Louis Gates Jr to Harry Hyatt, 4 May 1976, Box 2, Folder 1, HHC, QUA.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

collection entitled *Conjure*, as well as interviews with Reed, to determine how he conceptualises hoodoo in the 1970s, paying particular attention to continuities and differences between representations that appeared during the earlier twentieth-century wave and the latter of which Reed's work is a significant part. This chapter will then shift to discuss Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, also published in 1972, in which the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic is most visible in Reed's fiction.

Shelley Ingram argues that Reed's novel is often overlooked in terms of its valuable insights into folklore and African American culture. She claims that *Mumbo Jumbo* as an example of metafiction, being a novel that overtly acknowledges its own constructedness, should be read as an ethnographic text. The novel, she says 'embraces what many critics of new ethnography feared – techniques that complicate the distinction between reality and fiction [...]'<sup>3</sup> Building on Ingram's position, this chapter examines *Mumbo Jumbo* as an ethnographic text that blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality and proposes that Reed's Neo-HooDoo aesthetic informs these generic and formal choices. It will argue that this aesthetic is used as means to protest and challenge white cultural hegemony; promote ideas about multiculturalism; and to advocate for freedom of individual expression and cultural sovereignty. It will consider theoretical perspectives from scholars of Afrofuturism to argue that Reed looks back to ancient Egyptian mythology and to more recent moments in African American history such as the Harlem Renaissance to prophesize a multicultural future and aesthetic. It will also claim that, taking a cue from Hurston whom he called 'our theoretician', Reed utilises hoodoo as a mode of cultural

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<sup>3</sup> Shelley Ingram, "'To Ask Again': Folklore, *Mumbo Jumbo*, and the Question of Ethnographic Metafictions," *African American Review* 45, no. ½ (2012): 183. New ethnography is described by Ingram as the set of ideas laid out in James Clifford and George E. Marcus' *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1986) that call for an acknowledgement of the fictiveness of seemingly objective works of ethnography and spur scholars to theorize the process of writing ethnography.

expression and a means to reconnect with and celebrate African and African American culture.<sup>4</sup> Where scholars such as Christopher Douglas have highlighted Reed's use of African "survivals" and Alondra Nelson has identified his revival of old technologies in *Mumbo Jumbo*, I further propose that by drawing on historical stories and artefacts and regenerating, repurposing, and temporally repositioning them in the novel, the author himself functions as a conjuror. In examining Reed's writing, this chapter claims that the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic has a dual function: it looks back to the past through the lens of hoodoo to recover historical and mythological stories about African cultures and using those perspectives, it prophesizes a present and future that celebrates multicultural, African diasporic identities and beliefs and offers a praxis for navigating contemporary racial politics.

### The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic

In the 1960s and early 1970s Ishmael Reed began to develop what he calls the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic. *Conjure*, a collection of poems published in 1972, is the first occasion where Reed conceptualises this new literary aesthetic and maps out its principles. In the foreword, Reed describes the context in which he wrote the collection and the influences upon him in relation to specific poems. He mentions poets he studied at college including William Yeats, Ezra Pound, and William Blake and points to his time at the Umbra Workshop, a collective of black writers 'which began the current inflorescence of "Black poetry" as well as many other recent Afro-American styles of writing.'<sup>5</sup> Reed also states that some of the poems were 'written

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<sup>4</sup> Ishmael Reed, "The Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetic," in *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972)

<sup>5</sup> Reed, "Foreword," in *Conjure*, vii.

under pure inspiration as if the loas were whispering in [his] ear.’<sup>6</sup> What comes out of the foreword is a picture of the circumstances that Reed formulated the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic under: the influences of his education studying European authors; being part of a group of African American writers that grew out of a Black Nationalist literary organisation in New York City; and experiencing a connection to African spirituality. After mentioning the influence of white poets on one of the poems in the collection, Reed remarks, ‘Excuse me. I know that it’s white culture. I was a dupe, I confess.’<sup>7</sup> This irreverent apology to the reader premises the tone of the collection and purpose of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic: it protests white cultural hegemony and promotes the notion of cultural sovereignty.

The aesthetic is most clearly mapped out in the poem ‘Neo-HooDoo Manifesto’, which Reed describes as ‘the first attempt to define ancient Afro-American HooDoo as a contemporary art form.’<sup>8</sup> The first line of the poem declares that ‘Neo-HooDoo is a “Lost American Church” updated’ that has its origins in what Reed believes is a lost or suppressed belief system, a fate that a number of scholars claim met African religious beliefs brought to the United States under slavery.<sup>9</sup> Echoing Hurston’s assertion that hoodoo is a “suppressed religion”, Reed’s project to update hoodoo and reimagine it as a mode of art is largely a project engaged in the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>9</sup> Reed, “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto,” in *Conjure*, 20. Katrina Hazzard-Donald in particular argues that as a result of the trauma and oppression endured by enslaved people, hoodoo ‘made adaptations necessary for its own survival’, resulting in the decline and loss of many traditions and its status as ‘a full-blown religion.’ She also argues that this loss was spurred in the mid-twentieth century when practitioners began to turn more frequently to “mail order” or “snake-oil” magic. Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’*, 60 and 2 respectively. Similarly, as discussed in the previous chapters, FWP writers, Hurston, and Hyatt felt that they had missed the ‘Golden Age’ of conjure which suggests that there was a consensus amongst those who have conducted research on hoodoo, both in the past and in the contemporary moment, that traditions had faded and some were indeed lost.



work of recovery. He looks back to past hoodoo traditions and practices and identifies their analogues in the contemporary moment:

Neo-HooDoo is the 8 basic dances of 19-century New Orleans' Place Congo – the Calinda the/ Bamboula the Chacta the Babouille the Conjaille the Juba the/ Congo and the VooDoo – modernized into the Philly Dog, the/ Hully Gully, the Funky Chicken, the Popcorn, the Boogaloo/ and the dance of great American choreographer Buddy Bradley.<sup>10</sup>

Referring to the gatherings of enslaved and free people of colour on Sundays in New Orleans' Congo Square in the nineteenth century that were discussed in chapter one, Reed sees Neo-HooDoo as an art that has evolved over time and that can trace its history back to New Orleans during the era of slavery. He sees the 'updated' version of these nineteenth-century hoodoo dances in the dances of contemporary African American performers including The Olympics and James Brown who popularized the Philly Dog, the Hully Gully and others as mentioned by Reed. Similarly, he looks back to stories of famous hoodoo priestesses such as Marie Laveau and Tituba, an enslaved woman known as the black witch of Salem, to suggest that their practices live on in the contemporary moment:

HooDoo is the strange and beautiful “fits” the Black slave/ Tituba gave the children of Salem. (Notice the arm waving/ ecstatic females seemingly possessed at the “Pentecostal,” “Baptist,” and “Rock Festivals,” [all fronts for Neo-HooDoo]).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Reed, “The Neo-HooDoo Manifesto,” 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Reed sees these contemporary dances and expressions of faith, which he labels Neo-HooDoo, as expressions of African and African American history, tradition, and culture that have survived, evolved, and modernized with the times. The recovery and expression of African-based heritage and culture is at the core of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic. 'Neo-HooDoo Manifesto' states:

Whereas at the center of Christianity lies the graveyard the/ organ-  
drone and the cross. The center of Neo-HooDoo is the/ drum the anhk  
and the Dance. So Fine, Barefootin, Heard it/ Through The  
Grapevine, are all Neo-HooDoos.<sup>12</sup>

Just as he sees the dances of modern African American artists as an expression of Neo-HooDoo, so Reed identifies the music of Robert Parker and Marvin Gaye as examples of Neo-HooDoo. Like the popular dances of this era, Reed suggests that music, as a form of Neo-HooDoo, transmits African American experience and legacy. He also mentions the anhk, the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph that represents life, as central to the aesthetic. This references Reed's belief that Neo-HooDoo traces its origins back to ancient Egypt. Where the drum and the dance are expressions of African-based cultures, the anhk represents African history and mythology. The Neo-HooDoo aesthetic, like the goals of various Black Power leaders and groups, is concerned with developing a consciousness and awareness amongst contemporary African American peoples about a longer African history. As Kwame Ture stated, and as many leaders in the movement concurred, 'it was absolutely essential that

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

black people know this history.’<sup>13</sup> For Reed, this meant looking back to ancient Egypt.

Joyce Ann Joyce suggests that one of the main challenges for African-centered writers and scholars is being confronted with the belief held by Europeans and Anglo-Americans that Greek culture marks the beginning of Western civilization.<sup>14</sup> Instead Joyce argues that this is a ‘mangled and badly falsified history’ that has denied ‘the African influence on Greek culture’ and has caused ‘many intellectuals [to] still resist the fact that ancient Egypt was essentially an African society and that much of what is venerated in Greek culture and in Christianity is thus of African origin.’<sup>15</sup> Reed pushes back against this Eurocentric view of civilisation and instead advocates that ancient Egypt was an African society and that it is to there that African American artists must look to reclaim a lost, ‘mangled and badly falsified’ heritage. Joyce suggests that challenging this Eurocentric conception ‘shatters the myth of white superiority.’<sup>16</sup>

This perspective becomes evident in ‘Neo-HooDoo Manifesto’, in which Reed emphasises that ancient Egypt was an African civilisation and argues that hoodoo originated in ancient Egypt. Reed claims that people of African descent and hoodooists in particular, can trace their heritage back to the pharaohs and ancient Egyptian gods. He claims that the music of contemporary African American jazz and

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<sup>13</sup> Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 38-9.

<sup>14</sup> Joyce uses the term “African-centered” in opposition to the more commonly used “Afrocentric”, which she suggests comes under the same criticism as the term “Black aesthetic”. African-centered on the other hand, aligns much more closely to Reed’s aesthetic – it allows for the recognition of multiple cultural influences but a clear emphasis is placed on what Reed identifies as the most prominent part (the African part) of his heritage without implying a separation of cultures as “Afrocentric” or “Black aesthetic” does. She claims that Reed, along with Henry Dumas, are the only two fiction writers whose ‘art is the language, rhythm, thought patterns, feelings and spirituality of African-American culture put into words.’ Joyce Ann Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurors and Priests: Defining African-centered Literary Criticism* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994), 259.

<sup>15</sup> Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurors and Priests*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

blues artists had been ‘heard before in Egypt’ and there was ‘probably a mixture of Sun Ra and Jimmy Reed played in the nightclub district of ancient Egypt’s “The Domain of Osiris”.’<sup>17</sup> Neo-HooDoo, he says, ‘borrows from Ancient Egypt as well as Haiti, Africa, and South America.’<sup>18</sup> Reed suggests that the African diaspora spread across numerous continents and nations can all trace their heritage back to an African ancient Egypt and that the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic is a way in which African diasporic populations can connect with each other. He reminds the reader in the Foreword: ‘Egypt is located in Africa, you know, even though certain Western Civ. fanatics pretend that it lay in the suburbs of Berlin.’<sup>19</sup> Here, Reed criticises the view that ancient Egypt was not an African society, using satire to suggest that proponents of this view would even go as far as to claim that Egypt was a European civilisation. By incorporating the narrative of ancient Egypt as an African civilisation, a thread that reappears in Reed’s fiction, the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic recovers and centres African traditions and heritage.

The ahnk that Reed mentions is at the core of Neo-HooDoo is a symbol of life and is another important aspect of the aesthetic because Reed’s descriptions often suggest that Neo-HooDoo is a living force:

Neo-HooDoo is a litany seeking its text

Neo-HooDoo is a Dance and Music closing in on its words

Neo-HooDoo is a Church finding its lyrics<sup>20</sup>

Neo-HooDoo is a spirit, or to borrow Joyce’s phrase ‘the spirituality of African-American culture’, that at this pivotal moment in African American history is

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<sup>17</sup> Reed, “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto,” 24.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>19</sup> Reed, “Foreword,” vii.

<sup>20</sup> Reed, “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto,” 25.

resurfacing and becoming more visible.<sup>21</sup> Reed claims that Neo-HooDoo at this point has only been able to take the form of dance and music and now, in the 1970s, it is seeking expression through the written word. Here, Neo-HooDoo as the expression of African American culture and heritage, is seeking a new form and the 1970s marks a moment when Reed sees this change.

Central to the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic is also the idea that artists had complete autonomy over the work that they created. It promotes the idea that artists should have the ability to improvise, experiment, and bring their own cultures and heritages into their art. 'Neo-HooDoo Manifesto' states that 'Neo-HooDoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist a priest. You can bring your own creative ideas to Neo-HooDoo.'<sup>22</sup> This freedom for artists to embrace their own style and culture and to use that to assert autonomy over the art that they create is one of the central tenets of Neo-HooDoo. For Reed, the essence of Neo-HooDoo is the celebration of difference and variation, and the freedom to artistically express those differences.

In a poem entitled 'The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic', Reed recites the recipes for Gombo Févi and Gombo Filé, local Louisiana dishes that combine French, Spanish, and Cajun culinary traditions. As the poem suggests, Gombo (or Gumbo) has many different variations that depend on what ingredients are included and the method in which they are cooked. Similarly to the fluidity of hoodoo practices as observed by Harry Hyatt, the recipe and the accompanying instructions are not rigid; ingredients and quantities vary depending on availability and taste. Reed's recipe for Gombo Févi is as follows:

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<sup>21</sup> Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurors and Priests*, 259.

<sup>22</sup> Reed, "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto," 21.

A whole chicken – if chicken cannot be/ had, veal will serve instead;  
a little ham;/ crabs, or shrimps, or both, according to the/ taste of the  
consumer; okra according to the quantity of soup needed; onions,  
garlic, parsley/ red pepper, etc. Thicken with plenty of rice./ (Don't  
forget to cut up the gombo or okra.)<sup>23</sup>

As the recipe illustrates, Gombo is a dish characterised by improvisation and experimentation. The cook has autonomy over the work that they produce and the freedom to adjust the quantities of ingredients depending on their own individual needs and environment. This recipe acts as a metaphor for the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic and the ingredients represent the different cultures that influence artists and produce diverse, multicultural art.

Similarly, in 'Neo-HooDoo Manifesto', Reed claims that 'The Neo-HooDoo cuisine is Geechee Gree Gree Verta's Mae's *Vibration Cooking*', referring to Verta Mae's cookbook/biography of the same title.<sup>24</sup> In the introduction, Mae shares that she cooks 'by vibration', instead of following a strict recipe and measuring ingredients, and she uses 'different strokes for different folks', telling her readers to 'do your thing your way.'<sup>25</sup> The 'Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic', like Mae's philosophy, emphasises the sovereignty of the cook over the food they create, the artist over their art: 'The proportions of ingredients used depend upon the cook!'<sup>26</sup> The aesthetic rejects uniformity and supports the right of artists to reflect their own cultures and bring their own styles to their art.

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<sup>23</sup> Reed, "The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic," 26.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>25</sup> Verta Mae, *Vibration Cooking: Or, the Travel Notes of GeeChee Girl* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, [1970] 2011), xxxvii.

<sup>26</sup> Reed, "The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic," 26.

