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Hoodoo Ladies and High Conjurers: New Directions for an Old Archetype

Kameelah L. Martin

The African American healing woman, female root worker, Mambo, Voodoo queen, or simply—conjure woman, has permeated the literature of the Black Atlantic as far back as Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) and as recently as Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* (2009). The conjurer, as a historical figure, is an evolution and merger of the African medicine man and priest, or spiritual leader that survived the transition into the New World. As the realities of bondage manifested themselves, enslaved Africans renegotiated these roles to best suit the New World agenda of the master class. What emerged within the continental United States was a single figure with whom folk healing and communal welfare was entrusted. The conjurer, whether male or female, served as a spiritual advisor and doctor during the centuries of chattel slavery and has since evolved into a type of hero recalled in the folktales, personal narratives, and stories of the African American community. Increasingly, it is the conjure *woman* that bears these vital cultural and narrative responsibilities, particularly in twentieth century African American fiction and film.¹ As an archetype that has endured over two centuries within the literary and popular imaginations, "Sistah Conjuror," to borrow Valerie Lee's phrase, has emerged in the late twentieth century as a complex, multi-dimensional presence deserving of a study of her character as its own ontological being. This essay endeavors to initiate such a study by offering an historical overview of the conjure woman as a literary and cinematic construction. Reviewing the conjure woman's evolution in print and visual media reveals several

shifts, moving from farce to folk hero within the African American artistic community.

To be transformed into an image of value and respect, the conjure figure has suffered much at the hands of those who inscribe him or her in their work. Most well-known for its role in slave insurrection and more subtle forms of resistance such as poisoning,² the African religious retentions collectively referred to here as conjure garnered a sizable reputation as a deplorable remnant of the "heathenish" slave population. The disdain and outright intolerance of conjure and hoodoo by the dominant class had a lasting effect on the African American community. Several early African American narratives reveal an internalization of the biases and prejudices toward African-based spiritual practices propagated by the white, land-owning class. Equiano, for instance, reflects on his encounter with a "wise woman" during his worldly travels. He makes it clear to his audience that he is unimpressed with her supposed ability to divine the future: "I put little faith in this story at first, as I could not conceive that any mortal could foresee the future disposals of Providence, nor did I believe in any other revelation than that of the Holy Scriptures" (111). In the only written expression of his internal thoughts, Nat Turner also conveys his disbelief and intolerance for folk religion in 1831.³ Turner claims that his strong influence over the slave community of Hampton, Virginia was not begotten "by means of conjuring and such like tricks—for to [the other slaves] he (*sic*) always spoke of such things with contempt" (Turner 46). Frederick Douglass is also among the black intelligencia who disassociated themselves from certain intangible, misunderstood aspects of African diasporic spiritual traditions. His famed interaction with Sandy Jenkins evinces Douglass's skepticism, though his triumph over Edward Covey validates Sandy's claim of power.⁴

The fictional accounts of conjurers from the later nineteenth century are not any more flattering. The plantation "doctor," Cato, in William Wells Brown's *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom* (1858) is curiously portrayed as simpleton and buffoon, a quack to be sure. According to Jeffery Anderson, this is not an uncommon occurrence in Brown's work: "William Wells Brown, author of *My Southern Home* [1880], used the semihumorous character Uncle Dinkie, a conjurer, to demonstrate the 'ignorant days of slavery.' In addition to being a fraud who earned his reputation by fortunetelling, love potions, and 'medicine,' Uncle Dinkie had learned to serve the devil instead of God 'kas de white folks don't fear de Lord'" (7). Martin R. Delaney makes clear his protagonist Henry Blake's, and quite possibly his own stance on conjure and slave superstition in his serial novel *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859-62). During his trek across the United States, the hero Blake discovers a camp of conjurers hiding in the swamps and allows them to initiate him into the "order of High Conjurers" mainly to "satisfy the aged devotees of a time-honored superstition" as the reader finds out (Delaney 114). Relaying the

happenings to fellow slave fugitives, Andy and Charles, Blake discloses his opinion about Maudy Ghamus and Gamby Gholar, the two elderly conjure men hiding in the swamp, and their traditions. Charles queries what good comes from being initiated into the order of High Conjurers, to which Blake replies: "It makes the more ignorant slaves have greater confidence in, and more respect for, their headmen and leaders. . . . It only makes the slaves afraid of you if you are called a conjuror, that's all!" (126). Henry returns to the issue of conjuration several chapters later when Charles stops to consider the power that Ghamus and Gholar can wield if they are indeed "high conjurers":

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

As if Blake's statement fails to clarify to the reading audience that within the novel conjuring and other such traditions are not taken seriously, Delaney depicts the conjurers in question as incompetent and ignorant. The reader quickly comprehends that these conjure men are trying to convince themselves of their power as much as they try to convince Blake:

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

Though a very detailed description, Delaney seems to be drawing out the inadequacies and transparencies of Gholar's conjuring moment.⁵ This type of degradation and dismissal of conjure and hoodoo was common among the burgeoning black literati of early America.