This idea of freedom to incorporate the artists' preferences and responses to their environment into their art echoes what Hyatt found when conducting his hoodoo research in New Orleans and what Bell later theorized about the nature and structure of hoodoo performance in his doctoral thesis. As discussed in the previous chapter, Hyatt and Bell believed that there was a deep underlying structure to hoodoo ritual and Hyatt observed that the best doctors he encountered were able to improvise a ritual to suit any novel situation.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, after studying data from the Hyatt collection to investigate the structure of hoodoo performances, Bell concludes that practitioners are afforded a significant amount of choice over their individual performances.<sup>28</sup> Both suggest that hoodoo comprises an underlying structure but that individual practitioners are afforded the freedom to adapt and improvise their rituals to suit different environments and needs. Bell articulates the sovereignty of the hoodooist and their ability to experiment and improvise freely:

Like the cook—or the bluesman—or the speaker of a natural language—the hoodoo practitioner is able to generate unique performances, but still remain coherent and understandable—still perceived as using hoodoo by those who know—so long as he holds to the rules of the communication source to which he is referring. He can be creative without being whimsical, and the traditional system of hoodoo can be adaptable without being amorphous.<sup>29</sup>

This freedom in performance afforded to the hoodoo practitioner is mirrored in the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic. Though the appearance of the performance or the art may change, update, and modernize with the times, it still remains recognisable as Neo-

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<sup>27</sup> Hyatt, *Hoodoo* Volume 5, II.

<sup>28</sup> Bell, *Pattern, Structure, and Logic in Afro-American Hoodoo Performance*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

HooDoo. Thus, Reed draws on hoodoo's principles of individuality, diversity, and freedom of expression, as observed by Hyatt and Bell, and incorporates them into this 'updated' version of hoodoo.

Reed was writing at a time when there was a flourishing of African American art that, like the Harlem Renaissance, was part of a wider movement that called for black cultural, political, and economic self-determination. Larry Neal, a key theorist in the Black Arts Movement, explains:

The Black Arts and Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. [...] A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for black people to define the world in their own terms. The black artist has made the same point in the context of aesthetics. The two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas – one black, one white.<sup>30</sup>

This explanation exemplifies the reasons that Reed has an irresolute relationship with the Black Arts Movement. As Neal posits, the Black Arts and Black Power movements recognised and pushed for black people to have the right to live self-determined lives. This tenet aligns with one of the central tenets of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic: that the artist should have the freedom to determine their own aesthetic, experiment and improvise, and bring their own individual identity to it. However, Reed developed Neo-HooDoo as part of an international, multicultural aesthetic and not a nationalist as in the Black Arts' view. Reed recognises the significance of the

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<sup>30</sup> Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 1, no. 4 (1968) 29-39; reprinted in Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, eds., *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989), 62.



movement as part of a larger effort to promote the work of non-white artists but remains ambivalent towards the nationalist values that were often incorporated into the works of Black Arts' writers. In a 1995 interview, Reed acknowledged the "blow" that the Black Arts struck for non-white writers in America:

I think what Black Arts did was inspire a whole lot of Black people to write. Moreover, there would be no multiculturalism movement without Black Arts. Latinos, Asian Americans, and others all say they began writing as a result of the example of the 1960s. Blacks gave the example that you don't have to assimilate. You could do your own thing, get into your own background, your own history, your own tradition and your own culture. I think the challenge is for cultural sovereignty and Black Arts struck a blow for that.<sup>31</sup>

As part of progressive process towards artistic freedom and rejection of a dominantly white American canon, Reed hails the Black Arts movement for the example that was set in resisting and challenging white cultural hegemony. He envisions the role of the Black Arts movement as a precursor to what he calls the multicultural movement. The Black Arts movement's challenge for cultural sovereignty and promotion of black art as something independent of and separate from the dominantly white artistic canon coincides with Neo-HooDoo's promotion of autonomy and the freedom to incorporate the artists' culture(s) into their art. Neil Schmitz suggests that this challenge to white cultural hegemony is the essence of Neo-HooDoo, describing it as, '...rather a characteristic stance, a mythological provenance, a behaviour, a complex of attitudes, the retrieval of an idiom, but

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<sup>31</sup> Ishmael Reed quoted in William L. Andrews et al, eds., *Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 70.

however broadly defined, Neo-Hoodoo does manifest one constant and unifying refrain: Reed's fiercely professed alienation from Anglo-American literature.<sup>32</sup> It is the resistance to the dominance of Anglo-American literature in American culture that the Black Arts symbolises that Reed values, but the nationalistic and sometimes essentialist attitudes endorsed by prominent writers of the Black Arts Movement is problematic for Reed.

Instead, Reed proposes a more inclusive rather than separatist aesthetic, an attitude which ultimately marginalised him from the Black Arts Movement. To many, including Reed, the "Black aesthetic" is a limiting and exclusive label. It suggests that there is only one mode of blackness and does not appreciate the diversity within African American art, literature, and culture. The Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic promotes diversity and challenges monolithic, essentialist conceptions of African American identity and aesthetic, instead proposing that 'the West's Afro-American aesthetic...is multicultural – it's not black. [...] That's the beauty of Neo-Hoodooism: there are European influences in my work, as well as African, Native-American, Afro-American, and that's what Neo-Hoodoo is all about – '<sup>33</sup> Reed uses the Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic, a reimagining of a folk tradition, to resist ideas about essential or fundamentalist black identity. This sentiment is expressed in 'Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto'. It states that:

Neo-Hoodoo never turns down/pork. In fact Neo-Hoodoo is the Bar-B-Cue of Amerika.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Neil Schmitz, "Neo-Hoodoo: The Experimental Fiction of Ishmael Reed," *Twentieth Century Literature* 20, no.2 (1974): 127.

<sup>33</sup> Reginald Martin, "A Conversation with Ishmael Reed," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4, no.2 (1984), Accessed 20 May 2019, <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-ishmael-reed-by-reginald-martin/>

<sup>34</sup> Reed, "The Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetic," 22.

In other words, Neo-HooDoo is not Black Nationalist or Black Separatist. Referring to the emergence of groups like the Nation of Islam and the conversion to Islam by a number of prominent black nationalists, including Amiri Baraka, Malcolm X, and Sufi Abdul Hamid, Neo-HooDoo's rejection of excluding pork is a metaphor for Reed's rejection of Black Nationalist values. Moving away from the values of integrationists like Dr King, groups like the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party promoted Black Nationalist values. While still advocating for racial solidarity as integrationists did, these groups differed in that they sought solidarity through self-determination and separation from white society. According to Jeffrey Ogbar, the Nation of Islam is 'in the strictest meaning a nationalist organization' due to their demands for the creation of a black nation state in North America or Africa and their building of black institutions and businesses including schools, supermarkets, and farms.<sup>35</sup> Ogbar highlights a key difference between these groups: where the Black Panthers and Black Power movement identified the renewal and celebration of black popular culture as central to black liberation, the Nation of Islam condemned it.<sup>36</sup> Challenging this condemnation and in his rejection of strict Black Nationalist values as held by the Nation of Islam, Reed declares that Neo-HooDoo is 'the Bar-B-Cue of Amerika', it is accepting of all meats and all cultures. It is inclusive and diverse, in direct opposition to Black Nationalist ideology.

Instead, the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic is a result of a multitude of influences and an experiment in creating a new art form that paid homage to Reed's African heritage, multicultural background, and American experiences. He describes the visibility of multiple cultural influences in his work thus:

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<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

The Afro-American material I use is part of an international aesthetic that blends in with other cultures very easily. It's absorptive. [...] In this hemisphere there are whites who are members of syncretic religions, Afro-American, Native American, Euro-American religions in Brazil and other places. You have pictures of whites running temples or whites who have become possessed by black loas. African mythological systems get along very well with Euro-American ideas and Native American ideas... Indians, black gods, the saints. So what I'm dealing with is a multi-cultural aesthetic of which the Afro-American part may be the strongest part because that is my strongest heritage, which is Native American and Irish-American as well.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly to the ways in which the authors who precede this chapter observed the blending of African-based cultures and belief systems with others in New Orleans, or indeed their being "rubbed off" by contact with white culture as Hurston suggested, Reed sees the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic as the product of an amalgamation of cultures and heritages. But moving beyond the observations made by Hurston and Hyatt, Reed adopts the blending of cultures found in hoodoo as a guiding principle for his literary aesthetic. He uses it both to look back on an African-centred past and to look outward to a multicultural present.

*Conjure*, particularly 'Neo-HooDoo Manifesto' and 'The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic', acts as a site of experimentation and improvisation in which Reed maps out the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic. It draws on the historical uses, functions, and qualities of hoodoo in an effort to modernize and 'update' the spirit of the belief

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Nazareth, "An Interview with Ishmael Reed," in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, ed. Bruce Dick and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 187-8.

system. Where hoodoo is a set of religious beliefs and practices responsive to the political and social needs of African Americans, Neo-HooDoo is the expression of African American culture, heritage, and tradition. It emphasises cultural sovereignty and the notion that artists should have complete freedom over the art that they create. Moreover, it encourages artists to incorporate their own cultural heritage, influences, and experiences into their art, promoting multiculturalism and rejecting Nationalist ideology and notions of uniformity. For Reed, this manifests as an African-centred aesthetic that reconnects with, reclaims, and celebrates his African ancestry which he says is the strongest part of his heritage. I now turn to an examination of Reed's 1972 novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, in which he puts the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic into practice.

### Experimenting with the Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic in *Mumbo Jumbo*

#### I. Towards Multiculturalism

*Mumbo Jumbo* is set in 1920s New York City and follows the outbreak of an epidemic called Jes Grew, described in the novel as 'a disease, a plague, but in fact it is an anti-plague.'<sup>38</sup> Jes Grew can briefly be explained as the spirit of African American culture. It is described in the novel as a plague or disease because those who represent white western culture view it as a threat to their cultural dominance but Reed sees it as an antidote to notions of cultural hegemony, an anti-plague. The name alludes to James Weldon Johnson's use of the phrase to describe the propagation of Ragtime music; he stated in the preface to the *Book of American*

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<sup>38</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, [1972] 1996), 33.

*Negro Poetry* that ‘the earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, “jes’ grew.”’<sup>39</sup> Now characterised as an anti-plague, Jes Grew is the embodiment of African American art, music, and culture. It is responsible for the creation of jazz as well as various dances and is spread by black artists known as Jes Grew Carriers, or JGCs. Jes Grew, Reed suggests, manifests itself at three crucial moments: in the Ragtime songs of the late nineteenth century; during the Harlem Renaissance when the main action of novel takes place; and we are told in the epilogue that it appears once again in the 1970s. Reed’s Jes Grew not only coincides with these pivotal moments in African American cultural output, it both is, and is responsible for, the flourishing of African American art and culture during these times.

The reason that the 1890s Jes Grew flair-up declined was due to its inability to “find its Text”. In order for Jes Grew to thrive and survive, it must be translated from dance or music into written word; Reed asks, ‘for what good is a liturgy without a text?’ Instead of cementing its position in American culture, as Gates says, ‘the power of Jes Grew was allowed to peter out...because it found no literary texts to contain, define, interpret, and thereby will it to the subsequent black cultures.’<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Weldon Johnson reminisces on the last “jes’ grew songs” and their existence in the imagination rather than in print, stating ‘the words were unprintable, but the tune was irresistible, and belonged to nobody.’<sup>41</sup> Described in the same way as Neo-HooDoo in ‘Neo-HooDoo Manifesto’, during the 1890s flair up of Jes Grew, primary symptoms included dancing ‘the Bamboula the Chacta the Babouille the

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<sup>39</sup> James Weldon Johnson, “Preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry (1922),” in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 428.

<sup>40</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 224.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, “Preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry (1922),” 428.

Counjaille the Juba the Congo and the Voodoo.’<sup>42</sup> The second outbreak also appears as dance and music originating in New Orleans and sweeping up America until it finally reaches Chicago and New York City, prompting a flurry of activity in Harlem particularly. Gates suggests that there are specific tropes in African American literary traditions that recur frequently including the ‘vertical “ascent” from South to North.’<sup>43</sup> *Jes Grew* mirrors this trope, echoing the journey that many African Americans made from the rural South to the urban North during this period, confirming that *Jes Grew* is a characterisation of African American culture and that the outbreak symbolises the flourishing of African American culture during the 1920s.

During the second outbreak that the novel is primarily focused upon, several characters embark on a mission to help *Jes Grew* find its Text and its permanent, visible place in American culture. This effort is spearheaded by houngan PaPa LaBas and his ally, Black Herman, who are united against a group known as The Wallflower Order, an international organisation aligned with the Knights’ Templar that seek to control the output of culture and are doing everything in their power to suppress the outbreak and destroy *Jes Grew*. PaPa LaBas is a modern day conjurer and the owner of the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral, a business and place of worship. He is the son of a man who ran a successful mail-order Root business and someone who ‘carries *Jes Grew* in him like most other folk carry genes.’<sup>44</sup> His name is a synonym for the loa more commonly known as Papa Legba. Found in both New Orleans Voodoo and Haitian Vodou, Papa Legba/LaBas acts as an intermediary between the material world and the spirit world and is one of the most important loa in the

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<sup>42</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxv.

<sup>44</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 23.

pantheon. PaPa LaBas is Reed's own Neo-HooDoo priest like those described in 'Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto'. He draws on 'Black astrology, charts, herbs, potions, candles, talismans,' along with a strict regime of feeding the Haitian loas, 'to create his own version of The Work'.<sup>45</sup> Taking his organization from 'Haitian VooDoo...following the traditions of VooDoo but modifying and changing the ceremonies and rituals in various ways,' he is an agent of creative freedom who is devoted to impeding the Wallflower Order's plot to 'bleach [Jes Grew's] blackness and neutralize its force.'<sup>46</sup>

Christopher Douglas frames PaPa LaBas and his Voodooism as African survivals in Reed's novel. He suggests that Reed looks back explicitly to Hurston's anthropological work in the United States and the Caribbean as a source for formulating cultural continuity and for 'the substance of that continuity', proposing that LaBas is based on the hoodoo practitioners found in Hurston's *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* as her work is cited in the bibliography of the novel.<sup>47</sup> Stressing the importance of Hurston's research to Reed's writing, he claims that Hurston was concerned with theorizing continuity and that '[her] model of culture at first seems to allow Reed to understand Jes Grew as a set of cultural retentions in contemporary African American life that trace back to African origins.'<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Reed uses the language of survivals or retentions himself in his short essay on Neo-HooDoo as a literary aesthetic. Offering a long history of HooDoo, he says: 'Kidnapped by bandits from North America, they [enslaved people] became HooDoo men, maintaining the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>46</sup> Reed, "The Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto," 21 and Schmitz, "Neo-Hoodoo: The Experimental Fiction of Ishmael Reed," 135, respectively.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2009), 261. It also seems likely that given the content of the correspondence between Reed, Gates, and Hyatt as discussed in the previous chapter and at the beginning of this chapter, that Reed also drew on material from Harry Hyatt's *Hoodoo* collection to inform the content of *Mumbo Jumbo*.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 266-7.



faith of the old religion' and later claims that despite the imposition of Christianity on enslaved people 'fragments of the old religion remained intact' and could be heard in the subversive music of New Orleans jazz.<sup>49</sup> Douglas however claims that Hurston and Reed ultimately view survivals through different lenses: Hurston grounds the notion of African survivals in culture but he argues that Reed 'ultimately ground[s] African American [...] retentions in race, thus erasing the hard-won conceptual disengagement from culture that had been the orthodoxy for Hurston...'<sup>50</sup> Though Reed is concerned with racial politics and particularly with challenging white cultural hegemony, he does not see race and culture as discrete categories as Douglas suggests or more specifically, it does not seem that he sees cultural continuity as racial. Rather, Reed is concerned with protesting binary categories of race and promoting the idea that both race and culture should be viewed as categories that can accommodate multiple identities and influences. Reed's multiculturalist politics means that he does not view the religious or cultural practices that Hurston observes in the U.S. and in the Caribbean as practices which can be reduced to a single racial or cultural descriptor. Rather, Reed's Neo-HooDoo is characterised by its presence in multiple cultures and nations, and by identifying cultural and religious continuities across the diaspora, through its ability to connect multicultural and multiracial populations. He sees the fluid and adaptable religious practices that Hurston observed as a way to challenge binary conceptions of race and culture. Pitting the monotheistic Christianity represented by the Wallflower Order against LaBas' polytheistic Voodoo, Reed uses these competing faiths as a symbol of the challenge that multiculturalism makes to Anglo-American cultural sovereignty and as a paradigm for navigating contemporary racial and cultural politics.

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<sup>49</sup> Ishmael Reed, "Can a Metronome Know the Thunder or Summon a God?: The New Literary Neo-HooDooism," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr. (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 381.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism*, 261.

Reed also cautions against Black Nationalist ideologies or indeed any notion of culture that promotes uniformity. Jeffrey Ebbeson states this position thus:

He [Reed] actually wants to rethink the West's whole notion of unity, be it unity of self, unity authorship, textual identity, or some version of racial identity which encourages uniformity, repressing both difference and multiplicity. Reed believes such notions mark the (white) west's victorious erasure of blackness from history. Likewise, attempts by black thinkers to devise a unitary African-American identity – authorial or otherwise – are equally doomed, for they merely repeat the original western error.<sup>51</sup>

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed uses the character Abdul Hamid, based on the preacher and black Islamic convert Sufi Abdul Hamid, to illustrate the dangers of fundamentalist ideologies that promote ideas about cultural and racial uniformity. Hamid is the only person who can translate the key to “The Book of Thoth”, an essential step in finding Jes Grew's Text, but he is also the one who burns it. After finding Hamid dead in his home, PaPa LaBas and Black Herman take on the role of detectives and run all over the city to find the Book before the Wallflower Order. They believe that The Book is hidden and buried in a box underneath the Cotton Club, but they soon find that Hamid destroyed it. They later receive a letter from Hamid explaining his viewpoint on the outbreak and why he burned it:

Hopefully one day all of us will be able to express a variety of opinions, styles, and values, LaBas, but for now we need a strong man, someone to “whip these coons into line.” Let the freedom of

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<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey Ebbeson, *Postmodernism and Its Others: The Fiction of Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker, and Don DeLillo* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 15.

culture come later. I know this sounds contradictory but I don't have God's mind yet!

I really wanted you and Herman to see this book, *The Book of Thoth*, but now you won't have a chance...for I have burned it!! It has gone up in smoke!!

When I translated it I didn't give it too much thought but now that I have had a chance to read it over a few times, I have decided that black people could never have been involved in such a lewd, nasty, decadent thing as is depicted here.<sup>52</sup>

Hamid's letter reiterates some of the sentiments discussed by Hurston, Hughes, and Locke about censoring the diversity and vibrancy of black life in press, and the consistent reduction of black people and cultures to 'more a formula than a human being.'<sup>53</sup> Here, Hamid advocates for conformity and uses his own view of how black cultural material should appear to censor depictions of black people and culture. Babacar M'Baye points to Reed's satirical depiction of Abdul Hamid to demonstrate the complexity of Reed's attitudes towards Black Nationalism. M'Baye claims that Reed portrays Hamid as both a 'character whose multiculturalism celebrates the pluralism and eclecticism of Pan-African trickster figures' and 'as a figure whose overbearing and authoritarian attitudes towards race reflect a kind of despicable fundamentalism.'<sup>54</sup> This duality that Abdul Hamid represents — his ability to both translate the text and to solidify Jes Grew's presence and his decision to sabotage it — reflects Reed's own attitudes towards Black Nationalism. By giving Hamid the

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<sup>52</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 201-2.

<sup>53</sup> Alain Locke, "The New Negro (1925)," in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York, Penguin Books, 1994), 46-47.

<sup>54</sup> Babacar M'Baye, "The Trickster in Ishmael Reed's Dualistic Representations of Black Radicalism and Nationalism in *Mumbo Jumbo*," *The Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 10, no.1 (2016): 115.

ability to translate the Book of Thoth, Reed credits him and the Black Nationalism that he represents with the challenge to white hegemony that this movement made but the act of burning it symbolises Reed's view that this singular outlook is problematic and ultimately self-destructive. It also suggests that these views are just as detrimental to black culture as the efforts of the Wallflower Order and that both groups have shared goals to suppress black cultural expression. Additionally, the ultimate disappearance of Jes Grew as a result of Hamid's actions during the 1920s serves as a warning to contemporary black fundamentalists and nationalists that their exclusive perspectives are damaging and inevitably hinder progress towards a multicultural present and future.

## II. *Mumbo Jumbo* as a text of resistance

Outside the central plot, there are several sub-plots, interludes into re-imaginings of mythological stories, and the mingling of factual and fictional narratives that are also concerned with the oppression of culture and imbued with the spirit of resistance. For instance, as part of their mission to suppress the outbreak and to homogenize culture, the Wallflower Order seeks what they call a 'Talking Android', an African American who will be a proponent of white American over African American culture and who they believe will convince others to follow suit. The novel also tracks another organisation called the Mu'tifikah, a group of multinational and multicultural individuals who plot to return art that was looted from Africa, Asia, and South America that is currently being held at the 'Center of Art Detention', more commonly known as the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. The group's name is a play on "motherfucker" and perhaps a reference to the 1960s New York City based anarchist group first known as Black Mask and later as Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, taking their new name from a line of the poem 'Black People!'

by Amiri Baraka and often shortened to simply “The Motherfuckers”.<sup>55</sup> The Mu’tifikah and their mission to repatriate stolen art from various parts of the world, as well as the Wallflower Order’s plan to suppress black culture using a ‘Talking Android’, represent Reed’s criticism of Western cultural imperialism and reflect one of the central tenets of Neo-HooDoo; cultural sovereignty. The Wallflower Order represents the control of cultural expression and the dominance of white European writers and artists, while the actions of both PaPa LaBas and the Mu’tifikah illustrate the core principles of Neo-HooDoo and its resistance to cultural imperialism. Additionally, the way in which the Mu’tifikah is made up of individuals from a diverse range of racial and cultural backgrounds and that they are the ones who seek to, and are able to, disrupt and dismantle the power dynamics of the museum as a site of colonisation furthers Reed’s emphasis on Neo-HooDoo as a means resist cultural imperialism and promote the importance of multiculturalism. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Neo-HooDoo and characters that represent its principles act as sites of resistance to cultural imperialism. They illustrate Reed’s perspective that by resisting ideas of fundamentalism and nationalism, and instead celebrating multiculturalism, these power structures can be challenged.

Similarly, *Mumbo Jumbo* resists many of the formal conventions of the Western novel. Even before reading it, Reed signals to the reader that this text challenges the traditional aesthetics of the form. Flicking through the pages of *Mumbo Jumbo*, the reader is met with a bibliography consisting of over one hundred items and a number of the pages include footnotes, photographs, illustrations, and newspaper clippings. Frederic Jameson has categorised Reed as a postmodernist writer, and suggests that he belongs to a new movement that breaks with high

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<sup>55</sup> For more on “The Motherfuckers” see Osha Neumann, *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker: A Memoir of the ‘60s with Notes for Next Time* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008)

modernism and is instead ‘empirical, chaotic, and heterogeneous.’<sup>56</sup> *Mumbo Jumbo*’s use of pastiche, irony, and satire indeed signify its belonging to the postmodernist movement and in many ways this assessment is apt. While *Mumbo Jumbo*’s blending of fictional and non-fictional characters and events (such as the appearance of President Warren Harding and the newspaper clippings reporting the Haitian Revolution), intertextual references, and the overt acknowledgement of itself as publication do firmly place it in the category of a postmodernist text, it seems that Reed’s concerns go beyond breaking with the trends of high modernism. Rather, the postmodernist characteristics of Reed’s novel relate specifically to African and African American themes and concerns – for example, the appearance of Warren Harding in the novel alludes to the real rumour that he was the first African American president. Instead, Reed is concerned with connecting and collating fragmented pieces of African and African American cultural history.

As Shelley Ingram suggests, it is fruitful to read Reed’s novel as an ethnographic text as well as a postmodernist novel. She highlights the novel’s preoccupation with folklore, anthropological practices, cultural preservation, and Voudou as reasons why *Mumbo Jumbo* should be interpreted as an ethnographic text. Aside from the themes of the text, she also points to the novel’s metafictional self-consciousness as evidence of its embrace of “new ethnography” and the calls made by James Clifford and George E. Marcus for self-consciousness in ethnographic writing.<sup>57</sup> She argues then that *Mumbo Jumbo* can be read as a text that provides “partial truths” about race and culture. Anthropologist Ruth Behar also argues ‘it is no longer social scientists [...] who are shaping U.S. public

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<sup>56</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>57</sup> Ingram, “Folklore, *Mumbo Jumbo*, and the Question of Ethnographic Metafictions,” 183.

understanding of culture, race, and ethnicity, but novelists such as Toni Morrison and Amy Tan.<sup>58</sup> It seems apt then to consider Reed alongside Behar's list of woman novelists who are shaping public understandings of culture, race, and ethnicity. Taking *Mumbo Jumbo* then not only as a work of postmodernist fiction but as a text that transgresses the boundaries of discipline and form, and that draws on ethnography to offer account of race and culture, it is imperative to examine how Reed presents the material that he has gathered and why he presents it in the way that he does.

The images scattered throughout the novel are taken from a range of periods and serve to gather "artefacts" that depict African or African American themes. They portray African-centered art and people, as well as significant cultural moments in African American history such as a flyer for the Cotton Club and a photograph that depicts a protest in which a sign with the Black Panther Party logo and the slogan 'Free Huey' can be recognised (Fig 4.1). The novel acts as a site in which Reed looks back to the past and into the present in order to think about African-centered futures. Some of these images also serve to disrupt the temporal boundaries of the main plot and contribute to the aesthetic of resistance that runs throughout the text. For instance, the image below of the Black Panther protest comes from between the years 1967-1970 when Huey Newton was arrested and subsequently released from jail. Similarly, another diagram embedded in the text depicts the volume of U.S. bombing tonnage in the Vietnam War in comparison to that of World War Two and the Korean War (Fig. 4.2). There are also quotations from texts that are published

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<sup>58</sup> Ruth Behar, "Introduction: Out of Exile," in *Women Writing Culture*, eds. Deborah Gordon and Ruth Behar (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995), 20.

beyond the dates in which the main action of the novel is set that are embedded into the main body of the text, all disturbing the temporal boundaries of the text.<sup>59</sup>

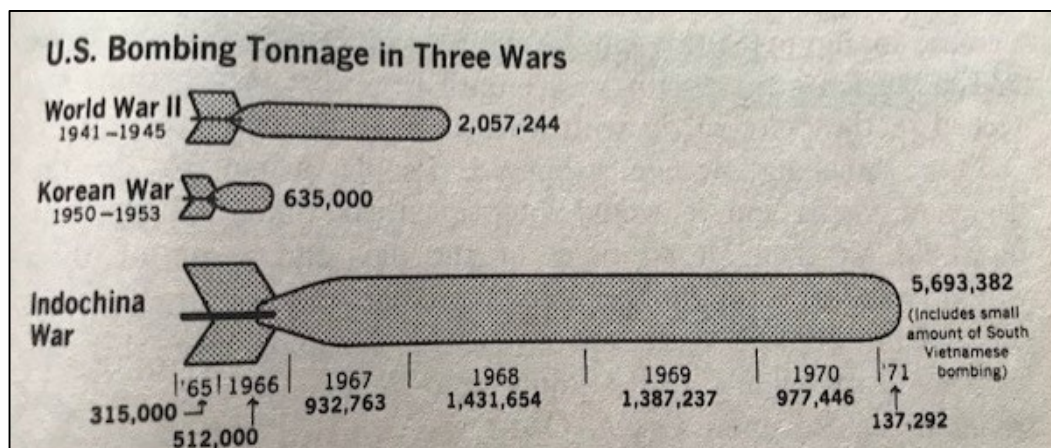


Fig. 4.1 and 4.2: Fred McDarrah [Black Panther protest] and [U.S. Bombing Tonnage in Three Wars] New York Times Company, 1971, in Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, [1972] 1996), 65 and 163.

The images above not only show realities from the future and present but each are concerned with challenging the status quo: they mirror Jes Grew and reflect Reed's resistance towards white political, cultural, and literary dominance. This resistance to the traditional form of the novel, the themes of resistance running

<sup>59</sup> For example Reed includes passages from Pennethorne Hughes, *Witchcraft* (1965), Francis Huxley, *The Invisibles: Voodoo Gods in Haiti* (1969), and Carl Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East* (1969) as well as numerous other citations from texts that appear beyond the chronological limits of the plot.



through the plot and sub-plots, as well as the images of resistance embedded within the text echoes the resistance that is found in historical uses of hoodoo. Reed imbues his text with the same spirit of resistance seen in the practices of hoodoo doctors decades earlier, configuring himself as a modern literary conjuror.

Reed however is not solely concerned with challenging white, western conventions but with critiquing the notion of conformity to tradition more generally: instead he encourages an aesthetic that promotes improvisation and individuality. Indeed, Gates argues that *Mumbo Jumbo* is not only a critique of Western literary forms but of black literary forms and conventions ‘and of the complex relationships between the two.’<sup>60</sup> In his seminal text, *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates posits a theory of ‘signifyin(g) that arises from [...] moments of self-reflexiveness.’<sup>61</sup> Signifyin(g) language is concerned with connotative and contextual meaning so only those who belong to a certain community, or who share cultural values and patterns in speech, are privy to the connotative meaning of signifyin(g) language. Signifyin(g) language is subversive and Gates argues that this tradition of signifyin(g) is inherent and implicit in African American literature.

The use of signifyin(g) language is one of the primary modes of signification in African American literature, but it also, as Gates suggests, ‘functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality within the African American literary tradition.’<sup>62</sup> He argues that Reed’s inclusion of images, along with references to other texts and literary figures ‘parodies and underscores our notions of intertextuality, present in all texts.’<sup>63</sup> By parodying this tradition in his literal

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<sup>60</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 221.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

replication of texts and images in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed is suggesting that while art does not have to conform to white literary conventions, it also does not have to conform to African American ones. This again emphasises one of the central tenets of Neo-HooDoo: that the artist should have the freedom to experiment and improvise. By employing the experimental nature of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic, Reed is advocating for artists not to assimilate to either black or white traditions but to bring their own culture(s) to their art.

### III. *Mumbo Jumbo* as an Afrofuturist text

Reed also uses these images of protest from his present (the future in the novel) and drops them into the past (the present in the novel) to disrupt the temporal framework of the text and to suggest that the challenges to the establishment that are happening in the era in which the novel is set will resurface in the future. Reed is concerned with connections between different moments and with exploring how the past can be used to inform a praxis for the present and future. As well as being categorised as a postmodernist and ethnographic text, *Mumbo Jumbo* has also been discussed as an Afrofuturist text. The term Afrofuturism first appeared when Mark Dery conducted an interview with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose in the early 1990s that explored the relationship between African American writers and science fiction. Dery proposes that Afrofuturism can broadly be defined as:

Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture – and, more generally African-American signification

that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, *Mumbo Jumbo* directly addresses African American themes and concerns throughout, most noticeably through the central plot to solidify Jes Grew (the spirit of African American culture) in American culture but also in several of the sub-plots as mentioned earlier. While *Mumbo Jumbo* does not offer a vision of a 'prosthetically enhanced future' it does appropriate various images as well as the language of technology throughout the novel including talk of the search for a Talking Android. Dery goes on to ask the question: 'Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its histories, imagine possible futures?'<sup>65</sup>

Alondra Nelson, along with a group of scholars who exchanged ideas in an online forum, did much of the work to map out Afrofuturism following the publication of Dery's interview in the 1990s. Their work culminated in a special issue of the journal *Social Text* which was introduced by Nelson in an essay entitled 'Future Texts'. Nelson opens her discussion of Afrofuturism around the notion of the digital divide – a term which refers to gaps in access to technology along the lines of race, gender, class, ability, and geographical location but that she suggests became shorthand for the inequities in access to technology between blacks and whites.<sup>66</sup> Historically, she observes that '[b]lackness gets constructed as always oppositional

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<sup>64</sup> Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber Culture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 180.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 1.

to technologically driven chronicles of progress.’<sup>67</sup> As the essays that comprise the issue demonstrate, Afrofuturism challenges this narrative of blackness being at odds with technology and constitutes African American voices with ‘other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come.’<sup>68</sup> *Mumbo Jumbo* as an afrofuturist text then is concerned with Dery’s and Nelson’s questions about imagining possible futures and the position of African American voices in these futures. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a project that is engaged in the work of historical and cultural recovery. Reed’s gathering of stories, images, and newspaper clippings from various periods come together in *Mumbo Jumbo* as a vehicle through which Reed prophesises about the future. In this sense, Reed himself acts as a literary conjuror, drawing on materials from the past to create art in the present that will provide a paradigm for navigating the future.

As Nelson has pointed out, *Mumbo Jumbo* engages with discourses about blackness and technology. She discusses the “knockings” that PaPa LaBas listens to in order to receive messages from the beyond. Rather than making use of a future technology, these “knockings” are older technologies placed in the present. Sămi Ludwig suggests that they operate similarly to radio waves in that they remain useful to those who continue to use older, outdated technologies.<sup>69</sup> Nelson suggests that rather than imagining new technologies, Reed’s location of old technology in the present, which she calls synchronicity, instead reprioritizes technology and supplies ‘a paradigm for an African diasporic technoculture.’<sup>70</sup> Reed has described this process of looking to the past to speculate about the future as necromancy. He says:

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Dery, “Black to the Future,” 182.

<sup>69</sup> Sămi Ludwig, *Concrete Language: Intercultural Communication in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996), 319.

<sup>70</sup> Nelson, “Future Texts,” 8.

‘[n]ecromancers used to lie in the guts of the dead or in the tombs to receive visions of the future. That is prophecy. The black writer lies in the guts of old America, making readings about the future.’<sup>71</sup> Rather than viewing the past as stagnant, Reed views the past as alive and a place that one must visit to understand the present and to speculate about the future. Reed’s consciousness of his own role as a necromancer echoes the role of the conjuror as illustrated in previous chapters. By reproducing relics from the past and repurposing them in the present, Reed’s mirrors the way that conjurors create and update rituals in modern times using historical practices and knowledge.

Reed’s gaze into the past goes beyond his attention to technology, as Nelson discusses. Greg Tate suggests that, ‘science fiction [is] continuing a vein of philosophical inquiry and technological speculation that begins with the Egyptians and their incredibly detailed meditations on life after death.’<sup>72</sup> Reed shares this perspective and looks back to ancient Egyptian mythology, as he did in poems from *Conjure*, to ruminate on the legacy and identity of African civilisations, communities, and culture. Reed’s ‘necromancy’ or conjuring, the revisiting of the past in order to understand the present and prophesize about the future, is exemplified in his retelling of the story of Osiris. Reed devotes approximately twenty pages of *Mumbo Jumbo* to the story of Osiris, the Egyptian god of the afterlife, as one of the first hoodoo priests in ancient Egypt. It is to the story of Osiris and the creation of the Book of Thoth during this period that Reed looks back in order to understand and navigate the problems that his contemporary hoodoo priest faces in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Only by looking back to this ancient story does the reader

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<sup>71</sup> John O’Brien, “Ishmael Reed,” in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, 16.

<sup>72</sup> Dery, “Black to the Future,” 210.

gain a fuller understanding of the modern outbreak of Jes Grew and the longer history of African spirituality that it represents.

Under Osiris' rule, Reed says that the Egyptian people prospered; they were happy, crops were abundant, and there was peace. One of the main characteristics of Osiris and his rule was his ability to dance and to teach those he met how to dance too. Osiris' dances were popular and spread happiness across Egypt, he even became known as “the man who did dances that caught-on,” infected other people.’<sup>73</sup> Osiris travelled to Ethiopia, Sudan, and South America where he danced and the people would ‘mimic him and add their variations to fit their country and their clime.’<sup>74</sup> Osiris' dances are some of the earliest manifestations of what Reed identifies as Neo-HooDoo and which he claims resurface at various points in modern history. Similarly to Reed's suggestion that Sun Ra was played in the nightclub district of ancient Egypt in ‘Neo-HooDoo Manifesto’, according to this story there were ‘Hully Gullyng children on the street’ in ancient Egypt too.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the way in which Osiris permitted people from other countries to add their own variations to his dances aligns with Neo-HooDoo's principles of cultural sovereignty and experimentation. Reed rewrites the Osiris myth and places African and African American culture at the centre of it. In doing so, he provides modern African American culture with a longer history concomitant with the shared aims of social movements of the period.

Reed's retelling of Osiris also sets up an opposition between the cultural liberation that Osiris represents and which aligns with the central tenets of Neo-HooDoo, and the forces of hierarchy, order, discipline, and rigidity that Osiris'

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<sup>73</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 162.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 163.

brother Set embodies. Jonathan P. Lewis argues that Reed uses Set ‘to characterize oppressive, white American and European cultures as Osiris’s opposite.’<sup>76</sup> Reed writes that Osiris’ dances grew so popular that people stopped their work tilling so that they could dance, causing some concern amongst the population. A man named Thoth theorised that these dances needed a text to turn to, meaning that the spirit that was present in dance needed a litany to reside in, an allegory for the aims of Harlem Renaissance writers and later the Black Arts Movement. Osiris listened and performed all of his dances in front of Thoth over and over again until all of them were recorded and illustrated in what becomes known as “The Book of Thoth”. Following the creation of the Book, peace was restored to Egypt and Osiris left to travel with the ‘International Nile Root Orchestra’ and teach his dances to the world. In Reed’s story, upon Osiris’ return Set murders him in an attempt to stop “The Work” from spreading and to reinstate autocratic rule in Egypt. Though Osiris was murdered, the Book and the spirit that it contained survived and made its way around the world.

Reed’s retelling also offers a cautionary tale about ensuring that the Book does not fall into the wrong hands. This again is a metaphorical warning against simply reproducing the practices of the oppressor and that prominent black intellectuals and artists in the contemporary moment should not promote ideals of uniformity and exclusivity as the dominant white culture had before. Reed’s reimagining of the myth proffers that The Book of Thoth was hidden from those who sought to destroy it but it eventually found its way into the hands of Moses who sought it from Jethro. According to Reed’s myth, Moses garnered thousands of Atonist followers and as such was warned by Jethro that if he did manage to get the

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<sup>76</sup> Jonathan P. Lewis, “Set and Osiris in Ishmael Reed’s Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 49, no. 1 (2014): 78-9.

Book it would be no use to him. Moses ignored his advice and retrieved it from its hiding place in the Temple of Osiris and Isis, and when he performed the dances and songs contained within in front of an audience in Egypt, it did not work like it had for Osiris, rather '[t]he ears of the people began to bleed.'<sup>77</sup> Following this incident, the story suggests that as 'H. P. Blavatsky concurs: The fraternity of the Free Masons was founded in Egypt and Moses communicated the secret teaching to Israelites, Jesus to the Apostles and thence it found its way to the Knights Templar.'<sup>78</sup> Moses went into exile and, too afraid to destroy the book, he hid it and it later became known as one of the lost Books of Moses (the same text which is mentioned and used by hoodoo practitioners in Hurston's *Mules and Men* and Hyatt's *Hoodoo Conjuraton Witchcraft Rootwork*). The loss of the Book and suppression of the hoodoo contained within serves as a warning both to the characters in *Mumbo Jumbo* and to contemporary artists and intellectuals.

The concerns of the contemporary characters in *Mumbo Jumbo* have clear antecedents in this reimagining of the stories of Osiris and Moses. Revisiting ancient Egypt recovers both the Book's origin story and an understanding of the nature, spirit, and history of the 1920s Jes Grew epidemic. Looking back to this myth, the reasons why locating the Book of Thoth is so important to the wellbeing and peace of the contemporary population also becomes clear. Once the Book is found and its contents are transmitted around the world through music and dance, peace is restored and people from diverse cultures experience a connection to each other through Neo-HooDoo. This tale from ancient times allows Reed to prophesize about the future: when Jes Grew finds its text in the contemporary moment then a peaceful, connected, multicultural future will follow, as it did in the past. Neo-HooDoo acts as

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<sup>77</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 183.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 186.



vehicle to reach back to an African past to understand present concerns and speculate about the futures of African-descended people in the contemporary moment.

The interweaving of the main plot and sub-plots, non-linear chronology of events, blending of reality and fiction, and interweaving of images throughout the text makes *Mumbo Jumbo* a novel that does not conform to the conventions of the form. Though it still remains recognisable as a novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* also offers an ethnographic account of African American culture that collates fragmented pieces of history to offer a praxis for navigating the present and future. Just as Reed explores ideas about experimentation as part of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic in poems in *Conjure*, and reaffirms Hyatt and Bell's observations about variation in hoodoo rituals, *Mumbo Jumbo* sees Reed experiment with the form of the novel and bring his own style, influences, and heritage to his art. To borrow Bell's phraseology, *Mumbo Jumbo* 'holds to the rules of the communication source' in that it still presents itself as a novel but Reed is able to 'generate [his own] unique performance' that resembles ethnographic work.<sup>79</sup> Where hoodoo practitioners vary rituals according to their environment, Reed varies the form and aesthetic of his writing according to the cultural influences he experiences, casting himself as a literary conjuror. *Mumbo Jumbo* is an example of Neo-HooDoo in that it applies the principles of variation, improvisation, and experimentation in hoodoo practice to the creation of art in the contemporary moment. This disturbance of convention draws on the spirit of resistance within hoodoo and serves as a protest against uniformity and conformity and instead promotes diversity within art. In other words, the non-conventional form of *Mumbo Jumbo* challenges western, dominantly white, iterations of the novel and sets forth an aesthetic that reflects and accommodates a multicultural present.

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<sup>79</sup> Bell, *Pattern, Structure, and Logic in Afro-American Hoodoo Performance*, 26.

The Neo-HooDoo aesthetic and the long history that Reed offers of its origin and survival in a world ordered by white supremacy provides a means of recovering and reconnecting with African spirituality. Its story answers the call that Black Power leaders made to African Americans to connect with a longer African history and heritage. In doing so, Reed's reimagining of ancient myths provides a blueprint for navigating the competing ideologies within black liberation movements and groups of the time, advocating for multiculturalism and rejecting Black Nationalism. The Neo-HooDoo aesthetic, like the hoodoo practices of priests and doctors, provides a way of connecting to an African-centered past but also a means of understanding and navigating present and future concerns. Thus, as Reed suggests, the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic retains and updates the ancient spirit of hoodoo in the contemporary moment to address the cultural oppression of blacks in the twentieth century.

## **Chapter 5: The Conjure Woman and the Search for Ancestors in Black**

### **Women's Fiction of the 1970s and 80s**

Like Reed's "necromancing", several black writers of the 1970s and 1980s constructed narratives in which characters retraced the past in order to better understand their present and futures. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed reimagined epic histories of early civilisations and reconstructed biblical and mythological stories to navigate the present and future. In many ways, stories about hoodoo's biblical origins found in Hurston and Reed's work as well as in Hyatt's informants' testimonies are an act of tracing and recovering hoodoo's genealogy. This act of recovery was an endeavour that numerous African American writers engaged in but not always on such a colossal scale. This chapter will look away from these epic origin stories and will examine the ways in which writers became concerned with tracing genealogies *through* conjure as opposed to *of* conjure. In particular, it will examine how black women writers utilised conjure as an epistemology through which their characters recovered family history, connected with an African heritage, and navigated the concerns and experiences of black women in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement which largely articulated the concerns of black men and subjugated black women, and the Women's Liberation Movement which chiefly expressed the concerns of white women and ignored the voices of black women, there was a proliferation of black feminist writing and organisation that continued into the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> In the 1977 Combahee River Collective statement authored by Barbara Smith and others, black feminists described their purpose thus:

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the suppression of black feminist thoughts by black men and white women see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4-8.

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.<sup>2</sup>

Laying the groundwork for what would later be termed by Kimberlé Crenshaw as intersectionality, black feminists of this era were preoccupied with developing a politics that critiqued gendered, racial, and class-based systems of oppression.<sup>3</sup> Patricia Hill Collins suggests that black women's thought also represents a resistance to traditional scholarship and knowledge because it is created under different circumstances and from perspectives and experiences that white feminists and men cannot articulate. She describes the substance and form of black feminist thinking in her seminal work in these terms:

As an historically oppressed group, U.S. black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory – it

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<sup>2</sup> Combahee River Collective, "Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, [1988] 2000), 264.

<sup>3</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term intersectionality in 1989 to describe intersecting structures of oppression that black women face. It has since been adopted as a theoretical lens to critique the ways in which multiple structures of oppression interact and impact marginalised groups. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989):139-167.

can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like – but the purpose of black women's thought is distinctly different. Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, like the spirit of resistance instilled in Reed's Neo-HooDoo writing, black women's writing of this era was resistant and, as Collins suggests, represented a divergence from traditional forms and systems of knowledge. Yet unlike Reed, who has been criticised for the treatment of women in his works and labelled a misogynist by critics such as Michele Wallace and Barbara Smith, black women writers who used hoodoo in their writing during this moment did so to articulate the experiences of black women in the United States and as a medium through which to represent black women's experiences, politics, and knowledge as an epistemological framework.<sup>5</sup> Where Reed centres the experiences of men and the mission to locate the Book as an endeavour that focuses on the individual PaPa LaBas within a masculine paradigm, the black women writers examined here centre community and represent conjure as a more feminine, or feminist, model of empowerment that focuses on positioning the experiences of women characters within a longer lineage.

As Cheryl Wall discusses in her book *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*, black women writers of the late twentieth century were preoccupied with 'the recuperation and representation of the past four hundred years of black peoples' lives in the United States and throughout the African

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<sup>4</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Smith, "Recent Fiction: Review of *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* by Ishmael Reed," *The New Republic*, no. 23 (1974): 53-54 and Michele Wallace, "Ishmael Reed's Female Troubles," *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, [1990] 2008), 146-154.

diaspora.’<sup>6</sup> A recurring way in which black women writers retraced the past during this period was through the figure of the conjure woman, a specific manifestation of the ancestor. This chapter will discuss the significance of the revival of the conjure woman during this moment through an examination of three texts: Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cyprus and Indigo* (1982), and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988). It will argue that black women writers of the 1970s and 80s utilised the conjure woman as a conduit through which to recover the history of African Americans. In doing so, they contributed to the revaluation and renegotiation of black aesthetics and culture that was occurring at that moment. It will demonstrate that the conjure woman was a figure who healed and protected the community as well as an ancestral guide through which characters could access an African past, recover a fuller sense of their identities, and navigate contemporary life.

The ancestor is an important figure not only in the African American literary tradition but to African Americans more generally. As Hortense Spillers outlines, the notion of family in the West that refers to ‘the *vertical* transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of “cold cash”, from *fathers* to *sons* and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and female of *his* choice – becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community.’<sup>7</sup> As a consequence of the slave trade, families, within this definition, could not exist. Beginning with the destruction of communities on the shores of Africa and the dispersal of enslaved people across the world, people subjugated into slavery were severed from their communities and familial ties. Once

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<sup>6</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no.2 (1987): 74.

in the United States, the destruction of family was ensured through various means. In contrast to Spillers' definition of family, the slave system manifested a matronymic system and enslaved children inherited the status of their mothers rather than their fathers. Enslaved men and women were not permitted to marry and the auction meant that enslaved people were frequently sold away from their families. The Slave Trade ensured that communities of people were dispersed, families were separated and sent to different regions of the country, and enslaved people often lost knowledge of their ancestors.

The impact of the forced separation of families is documented not just by historians but in slave narratives and abolitionist literature that imagines the life of the enslaved.<sup>8</sup> For example, Frederick Douglass tells of his separation from his mother in his *Narrative*:

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant – before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers as a very early age [...] For what this separation has done, I do not know, unless it to be hinder the development of the child's affection towards its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Harriet Jacobs recalls the heartache of watching her children as she hid below the floorboards before leaving them to escape to the North. The narrative

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the impact of slavery on the family see: Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Built* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); and Stephanie E. Jones, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) particularly chapters 3-6.

<sup>9</sup> Douglass, *Narrative*, 7.

details Jacobs' struggle for freedom and the impact that that had on her relationship with her children.<sup>10</sup> The destruction of family and the loss of connection to ancestors, and with that, knowledge of family histories, is something that African Americans have long endured the consequences of after the abolition of slavery.

As well as documenting and conveying the experiences of familial destruction, African American literature is also a site in which the search for the ancestors, African spirituality, and lineage is manifested. It is a theme that has preoccupied African American literature for decades and that has been revisited in black women's writing of the 1970s and 80s. Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) amongst numerous other texts, including those discussed in this chapter, trace genealogies and attempt to recover family histories. Discussing the characteristics of African American writing, Toni Morrison suggests that the presence (or absence) of the ancestor is an interesting paradigm through which to evaluate black literature. She writes that ancestor characters are 'not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.'<sup>11</sup> Her description of the ancestor as timeless suggests that though the character might be rooted and a living person, as opposed to a spirit, the ancestor provides a link to the past and has the ability to know things about the lives and culture of their forebears.

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, poet and abolitionist Frances Harper conveys the fate of slave mothers and the break-up of family in numerous poems including 'The Slave Auction' and 'The Slave Mother'. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson Printers, 1857) Retrieved from Library of Congress, <https://lcn.loc.gov/26020586>.

<sup>11</sup> Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers 1950-1980: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1984), 343.



Knowledge of enslaved relatives was often lost and was rarely recorded or accessible in the written form. Often enslaved people learned about their relatives and heard stories about the places their ancestors were from through the oral tradition. Farah Jasmine Griffin extends Morrison's definition of the ancestor and argues that: '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.'<sup>12</sup> The ancestor provides a way of knowing African American and African forebears and offers different ways of connecting with the past and African-based cultures. Ancestors fill in gaps of knowledge about family and understandings of genealogical identity lost under the harsh and destructive system of slavery.

The other important descriptor of the ancestor that Morrison offers is their provision of 'a certain kind of wisdom' which suggests a kind of wisdom that functions outside of traditionally accepted systems of knowledge, echoing the way in which black feminists described their thinking and writing during this period. Discussing the blending of the supernatural with the real world in her fiction, Morrison says: '[i]t is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things.'<sup>13</sup> Without the written record and the history that many white Americans are able to document

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<sup>12</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, *"Who Set You Flowin'?: The African American Migration Narrative"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Morrison, "Rootedness," 342.

about their genealogy, African Americans developed what she says are ‘another way of knowing things.’<sup>14</sup>

The conjure woman in particular, as a particular manifestation of the ancestor, has a deep understanding of this alternative epistemology and acts as a means for signifying cultural continuity. She has appeared in literature across the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries as both a figure based on historical women like Tituba and Marie Laveau and a fictional character like those who appeared in Charles Chesnutt’s collection of short stories titled *The Conjure Woman* (1899), Julia Peterkin’s Pulitzer prize winning *Scarlett Sister Mary* (1929), and Zora Neale’s Hurston *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) as well as in more recent texts that this chapter will examine. As Houston Baker Jr. briefly explains, ‘[o]ne reason the conjuror is held in such a powerful position in African diasporic communities was her direct descent from the African medicine man and her place in a religion that had definable African antecedents.’<sup>15</sup> Due to her knowledge of African-based religious and cultural practices, the conjure woman has a direct link to Africa and therefore acts a particularly powerful medium through which characters can access an African past, heritage, and systems of knowledge.

Despite the conjure woman’s persistent appearances in African American literature, scholarship on the conjure woman as a literary figure has been comparatively scarce unlike the documentation of conjurors in historical studies as outlined in the introduction. Several studies do exist, though, on the relationship between conjuring traditions and literature. One work that examines this relationship is Hortense Spillers and Marjorie Pryse’s edited collection of essays, *Conjuring*:

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Houston A. Baker Jr., *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 79.

*Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, which posits that ‘[i]n the 1970s and 1980s black women novelists have become metaphorical conjure women, “mediums” like Alice Walker who make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, rootworkers, and women who wrote autobiographies) and to name each other as a community of inheritors.’<sup>16</sup> The female literary conjuror is an enabler and facilitator of community who seeks connection with ancestors. Rather than focusing on the literary presence of the conjure woman, Pryse and Spillers argue that black women novelists themselves are conjure women and that their storytelling is an act of conjure. This echoes Morrison’s perspective on the function of the novel: that its purpose is to transmit stories that have been lost in the African American community and that the novel is itself another way of knowing things about African and African American history, culture, and spirituality.<sup>17</sup> It also reaffirms Collins’ statement that black women were transmitting their knowledge through divergent forms and that creative forms of writing were sites in which black feminist thought was communicated.

Since Pryse and Spillers’ publication, several important studies on the centrality of spirituality in African American women’s literature have built on their discussions. For example, Houston Baker Jr.’s *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing* (1991) argues that black women writers are creators with a unique way of seeing the world that is informed by spirituality. Building on the work done by Pryse, Spillers, and Baker, Judlyn Ryan’s *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women’s Film and Literature* (2005) explores spirituality as

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<sup>16</sup> Marjorie Pryse, “Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the “Ancient Power” of Black Women,” in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Morrison, “Rootedness”, 343.

epistemology in black women's art and offers a framework for interpretation. Ryan defines spirituality as 'a combination of consciousness, ethos, lifestyle, and discourse that privileges spirit — that is, life-force — as a primary aspect of self and that defines and determines health and well-being.'<sup>18</sup> She argues that 'spirituality [is] the foundation on which the Black woman artist constructs her vision of empowerment' and that spirituality functions as epistemology for black women writers and filmmakers and has an explicit function in generating their narratives and characters.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Tomeiko Ashford Carter's *Powers Divine: Spiritual Autobiography and Black Women's Writing* (2009) similarly considers the relationship between spirituality and black women's autobiographical writing, also termed 'black feminist confessional narrative', and suggests that the featured themes of divine action and social parity 'allows authors to construct spiritually empowered black female characters.'<sup>20</sup> Extending these perspectives on black female spirituality as ideology, Elizabeth West's *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory, Community, Nature, and Being* (2011) highlights the presence of African, as opposed to Christian, spirituality in writing by African American women claiming that black women writers have 'shaped a literary history that reflects [African] origins.'<sup>21</sup> These texts, alongside James W. Coleman's *Faithful Vision: Treatments of the Sacred, Spiritual, and Supernatural in Twentieth-Century African American Fiction* (2006) which also investigates male-authored fiction, examine the relationship between author, spirituality, and writing. They argue that African American writing is both informed by spirituality and is a site in

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<sup>18</sup> Judlyn S. Ryan, *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Tomeiko Ashford Carter, *Powers Divine: Spiritual Autobiography and Black Women's Writing* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), xiv.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth West, *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory, Community, Nature, and Being* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 1.

which themes relating to African spirituality frequently appear. They each contribute to debates about the relationship between spirituality, ancestry, and literature in the twentieth century and West in particular traces the presence of African-based spirituality in black women's fiction. While some discuss her, none substantially engages with the literary figure of the conjure woman.

The only study to do so is Kameelah L. Martin's *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and other such Hoodoo* (2012). Martin's intervention works to trace the appearance of the conjure woman in twentieth-century literature. Her study contains four arguments and observations about the conjure woman in African American fiction. She argues that black women writers have subverted negative connotations of women and spirit work through their literary expressions of the figure and that the role of the conjure woman is '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.'<sup>22</sup> These two positions are at the core of Martin's study but she also claims that there exists a symbiotic relationship between conjure women and the blues and that due to the proliferation of the conjure woman in mainstream culture (in literature, film, and visual media) in the twentieth century, the conjure woman should be reevaluated as a cultural icon. While Martin's research is significant in its sustained study of the literary figure of conjure woman, she does not focus on the extent to which the conjure woman provides a connection to African lineage and culture. Conversely, Elizabeth West's research charts the presence of African spirituality and African antecedents in African American fiction but she does not pay particular attention to the conjure woman as a literary figure. This chapter addresses

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<sup>22</sup> Kameelah L. Martin's *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and Other Such Hoodoo* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 5.

the gaps in West and Martin's research and examines the bridge between the figure of conjure woman and African spirituality, and how these themes relate to the politics of African American women during the 1970s and 1980s.

Morrison, Shange, and Naylor all employ the figure of the conjure woman and elements of African spirituality in the novels examined here. A close reading of the three texts shows how the conjure woman was reimagined during this pivotal moment and maps the multitude of functions that the conjure woman performs in African American women's writing.

#### Conjure and Folklore in *Song of Solomon*

Toni Morrison's third novel *Song of Solomon* is the novel in which she claims that she was able to find the 'elusive but identifiable style' of black literature that goes beyond simply being written by or for black people. Morrison says she owes this to 'the construction of the book and the tone in which [she] could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other.'<sup>23</sup> *Song of Solomon* presents Pilate's conjuring knowledge as well as African folklore as guiding epistemologies that are rooted in the real world and which are central to the development of the male protagonist. Morrison utilises the figure of the conjure woman as a vehicle for exploring black spirituality, female empowerment, and African American identity in the contemporary moment.

The novel follows the story of Macon Dead III, nicknamed Milkman, and his search for the history of his ancestors. Milkman is the son of a businessman, Macon

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<sup>23</sup> Morrison, "Rootedness," 342.

II, and his mother, Ruth, is the daughter of the first black physician in the unnamed Michigan city that the novel is set. Largely isolated from the family, Milkman spends much of his time with his friend, Guitar Bains, who joins a radical group called The Seven Days who, whenever a black person is murdered, murder a white person in a similar way to the crime committed against the black person. Milkman on the other hand is bored by 'the racial problems that consumed Guitar.'<sup>24</sup> He wonders what Guitar and the rest of men who attend the barber shop 'would do if they didn't have black and white problems to talk about. Who they would be if they couldn't describe the insults, violence, and oppression that their lives (and the television news) were made up of?'<sup>25</sup> Morrison uses this contrast between Guitar's radical militancy and Milkman's indifference towards racial politics to illustrate Milkman's lack of consciousness or awareness of himself as an African American and to critique male-dominated black political thought. Guitar's extreme perspectives and actions, for what he believes is justice for African Americans, serve to illuminate Milkman's alienation from his family and the community as well as his disconnection from African American historical experiences. Restless and lacking purpose or direction, Milkman is fascinated by his aunt Pilate from whom his father has warned him to keep away. She is a conjure woman who sparks Milkman's desire to discover his lineage and who is also the key to unlocking the family's history and ultimately Milkman's discovery of who he is.

Pilate is an important figure in Milkman's life: she is responsible for his conception and for protecting him from his father before he is born. Pilate gives Ruth 'funny things to do' including putting 'some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff' into

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<sup>24</sup> Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage Books [1977] 1985), 107.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-8.

Macon II's food in order to bring about the conception of Milkman.<sup>26</sup> After discovering that Ruth is pregnant, Macon II is enraged and wants Ruth to abort the baby; it is only with Pilate's spiritual protection that Ruth is able to keep Milkman safe:

Macon wouldn't bother her no more; she, Pilate, would see to it. (Years later Ruth learned that Pilate put a small doll on Macon's chair in his office. A male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly. Macon knocked it out of the chair and with a yardstick pushed it into the bathroom, where he doused it with alcohol and burned it. It took nine separate burnings before the fire got down to the straw and cotton ticking off its insides. But he must have remembered the round fire-red stomach, for he left Ruth alone after that.)<sup>27</sup>

The doll represents Macon and the red circle on the stomach seems to signify that he will become the target of danger or illness should he attempt to harm the unborn child. This confirms Pilate's role not only as conjure woman but as Milkman's spiritual guide and protector. Additionally, it also casts the conjure woman as a protector of women and children from both the harm and control of men. Pilate's knowledge of conjuring traditions empowers Ruth to retain control of her body and resist Macon II's attempts to force her to get an abortion. In this instance, the epistemology that Pilate represents — a body of otherworldly knowledge shared amongst women — acts as a system to combat gendered forms of oppression and control as well as a means for protection.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 132.



Pilate is also cast as a natural healer, both in terms of medicinal healing and the healing of relationships. She has the power to settle quarrels and sometimes ‘mediated a peace that lasted a good bit longer than it should have because it was administered by somebody not quite like them.’<sup>28</sup> In addition to these abilities, Pilate often communicates with the spirit of her dead father, Macon I. She says that she and her brother both saw him shortly after he was murdered and since then he often comes to visit and ‘tells [her] things [she] needs to know.’<sup>29</sup> Communication with supernatural entities, Kameelah Martin suggests, is a form of spirit work that literary conjure women often engage with, alongside an ‘intimacy with the healing and harming ritual practices of African-derived religions that evolved in the New World.’<sup>30</sup> Pilate appears to possess abilities in each of the areas that Martin sets out. It seems that in an effort to clearly demarcate Pilate as spiritually gifted, Morrison’s conjure woman embodies almost all of the abilities associated with conjure. As such, Pilate is an ancestor who exercises a complete mastery of ‘other ways of knowing things’ and poses a challenge to the knowledge that Milkman has acquired from his father which largely advocates for viewing the world through a materialist lens in which his success in business and appearance as a middle-class man take precedent.

In conjunction with Morrison’s efforts to establish Pilate as a conjure woman, she equally stresses Pilate’s connection to an African heritage and throughout the novel emphasises Pilate’s blackness to denote her African identity and connection to African spirituality. Early in the novel, Macon II says to Milkman: ‘If you ever have a doubt that we from Africa, look at Pilate.’<sup>31</sup> Central to Morrison’s establishment of Pilate’s African looks are descriptions of her as

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 54

particularly dark, she is often said to have been dark-skinned, unlike her mother who was 'light-skinned, pretty.'<sup>32</sup> Here, Morrison's uses the contrast between Pilate's dark skin and her mother's light skin to emphasise Pilate's blackness. Furthermore, when Milkman first meets Pilate, he observes her 'sitting wide-legged in a long-sleeved, long-skirted black dress. Her hair was wrapped in black too, and from a distance, all they could really see beneath her face was the bright orange she was peeling.'<sup>33</sup> Pilate is a vision of blackness only interrupted by fruit. The absence of light in Pilate's appearance signifies her blackness which appears even darker in contrast to the orange. Often described as dark, Morrison uses this blackness in Pilate's appearance to signify her African ancestry.

Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie also suggests that Morrison uses the idea of masking to locate Pilate in traditional cultures of Africa. Descriptions of Pilate's blackness are often focused upon her face which Zauditu-Selassie claims resembles a mask, for example:

Her lips were darker than her skin, wine-stained, blueberry dyed, so her face had a cosmetic look – as though she had applied a very dark lipstick neatly and blotted away its shine on a scrap of newspaper.<sup>34</sup>

She claims that masks were prominent in African epics and that they are often ceremonially used to promote well-being and community.<sup>35</sup> Pilate's face, in which her 'cosmetic look' can be interpreted as a mask, and where her features are specifically described as dark, further signify her African appearance and cultural heritage. The communal connotations that are held in the symbol of the mask also

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>35</sup> Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie, *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 74.

signify Pilate's position in the wider community. Though she felt shunned in her younger years, Pilate is respected in the Southside community. She connects with the other residents via her wine making business and everyone knows who she is. The communal connotations in the depiction of Pilate's face as a mask further solidify her position as a conjure woman. By depicting Pilate's face as a mask, Morrison is not only locating Pilate in traditional African cultures, she is also signifying her distinctive status in the Southside community and suggesting that Pilate, as a modern conjure woman, is a prominent figure in the community just like her nineteenth-century predecessors.

It is Pilate who initially arouses Milkman's curiosity about his father's family and it is only when this happens that the central journey of the novel begins. Milkman heads south to his father and aunt's hometown to locate bags of gold that belonged to the man who was killed in a cave when Macon II and Pilate were children. Milkman initially believes that Pilate has the gold in her home only to discover that the bag he thought it was in actually contains bones. Guided by Pilate and the people he meets along the way who knew his ancestors, what Milkman returns with is not gold, but a sense of belonging to a greater African past and a more realised sense of self that is not bound up in the material values possessed by his father, or in the protesting of racial injustice to which Guitar devotes his life, but in the stories of his ancestors.

The stages of Milkman's journey retrace the collective journey of descendants of Africans in America. He sets off from his Michigan city and journeys to the South in search of the places his ancestors lived. This is an inversion of the Great Migration that many African Americans undertook in search of economic prosperity and freedom from white terrorism and Jim Crow segregation in the South

during the early twentieth century. Milkman initially begins his journey in a suit which as he progresses south becomes more and more dishevelled. He sheds the expensive clothes afforded by his father's business and arrives at a place where African Americans were historically poorer than their northern counterparts. Culminating in his bathing at Sweet's home in Shalimar, the journey and process of shedding his material possessions is a cleansing experience for Milkman. Only by leaving these things and attitudes behind can he discover his ancestral history and realise his own place within it. Milkman's initial journey comes to an end in Shalimar, Virginia where his grandfather lived.

Virginia is the state in which the first slave ship arrived on U.S. soil and which also acted as what Jack Trammell describes as 'the economic locus of slavery', in that by 1860 more than half a million enslaved people had been bought and sold in Richmond and eventually, by the abolition of slavery, almost one million people were sold and moved out of the Richmond region alone.<sup>36</sup> By using Virginia as the setting of Milkman's ancestral home, Morrison evokes the historical significance of Virginia and locates Milkman, Pilate, and their ancestors in a culturally resonant place in African American history. As the location of one of the largest centres for slave auctions and the trading of enslaved peoples within America, Virginia represents a transient place which many Africans and their descendants passed through. Steeped in African American cultural significance, Milkman's journey echoes that of the thousands of African Americans who trace their ancestors back to Virginia.

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<sup>36</sup> Jack Trammell, *The Richmond Slave Trade: The Economic Backbone of the Old Dominion* (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), 20.

At the end of his first trip, in a scene of euphoric realisation, Milkman learns that his ancestors could fly. In hearing stories from the people who knew his family, meeting the ghost of a woman who protected his father and aunt, and listening to the children's songs about them, Milkman discovers that one day his great-grandfather 'got fed up. *All the way up!* No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders!...[he] lifted that beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew home...Back to Africa.'<sup>37</sup> Perhaps more importantly than discovering his family's magical ability, Milkman realises he is 'part of the flyin motherfuckin tribe.'<sup>38</sup> In tandem with realising his ancestor's mythical past, Milkman finally feels a sense of belonging to a wider identity. Morrison's choice of the word 'tribe' instead of family firmly locates Milkman's belonging to an African identity. Wendy Walters argues that the legend of the Flying African 'resonates throughout the expressive traditions of that part of the African diaspora which has known slavery in the New World,' citing versions of the tale from African Americans, Jamaicans and Cubans.<sup>39</sup> The Flying African was a universally recognised tale of resistance and symbolised hope for enslaved Africans across the Americas. Morrison's incorporation of the Flying African folktale into the narrative serves to locate Milkman and his ancestors in a wider African diaspora.

The inclusion of this folktale in *Song of Solomon*, for Walters, also signifies Morrison's engagement with the oral tradition.<sup>40</sup> She suggests that Morrison's employment of The Flying African transforms and translates the original folktale into contemporary contexts. Morrison's inclusion of this tale is an act of recovery where she retrieves an old African myth and relocates it in the present to help her

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<sup>37</sup> Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 328.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Wendy Walters, "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," *MELUS* 22, no.3 (1997): 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 17.

protagonist come to the most important realisation of his life whilst also disseminating Black history through the novel as she described in her essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”.<sup>41</sup> Her use of the tale and its centrality in Milkman’s familial history allows Milkman to leave behind his individualistic outlook and develop a sense of identity rooted in the connection with his family and ultimately becoming part of a tale that speaks to the African diaspora in the U.S. and beyond. Milkman is only able to access this past through belief in and engagement with conjure. Morrison therefore depicts this belief in folklore and conjure as a vehicle to connect with African ancestry and identity.

After learning about his paternal ancestors and discovering that the bones that Pilate had kept with her were actually her father’s, Milkman returns to Virginia with Pilate to finally bury them. However, Guitar is angry that Milkman went to search for the gold without him and follows him back seeking revenge. It is back in Shalimar on Solomon’s leap, after Guitar accidentally shoots Pilate that Milkman’s spiritual journey comes to a climax. After shouting to Guitar and calling him ‘brother man’, Milkman charges at him, not knowing and not caring ‘which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother.’<sup>42</sup> Following in the footsteps of his ancestors, Milkman leaps from the ground in the knowledge that ‘if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it.’<sup>43</sup> In this ambiguous ending, despite fighting with Guitar, Milkman recognises that they are brothers and accepts the folktale that defines his tribe. By submitting himself to the folktale, Milkman accepts the ‘other way of knowing things’ that Pilate represents and in doing so frees himself from the ways of thinking and knowing that have weighed him down. Zauditu-

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<sup>41</sup> Morrison, “Rootedness”, 343.

<sup>42</sup> Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 337.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Selassie argues that it is Morrison's exhumation of African spiritual traditions, symbols, and stories which 'lead her heroic characters to epic completion.'<sup>44</sup> Not only is Milkman relieved of his feelings of isolation and gains a fuller understanding of who he is but Zauditu-Selassie goes on to suggest that by rediscovering these stories and symbols of Africa, 'Morrison revives a dynamic cultural and spiritual history challenging the myth of being "stripped" and dispossessed of memory as a result of the Middle Passage and subsequent traumas, an account repeatedly narrated by the larger American society.'<sup>45</sup> Here, both the protagonist and the author utilise conjure as a means to recover African ancestry and as a body of knowledge that has the power to challenge western ways of thinking and understanding the world.

Additionally, this climactic scene can also be read as a commentary on the Black Nationalist sentiments and radical militancy that Guitar represents. By making Guitar the person who kills Pilate, Morrison suggests that this type of political thought, which in the *Seven Days* is exclusively male, is ultimately damaging to the community. Pilate as a symbol of protection, empowerment, and community is killed by the essentialist, violent, and masculine politics that Guitar embodies. In ending the novel in this way, Morrison uses the death of the conjure woman at the hands of a militant man to advocate for a more harmonious relationship between black men and women, and in particular between their political and epistemological perspectives during this moment.

#### Conjure Sisters in *Sassafrass*, *Cypress*, & *Indigo* (1982)

Crediting Ishmael Reed as her mentor, Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass*, *Cypress* & *Indigo* as well as several of her other publications resist Western literary

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<sup>44</sup> Zauditu-Selassie, *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

conventions.<sup>46</sup> Like *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo* transgresses traditional forms of the novel and blends passages of prose, poems, recipes, letters, and conjuring rituals, exemplifying Collins' description of the forms that black feminist thinking and writing takes. The effect of Shange's resistance, Arlene Elder claims, 'simultaneously rekindles the traditional African concept of the communal nature and unity of the arts and the very American experience of the liminal Black individual's flight to political economic, and psychological freedom.'<sup>47</sup> Yet unlike *Mumbo Jumbo*, Shange's novel centres the experiences of African American women and offers the story of three conjure sisters who each use "other ways of knowing" to connect with their ancestors. Indigo is a musician and midwife, Cypress is a dancer, and Sassafrass is a weaver who produces art. As Jasmine Farah Griffin suggests, the ancestor is present in these activities, and the sisters all engage in them to connect with their ancestors, explore African spirituality, and express themselves.<sup>48</sup> Chezia Thompson-Cager argues that their magical capability as women 'allows them [the sisters] to facilitate political analysis and to learn a specific language (dancing, weaving, making music) with which to interact with political realities.'<sup>49</sup> By employing these magically informed ways of knowing themselves and their ancestors, Shange's conjure sisters' art is a vehicle through which black women express their politics and experiences, and critique the ways in which black women are oppressed.

The sisters were brought up by their Christian mother in Charleston, South Carolina and each to some degree reject the theology of their mother and seek to

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<sup>46</sup> Shange credits Ishmael Reed as her mentor in Henry Blackwell, "An Interview with Ntozake Shange," *Black American Literature Forum* 13, no.4 (1979): 137.

<sup>47</sup> Arlene Elder, "Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo: Ntozake Shange's Neo-Slave/Blues Narrative," *African American Review* 26, no.1 (1992): 99.

<sup>48</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?", 5.

<sup>49</sup> Chezia Thompson-Cager, "Ntozake Shange's 'Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo': Resistance and Mystical Women of Power," *NWSA Journal* 1, no.4 (1989): 600.



explore their own spirituality in closer connection to their African forebears. The novel begins when the three sisters are young adults, indeed at the moment when the youngest sister, Indigo, begins menstruating, and charts the life of each woman during the height of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The narrator provides glimpses into the sisters' adult lives at various moments without any clear temporal frame and resisting a linear narrative. Hilda Effania encourages her children to be creative in other ways; she sends Cypress to school in New York to learn how to dance and encourages Indigo to learn how to play the fiddle properly. In nurturing her daughters' creativity and expression of themselves, Hilda Effania gives her daughters the tools to explore their ancestry and spirituality.

The eldest sister Sassafrass moves away from the family home and lives with her artist and musician boyfriend, Mitch, in Los Angeles. Sassafrass sees weaving and her art as a way to connect with African American history, spirituality, and politics. She decorates their home with homemade murals in homage to iconic black figures such as Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, and Josephine Baker. By making art that honours African American icons, Sassafrass feels a closer connection to contemporary African American politics whilst the act of weaving connects her to the ancestors.

As Mitch's drug problem gets worse and he becomes more emotionally abusive towards Sassafrass, she begins to neglect her art and her own happiness. After an explosive argument where he forces her to listen to one of his friends recite an offensive poem about black women titled 'Ebony Cunt', Sassafrass instinctively retreats to her loom and her thoughts immediately shift to her ancestors:

Almost unconsciously Sassafrass had begun the laborious process of warping the four-harness table loom she had transported from Charleston. The eccentric family her family had worked for as slaves, and then as freed women weavers, had seen fit to grant Sassafrass the looms her forebears had warped and wefted thousands of times since emancipation [...] Her mama had done it, and her mama before that; and making cloth was the only tradition that gave her a sense of womanhood that was rich and sensuous, not tired and stingy.<sup>50</sup>

Weaving allows Sassafrass to feel connected not only to her mother but to all of her enslaved and freed women ancestors who had sat at the loom before her. To her mother weaving was a craft, a job, and a way of earning a living but Sassafrass ‘wanted her mother to experience weaving as an expression of herself’, as she did.<sup>51</sup> To Sassafrass weaving was more than that; it was both a way to connect with women ancestors and a means through which she could heal her soul. It provides a way for her to express her anguish at the emotional and sexist abuse of Mitch and his friends and the connection to her ancestors also offers her a way to feel like a powerful woman in the face of their misogyny.

In addition to weaving to feel a connection to African spirituality and the ancestors, Sassafrass also explores African-based belief systems and her encounters with New World Africana religions empower her to escape the oppressive environment that she lives in. Initially, Sassafrass cannot find the strength to end their relationship and the couple decide to move to the New World Found Collective in Baton Rouge. After a ceremony in which Sassafrass is mounted by Oshun, and

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<sup>50</sup> Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (New York: Picador, 1982), 91.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

after being surrounded by women priestesses who nurture and protect her, she finally sees the damage that Mitch has done to her identity and creativity and decides to leave him at the commune and return to her mother in Charleston to have her baby.<sup>52</sup> Conjure and communications with the spirit empower Sassafrass to return to her living ancestor and to her maternal home. It is only by channelling the strength of her women ancestors, a woman deity, and the women elders at the commune who encourage her to leave, that Sassafrass is able to free herself from Mitch's power and reconnect with her family. In Sassafrass' experiences, Shange offers woman-centred African spirituality as a remedy to sexism and as a means to escape gendered oppression.

Similarly to Sassafrass, Cypress also leaves the maternal home in the South and goes to live initially in San Francisco and later in New York City. As a child, Cypress is preoccupied with ballet and the opening chapters see her practising the different positions and reciting their French names. Encountering western styles of dance as a child sparks her interest but she later learns that there are other modes of dance that she feels more culturally and spiritually connected to. Her mother warned her in a letter that ballet was 'for white girls' and that '[her] ass is too big and [her] legs are too short...'<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, Cypress is determined to dance and makes a promise to her mother: 'to dance as good as white folks and to find out the truth about colored people's movements, because she knew dancing was in her blood... every drop.'<sup>54</sup> Shange uses different dancing styles as a metaphor for different bodies of knowledge. Mirroring the way that black feminist thinkers rejected white

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<sup>52</sup> Oshun is an orisha (deity or spirit) in the Yoruban religion. She represents the river and water and is associated with purity, love, fertility, and sexuality. For more on Yoruban orishas see Velma E. Love, *Divining the Self: A Study in Yoruba Myth and Human Consciousness* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012)

<sup>53</sup> Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, 134.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

western theories of knowledge, Cypress rejects western styles of dance that were imposed on her as a child and explores other ways of dancing that connect her to her African ancestry. For Cypress, dance becomes a form of conjuring that allows her to ‘find out the truth’ about her heritage.

Cypress joins a dance troupe called The Kushites Returned who ‘immersed her in the ways of pre-Egyptian Nile culture’.<sup>55</sup> Cypress is exposed to non-western forms of dance and, like her elder sister, she also explores New World African-based religions and keeps an altar for the Orishas in her home. Through her religious practices and through dance, Cypress connects with her forebears and feels the energy of her ancestors in her practices:

Her dance took on the essence of the struggle of colored Americans to survive their enslavement. She grew scornful of her years clamouring for ballet, and grew deep into her difference. Her ass and her legs she used like a colored girl; when she danced, she was alive; when she danced, she was free.<sup>56</sup>

As Shange resists western conventions of the novel, Cypress rejects western forms of dance and uses dance to connect with her ancestors, to discover ‘the movements of the colored people that had been lost’ and to explore and express her own identity and experience as an African American woman in the contemporary moment.<sup>57</sup>

Shange imagines what we might call conjure dancing as a means of establishing connection with a lost past and with the present. Cypress’ conjure dancing is also connected to her politics as an African American woman involved in

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

the struggle for freedom in the 1960s and 70s. The Kushites Returned ‘danced nine hours a day, and moved all over the country playing audiences rallied behind the sit-ins and Equal Opportunity for Colored Folks.’<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Cypress joins another troupe called Soil and Soul. Even more politically engaged, Soil and Soul tour the country raising both money and morale for ‘bail, legal fees, stuff like that for the Civil Rights Movement.’<sup>59</sup> For Cypress, dance is political; it is a way for her to participate in activism and fight back against the oppression of African Americans. Morrison discusses the cultural importance of dance in the black community in her essay ‘Rediscovering Black History’:

Our bodies in motion at public dances that pulled black people from as far as a hundred miles away. A glorious freedom of movement in which rites of puberty were acted out on a dance floor to the sound of brass, strings and ivory. For dancing was relief and communication, control of the body and its letting go.<sup>60</sup>

Cypress’ dancing not only bonds her with her African and African American forebears, it also allows her to engage with political struggles of the present moment and becomes a form of activism.

It is conjure dancing as activism that, like Sassafrass’ weaving and communications with the spirits, eventually leads Cypress back to her maternal home. When Cypress tells her boyfriend that she is performing with Soil and Soul in a church, he warns her she’ll get herself killed and references the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four African American girls in Birmingham, Alabama in

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>60</sup> Toni Morrison, “Rediscovering Black History,” in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Non Fiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 54.

1963. Fearing for Cypress' life, they return to her mother's home in Charleston to be married. Shange's entwining of art and political activism as a means of connecting with the ancestors and with the historical experiences of African Americans echoes historical uses of conjure as a way to combat the effects of racism and as a method to heal racial violence and oppression in the contemporary moment.

The only daughter not to leave the south is Indigo, the youngest of the three sisters, but she does leave her mother's home to become a conjure woman and midwife in Difuskie – an island off the coast of South Carolina and her father's birth place. From the outset, the narrator signals that Indigo is a conjure woman and the sister who most fits the archetype. In the opening paragraph of the novel, we are told about the nature of conjure women: 'Where there is a woman there is magic [...] A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits.'<sup>61</sup> Indigo's Christian mother, the narrator says, tries to pull the moss from her head and clip the roses from her thighs, to which Indigo responds: "Mama, if you pull 'em off, they'll just grow back. It's my blood. I've got earth blood, filled up with Geechees long gone, and the sea."<sup>62</sup> Shange suggests that women are magical and that they express this magic in different ways, as evidenced by the three sisters. It is the alternative systems of knowledge, expressed as traditional conjure, dance, weaving, and cooking amongst others, that women possess that Shange suggests make them magical beings.

Indigo's position as a traditional conjure woman is also confirmed when she is initiated into the Junior Geechee Capitans, a street gang made up of two young boys who Indigo befriends. Indigo's identification as a Geechee or a Jr. Geechee

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<sup>61</sup> Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Capitan refers to the Gullah people who live in the Lowcountry region of Georgia and South Carolina that includes the Sea Islands. The Gullah people developed their own language and culture that is distinct from other African American communities in the U.S. and is rich in African influences and survivals.<sup>63</sup> Indigo's identification with this community as a child and her move to Difuskie Island as an adult cements her identity as a conjure woman connected with an African past.

Not only does Indigo create conjure spells for various purposes, she also communes with the spirits through the playing of her "talking" fiddle. As a child she experiences contact with spirit ancestors when she visits the caverns with her fellow Junior Geechee Capitans and her fiddle in hand:

The caverns began to moan, not with sorrow but in recognition of Indigo's revelation. The slaves who were ourselves had known terror intimately, confused sunrise with pain, & accepted indifference as kindness. Now they sang out from the walls pulling Indigo towards them. Indigo ran her hands along the walls, to get the song, getta hold to voices. Instead her fingers grazed cold, hard metal rings. Rust covered her palms & fingers. She kept following the rings. Chains. Leg irons. The Caverns revealed the plight of her people, but kept on singing. [...] Indigo knew her calling. The Colored had hurt enough already.<sup>64</sup>

This meeting with her enslaved ancestors, not necessarily her genealogical ancestors but the spirit of enslaved African Americans, foreshadows Indigo's life's work.

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<sup>63</sup> For further on Gullah communities see Melissa Cooper, *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017)

<sup>64</sup> Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, 49.

Hearing the pain of the ancestors and the suffering that they endured under slavery, Indigo dedicates her life and power to soothing the pain of African American women. As a conjure woman she is both a healer and a midwife. Indigo's conjuring practices allow her to connect with her ancestors and to find purpose in her life that honours their experience and legacy.

Initially, Indigo assists Aunt Haydee, Difuskie's old conjure woman, in delivering babies by playing her fiddle to soothe and calm labouring mothers. Aunt Haydee is aware of Indigo's power and witnesses her move the sea just by playing her fiddle and claims that the last time a woman was able to do that was 'back in slavery time.'<sup>65</sup> The legend that she refers to is about a woman named Blue Sunday who could move the sea as well as using her power to resist the horrors of slavery; her body was unmarked after being whipped, she remained a virgin when two white men 'were through with her', and when her enslaver tried to rape her, she turned into a crocodile and took one of his legs.<sup>66</sup> Blue Sunday was called upon by labouring women for strength just as Indigo is in modern times. The legend says that when labouring women called upon the two conjurers, they heard a song that only Blue Sunday or Indigo could know. Indigo uses conjure through her playing of the fiddle to connect with her ancestor, Blue Sunday, in order to empower and give strength to women in pain in the present.

The novel ends when Indigo joins her sisters back at their mother's home in Charleston to deliver Sassafrass' baby. The final scene sees Hilda Effania and Cypress and Indigo crowded around a labouring Sassafrass and encouraging her

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 223.



through the birth. The last line reads ‘Mama was there.’<sup>67</sup> This concluding scene and last words symbolise the conjuring experiences of the three sisters and the way in which conjure connects them to their Mama, Hilda Effania, and to their spiritual and ancestral mothers. Sassafrass’ weaving, Cypress’ dancing, and Indigo’s midwifery and playing of the fiddle, allow them to feel a connection to their living ancestors and sisters as well as to their spiritual ancestors. In feeling this connection, the conjure sisters are able to explore African spirituality, know the energy of their forebears, and channel it through their art or craft. In doing so, they are empowered to navigate the challenges they face as African American women in the contemporary moment including escaping abuse and violence inflicted by men, processing the generational trauma of their black women ancestors, and having their voices heard and their contributions recognised in the struggle for freedom.

#### Restoration and Healing through Conjure in *Mama Day*

Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* charts the story of multiple generations of Day women and is mostly set on the fictional Sea Island, Willow Springs. In *Mama Day*, Naylor subverts the figure of the conjure woman and portrays her as a benevolent community leader with knowledge and powers beyond this world. In doing so, through the character Sapphira Wade and her legacy as an empowered community founder and healer, Naylor decentres the patriarchy and the narrative of slavery that has often pervaded literature that presents the experiences of African Americans in the United States. Instead, she centres the experiences and power of black women and presents their knowledge as a paradigm through which the communities they

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 225.

lead navigate their lives. The novel focuses on the youngest Day woman, Ophelia, her Grandmother Abigail, and her Great Aunt Miranda “Mama” Day. Ophelia leaves the family home in Willow Springs and moves to New York City in search of work and meets her husband, George. The couple visit Willow Springs but during their trip the only bridge connecting the island to the mainland is destroyed in a storm and Ophelia becomes the target of a harming ritual and almost dies. Mama Day must use her knowledge of healing and her ability to call upon the ancestors to save her grandniece and ensure that the legacy of the Day women survives.

In the opening of the novel, the reader learns that the Day women are descendants of Sapphira Wade, ‘a true conjure woman’ and an enslaved woman who used her powers to convince her enslaver to free all of his enslaved people and leave them his land before killing him in 1823.<sup>68</sup> The people of Willow Springs do not know Sapphira’s name but her spirit lives in the residents and in the island, and what she did to the enslaver becomes shorthand for overcoming somebody or something; to “18 & 23” somebody.<sup>69</sup> Willow Springs is a sacred place where the Day ancestors are buried and where the Days lived as free black people before the abolition of slavery. Sapphira’s story becomes a legend though it ‘don’t live in the part of [their] memory [they] can use to form words.’<sup>70</sup> As in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Sapphira’s descendants find other ways of knowing her and this is most pertinent in the figure of Mama Day who follows in Sapphira’s footsteps as a midwife and healer.

Naylor subverts impressions of the conjure woman as malevolent and re-values the role of black conjure women as a force for good and healing. A key

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<sup>68</sup> Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Random House, 1988), 3.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

example of Mama Day's power and her use of it to heal is the way in which she helps Bernice to get pregnant and treats her when she falls ill. Against Mama Day's advice, Bernice takes fertility drugs and becomes seriously ill. Due to her experience as a midwife, something that conjure women frequently acted as, Mama Day is able to help Bernice.<sup>71</sup> She draws on her extensive knowledge of midwifery which is connected to the idea of nature and cycles; '[t]hem wrinkled fingers had gone that way so many times for so many different reasons. A path she knew so well that the slightest change of moisture, the amount of give along the walls, or the scent left on her hands could fix a woman's cycle within less than a day of what was happening with the moon.'<sup>72</sup> Mama Day says that Bernice has 'done undone months of care' and the good effects of Mama Day's herbal treatments by taking the fertility drugs.<sup>73</sup> Similarly to the ways in which Shange and Reed set up a dichotomy between western and non-western systems of knowledge, Naylor imagines western medicine and conjure healing as two opposing systems. Western medicine is harmful to Bernice while Mama Day's natural, herbal medicine is more in tune with her body and has the capacity to heal her. Where Mama Day's knowledge of natural healing represents the generational knowledge of black women, this dichotomy reflects the critique of white western thought undertaken by black feminists at the time.

When Dr Smithfield arrives at the house after travelling from across the bridge, he thanks Mama Day and treats her as a colleague. He is respectful of Mama Day's knowledge and experience and recognises her as a fellow healer. Though he is a white medical doctor and outsider, having worked with Mama Day before and

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<sup>71</sup> For more on conjure women as midwives see Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin'*, 117-135 and Fett, *Working Cures*, 112-141. For a discussion of their appearance in literature see Valerie Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers* (New York: Routledge, 1996)

<sup>72</sup> Naylor, *Mama Day*, 75.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

witnessed her perform emergency surgical procedures, he respects her as a colleague: 'Being an outsider, he couldn't be expected to believe the other things Miranda could do. But being a good doctor, he knew another one when he saw her.'<sup>74</sup> This incident re-values the role of the conjure woman and the black woman midwife. In Sapphira's bill of sale, it is noted that she '[h]as served on occasion in the capacity of midwife and nurse, not without extreme mischief and suspicions of delving in witchcraft.'<sup>75</sup> Sapphira's skills are seen as a threat and something to be wary of; however Mama Day's work as a midwife and healer is recognised as equally valuable to the work of Dr. Smithfield. In contrast to the way in which conjure women have been viewed as dangerous and threatening, as discussed in chapter one, Naylor rescripts the conjure woman as a healer and as a kind and benevolent figure who cares for the community. She also re-values the knowledge that the conjure woman holds and presents Mama Day's epistemology as more beneficial to the African American community of Willow Springs than western systems of knowledge represented by Dr. Smithfield.

Naylor also introduces a malevolent conjure woman, Ruby, and pits the stereotype of the conjure woman as evil against her reimagined benevolent conjure woman, Mama Day. Ruby sees her husband complimenting Ophelia and the next day she offers to put her hair in corn rows, which Ophelia accepts, and in the days that follow she becomes extremely ill. Mama Day soon realises what Ruby has done and treats the poison that was combed into Ophelia's hair with an antidote paste. This she says has treated the physical condition but the only way to save her soul is with guidance from the Day ancestors and with George's love. Mama Day's anger at Ruby causes her to use her powers to bring a storm to Willow Springs in which

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., iv.

lightning hits Ruby's home three times and causes her death. Though Mama Day uses her power to murder Ruby, she also prevents her from targeting any more women that her husband interacts with and in this way, she protects the community. Tomeiko Ashford Carter suggests that in this situation, Mama Day is 'singly charged with dispensing justice within the narrative.'<sup>76</sup> She claims that Naylor pits the two women against each other as two feminine extremes, Mama Day as good and Ruby as evil, and argues that Mama Day's presence as a force for good is so strong that Ruby cannot win. I further argue that by killing Ruby not only does Mama Day act as a dispenser of justice and community protector but she also kills the stereotype of the conjure woman as an evil or malevolent figure. Naylor's primary conjure woman, Mama Day, as a community leader, protector, and healer survives and destroys the malicious conjure represented by Ruby. Once again, Naylor re-values the conjure woman and presents her primarily as a benevolent protector and warrior for social justice, challenging historical conceptions of her as evil.

In order to save Ophelia, Mama Day says it is essential that George meets her in "the other place", the part of the island where the Day ancestors are buried. George, the cosmopolitan New Yorker who represents western knowledge, is resistant to Mama Day and the woman-centred, otherworldly epistemology that she represents. However, after speaking with Dr Buzzard, another resident conjuror whom Mama Day calls upon to help convince George of the supernaturalism of Willow Springs, and seeing the extent to which Ophelia's health is declining, George eventually agrees to meet Mama Day at "the other place". The physical site represents a link to an ancestral past. She explains to George:

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<sup>76</sup> Ashford Carter, *Powers Divine*, 50.

I can do more things with these hands than most folks dream of – no less believe – but this time they ain't no good alone. I had to stay in this place and reach back to the beginning for us to find the chains to pull her out of this here trouble. Now, I got all that in this hand but it ain't gonna be complete unless I can reach out with the other hand and take yours. You see, she done bound more than her flesh up with you. And since she's suffering from something more than the flesh, I can't do a thing without you.<sup>77</sup>

In other words, Mama Day must use the wisdom and knowledge of her ancestors to retrieve the part of Ophelia's soul that is bound up in George so that she can save her. When George joins Mama Day, she instructs him to return to her home and to get something from underneath one of the chickens that she keeps. When George realises there is nothing physical for him to collect and bring back to Mama Day other than his faith, he begins the long walk in the sweltering heat back to the other place. On this walk, George suffers what appears to be a heart attack and dies, only in his death Ophelia can live. George's acceptance of Mama Day's way of knowing and healing means that the Day women can survive. It is only when the central male in the novel recognises and believes in the knowledge that the Day women possess that the family survives. This acts as a metaphor for the need for society to recognise and value the knowledge of black women. It emphasises the importance of having their perspectives heard and centred rather than silenced and marginalised within the white-centred Feminist Movement and male-centred Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and in society more generally.

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<sup>77</sup> Naylor, *Mama Day*, 294.

Similarly to how Shange's conjure sisters must commune with their ancestors to heal the troubles of the present, Mama Day must contact and seek guidance from her ancestors to save Ophelia. Like many African Americans, Mama Day and the living Days do not know the names of their ancestors. However, Mama Day meets Sapphira in a dream and uses her strength to heal her grandniece but she still does not learn the name of the maternal grandmother who secured the land of Willow Springs. After George's death and Mama Day's communion with her ancestors, she prophesizes that once Ophelia, referred to as the child of Grace, has dealt with her grief she will live up to her name. Mama Day says that Ophelia will discover how to listen to the ancestors as she does and will learn about the Days' family history. She says to George's spirit as she walks with her candle through the island:

I can't tell you her name, 'cause it was never opened to me. That's a door for the child of Grace to walk through [...] One day she'll hear you, like you're hearing me. And there'll be another time – that I won't be here for – when she'll learn about the beginning of the Days. But she's gotta go away to come back to that kind of knowledge. And I came to tell you not to worry: whatever roads take her from here, they'll always lead her back to you.<sup>78</sup>

In surviving Ruby's attack and being healed by Mama Day, Ophelia is destined to become the next generation of Day conjure women. As conjure women, Mama Day and Ophelia have the ability to visit with and contact their ancestors in the sacred ground of Willow Springs. Naylor presents conjure not only as a method of healing and protecting but as a way in which family history and identity can be recovered and as a means through which generational knowledge can be transmitted.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 308.

Naylor reconfigures the conjure woman as a benevolent community leader, healer, protector, and living link back to the ancestors. In doing so, she centres the knowledge of black women and highlights their value to the communities that they lead and are an integral part of. Additionally, as a story focused on the lives of women, Naylor decentres the patriarchy but she also decentres the narrative of slavery. Even though the story begins before slavery was abolished, rather than open with the image of an enslaved family, the narrative centres the story of a free woman who overcame her enslaver. Echoing the calls of black feminist activists and thinkers of the contemporary moment, Naylor casts black women as a symbol of resistance to intersectional oppression.

Shange, Naylor, and Morrison all utilise the figure of the conjure women as a vehicle through which to recuperate genealogical history, rediscover African spirituality, and to provide their characters with a deeper sense of who they are by recovering their ancestral history. Not only are the conjure women spiritual and medicinal healers in these novels, their presence and integral roles as links to the ancestors also heals the loss of genealogical history that African Americans suffer because of the Slave Trade. With the loss of these records, the women in these stories use acts of conjure — dance, music, weaving, ritual, healing — as another way of knowing their ancestors and ultimately to recover the history of their families. Literary conjure women of the 1970s and 80s subvert early stereotypes of the conjure woman as malevolent and instead represent her as a healer, a connection to African spirituality, and ultimately a site of rediscovery and reconnection to African ancestry and identity.

In these novels, conjure is reconfigured as a black feminist epistemology. Morrison's Pilate is ultimately killed by Guitar who represents masculine radical



black militancy. By ending the novel this way Morrison offers a commentary on the value of black women's knowledge, criticising the dominance of black men in the struggle for political and cultural freedom in the 1970s and highlighting the need for black women's voices to be heard. Naylor and Shange on the other hand make more overt claims about the power of conjure women, or the knowledge of black women, as a force for challenging the patriarchy and more widely for challenging western systems and theories of knowledge. Shange and Naylor in particular offer conjure as a system of knowledge whereby western thought is decentred and African-based traditions and "ways of knowing" are central to their characters' epistemologies. In black women's fiction during this moment, conjure is reconfigured as a black feminist system of knowledge that challenges patriarchal and racist systems of oppression.

## **Conclusion**

The twentieth century bore witness to the rendering of a multitude of narratives about African-based belief systems in the United States which became particularly pronounced during two key moments of self-definition for African Americans, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power era. Ethnographers and literary authors, including those who blurred the lines between these disciplines, sought to record and represent sets of beliefs that informed the lives of African Americans in both the North and South of the United States. As we have seen, their efforts produced markedly different representations of African-based belief systems. Some of their cultural productions echoed nineteenth-century narratives and images that were steeped in racism, while others challenged them and imagined African-based beliefs in new ways that were influenced by the social, cultural, and political moments in which they were produced.

This thesis has argued that these representations generated three central narratives about African-based belief systems. The first narrative sought to align African-based belief systems with the pervasive racial hierarchy that dominated the United States, presenting the practice of belief systems such as Voodoo as indicators of racial inferiority and as a symptom of an unmodern people. The second narrative challenged the former and presented African-based belief systems as a method of resistance for African Americans, providing them with the means to resist, disrupt, and survive within a national society that racialised power. The final narrative proposed that these belief systems provided African Americans a means to reconnect with an African identity, ancestry, and history. As this thesis demonstrates, these three narratives were often constructed alongside and in interaction with one another. Taken together, the texts examined in this thesis illustrate the myriad of ways in

which African-based beliefs were viewed by both white and black authors at two pivotal moments in the twentieth century.

The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power era saw writers challenge the socially constructed inferiority of African-based belief systems by representing them as socially and politically responsive systems that empowered communities and provided cultural continuity. However, the initial narrative persisted in tandem with the second and third. Tallant made visible the resistant, empowering qualities and communal importance of Voodoo in New Orleans but his and Saxon's travel literature simultaneously replicated and extended racist images of the primitive through their depictions of ceremonies and participants. Hurston's account of rituals also saw these three narratives interact with one another. Where on the surface her depiction of sacrifice could be interpreted as reinforcing images of conjure as primitive or savage, her double-gaze perspective as ethnographer and insider centred narratives of hoodoo as a socially and politically responsive system of care that celebrated African-based traditions. In addition, Hyatt's collection of interviews contains the testimony of hundreds of African Americans who attest to the ways in which conjure offered them protection and guidance but the collection remains imbued with ambivalence towards hoodoo as a legitimate and respectable belief system. Whilst censuring and offering testimony that challenges the perception of hoodoo as an inferior belief system, Hurston and Hyatt's accounts still offer glimpses of this well-established narrative of hoodoo, and its believers, as inferior. However, the greatest and most impactful challenge to long-held understandings of African-based beliefs as inferior came from Hurston's *Mules and Men* and in the testimony of Hyatt's informants. By her own measure, Hurston offered an antidote to the narrative that had long been controlled and disseminated by white outsiders and

onlookers. The themes in the stories she collected were similar to the testimony of black New Orleanians collected by Hyatt just a few years later. Though Tallant, and to a much lesser extent Saxon, offered glimpses into these counter narratives, the central challenge to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of African-based belief systems during this period came from black writers such as Hurston and black practitioners like those interviewed by Hyatt.

African American writers picked up this effort to recover and reimagine African-based beliefs with intensity during the Black Power era and the years that followed. Reed, Morrison, Shange, and Naylor provided powerful counter narratives in the 1970s and 80s, yet the presence of this first narrative of conjure as inferior and unmodern is still visible in their texts through the politics and actions of The Wallflower Order in *Mumbo Jumbo*, and the attitudes of Morrison's Macon Dead II and Naylor's George. However, this narrative is not centred in their works, rather depictions of African-based beliefs as powerful and empowering, as steeped in historical and cultural significance, and as a guiding force of good in the lives of their characters is central. Continuities are also identifiable between the texts produced in the earlier twentieth-century moment and those in the latter: for example, narratives about the healing power, social functions, and longer biblical origins of hoodoo found in Hurston and Hyatt's collections resurface in the works of the writers of the 1970s and 80s which this thesis examines. However, there were also some crucial distinctions. As discussed in the final chapter, the narratives generated by black women writers, who were working at a time when black feminist writing and organisation intensified, highlights the distinctly female and matriarchal

nature of African-based beliefs in the cultural imagination.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the multicultural make-up of African-based belief systems was more clearly emphasised in the latter moment, particularly in the work of Ishmael Reed. These similarities, continuities, and differences demonstrate the ways in which narratives about African-based belief systems persisted and evolved over the twentieth century concomitant with the shifting political and cultural landscape.

While several of the texts I have examined have been the subject of scholarly analysis, particularly those by Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison, whose legacies have generated large and extensive bodies of criticism, this thesis examines these prominent texts alongside lesser known publications that deal with similar subjects. Through the examination and comparison of a diverse range of texts, this thesis provides a more detailed and nuanced picture of how African-based beliefs were viewed and represented throughout the twentieth century and across disciplinary boundaries. By adopting a broad temporal scope and comparing two specific moments in United States history, this thesis identifies trends that persisted over the course of the twentieth century and traces how attitudes have changed over time. By utilising an interdisciplinary approach and longer chronological perspective, this thesis also identifies recurring themes, attitudes, images, and narratives that highlight how pervasive and persistent nineteenth-century racist depictions were in the twentieth century as well as the ways in which writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power era mobilised new images and narratives to rescript the discourse on African-based beliefs. Ultimately, these two moments were paramount in the struggle to reconcile well-established images of African-

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<sup>1</sup> Voodoo as a matriarchal system has also been discussed in numerous historical studies including Ina Johanna Fandrich, "Defiant African Sisterhoods: The Voodoo Arrests of the 1850s and 1860s in New Orleans," in *Fragments of Bone*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, 187-207; Roberts, *Voodoo and Power*; and Ward, *The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau*.

based beliefs that permeated the nation's cultural imagination with more accurate, nuanced, and evolving perceptions.

Through this interdisciplinary approach and by considering existing scholarship from history, literature, and ethnography, this thesis offers a bridge between historical studies of conjuring traditions which highlight the functions of conjure, including its use for protection, to mend relationships, and to redress imbalances of power, with literary studies that examine how conjuring traditions and folklore function in fiction and poetry. The examination of representations of African-based beliefs in ethnographies and in literary texts, and texts that could be described as both, offers a broader and more inclusive picture of how African-based beliefs were conceptualised, understood, and portrayed during the twentieth century.

Few scholars have taken this approach and more work is needed to push these disciplinary boundaries further. This thesis stands as an example of how scholars can continue to build bridges across the research being produced by scholars of African American history, literature, and culture. Indeed, the methodologies utilised in this thesis can be adapted to study how African-based beliefs have been represented on screen as well as beyond the chronological parameters of this investigation. The turn of the twenty-first century has seen a notable rise in the amount of television shows and films that depict African-based beliefs, most often New Orleans Voodoo. Examples include *The Skeleton Key* (2005), *True Blood* (2008-2014), *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013), and *The Originals* (2013-2018), all of which are based in New Orleans or Louisiana more broadly. Other cultural productions employ a more universal Black Magic Woman such as *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), *Eve's Bayou* (1997), and more recently *Pirates of the*

*Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006), and *Big Little Lies* (2019).<sup>2</sup> In several of these examples, the three narratives identified in this thesis persist in twenty first-century on-screen representations.

One of the most striking examples in recent years has been *American Horror Story: Coven*, released in 2013 by American television channel FX. The thirteen-episode long season traces the presence of witchcraft and Voodoo in New Orleans from the nineteenth century to the present day and depicts magic as a racially divided practice. On the one hand is the predominantly white coven of witches who trace their heritage back to the Salem witches, and on the other are the African American Voodooists whose magic has been handed down through generations of Africans and African Americans. The season perpetuates long standing pejorative impressions of New Orleans Voodoo whilst simultaneously disrupting others. Through the depiction of Voodoo ceremonies featuring animal sacrifice, possession, and raising the dead, as well as the portrayal of the deity Papa Legba as a cocaine-taking sadist, *Coven* sensationalizes New Orleans Voodoo and presents its practices as dark and dangerous. Yet the season also offers counter narratives to these historical representations. In an exchange between the leaders of the two magical sects, the witch Fiona Goode and Voodooist Marie Laveau argue about the superiority of their respective magic. Laveau asserts that the Voodooists are concerned with ‘more than just pins and dolls and seeing the future in chicken parts.’<sup>3</sup> Her statement implies that African-based belief systems are primarily reduced to something “less” than their realities. However, Laveau’s actions as a leader protecting the black community retaliate against racism and racial violence and honour her ancestors, offering

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the figure of the Black Magic Woman in film see Montré Aza Missouri, *Black Magic Woman and Narrative Film: Race, Sex and Afro-Religiosity* (New York: Palgrave, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> *American Horror Story: Coven*, “Boy Parts,” FX, October 16, 2013, written by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk

counter narratives whereby reductive narratives about Voodoo's inferiority and malevolence are interrogated and challenged.

What *American Horror Story: Coven* renders is the multitude of narratives that have persisted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that continue to inform representations and impressions of African-based beliefs in the contemporary moment. By looking back to texts produced during the Harlem Renaissance and in the 1970s and 80s, this thesis pinpoints where and when these twenty first-century representations stem from and how contemporary images of African-based belief systems have developed. However, historic representations of African-based beliefs systems are not just worthy of scholarly attention because of the insights they provide to contemporary representations. As this thesis demonstrates they provide a lens through which black intellectual and political thought in the twentieth century can be traced as well as how social and cultural shifts were registered in literature. Although Zora Neale Hurston claims that 'belief in magic is older than writing', examining how African-based beliefs were presented in writing allows us to understand the ways in which black writers produced counter narratives about liberation, resistance, and cultural affirmation during periods of black self-definition.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 183.



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