In an attempt to challenge the popular notion that African Americans were ignorant and incapable of learning and living as equals among

The wide range of conjuring depicted in *The Conjure Woman* challenged prevailing assumptions about the tradition as Chesnutt both perpetuates and subverts many of the stereotypes surrounding the practice of African American folk belief. Richard Brodhead comments on the intricacies of Chesnutt's use of conjure, suggesting that the author had both political and cultural reasons for incorporating it in his work:

The practice of conjure is complexly characterized in these tales, where it combines occult properties of magic with the thisworldly, even businesslike properties of a social administration system. Conjure figures in these tales as a way to control property and settle property disputes, a way to regulate love conflicts, and, in "A Victim of Heredity," even as a bank, and it is used by whites and blacks. But above all conjure figures as a recourse, a form of power available to the powerless in morally intolerable situations. (9)

For the purposes of this essay, the representation of Aunt Peggy is of particular importance. As one of the first literary conjure women to appear in the fiction of an African American writer, Aunt Peggy serves as a prototype of sorts for contemporary writers. Aunt Peggy takes up very little space in the overall layout of the stories, but the collection is entitled *The Conjure Woman*. Chesnutt grants Aunt Peggy more mobility and autonomy than any of his other characters with the exception of Julius, perhaps. She is introduced in "The Goophered Grapevine," and she is obviously held in great esteem by her community and perhaps by Chesnutt as well: "Dey wuz a cunjuh 'oman livin' down 'mong' de free niggers on de Wim'l'ton Road, en all de darkies fum Rockfish ter Beaver Crick wuz feared er her. She could wuk de mos' powerfules' kin' er goopher—could make people hab fits, er rheumatiz, er make 'em des dwinel away en die; en dey say she went out ridin' de niggers at night" (Chesnutt 36).

Within this very short description of Aunt Peggy, much is revealed. She lived among the free community of African Americans, which signals to the reader that she was not enslaved and had ownership of her self, her services, and her time. Her status as a free person might also be a result of her conjuring abilities. Her freedom elevates her standing among her peers. For Aunt Peggy, whose "knowledge and power emanated from a source outside the slave system," respect for her craft and position was easily earned as her power "could be neither controlled nor usurped by the masters" (Roberts 94). Her free condition also implies a wider range of mobility within the community. Historically, African Americans were not permitted to roam freely whether free or enslaved during the antebellum period, but Aunt Peggy is depicted as one who moves between her home and the local plantations without much trouble aroused.

whites, public figures such as Douglass, Delaney, and others with advanced education believed that disavowing folk beliefs about sympathetic magic and the supernatural was the first necessary step toward racial uplift. There was still, however, a large populace who believed in and practiced conjure with no regard for racial solidarity or changing the minds of white folks. Conjuring culture saturated the American south in particular, and could not be excluded from the literary production of and about that region. At the turn of the twentieth century Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) became one of the first creative works by an African American writer to reflect conjure as the cultural phenomenon it was. In Chesnutt's collection, black and white, master and slave alike believe in the power of conjuration. The title character, Aunt Peggy, takes center stage and becomes one of the first depictions of a conjure *woman* that challenges the stigma of women and spirit work so deeply ingrained in Western culture. Pulling his influence from the archives of the Hampton Folklore Society, local oral histories of his native North Carolina, and his own childhood memories, Chesnutt is the first to carve out a niche for the conjurer—particularly the female conjurer—on which the next generation of African American writers would build.

Rather than focusing on one particular aspect of conjuring, Chesnutt's stories project the various circumstances in which conjure was invoked. Rather than shielding his audience from the seemingly negative attributes of hoodoo and rootwork, Chesnutt reflects its healing and harming duality to allow his readers to interpret, according to their own positionality, the role of conjure in American culture. For instance, in "The Goophered Grapevine" the white plantation owner seeks Aunt Peggy's wisdom, not a so-called ignorant, lazy "darkie": "Mars Dugal' tuk [a basket of food] in his buggy en driv ober ter Aun' Peggy's cabin. He tuk de basket in, en had a long talk wid Aun' Peggy. De nex' day Aun' Peggy come up ter de vinya'd. De niggers seed her slippin' 'roun,' en dey soon foun' out what she'uz doin' dere. Mars Dugal' had hi'ed her ter goopher de grapevines" (Chesnutt 36). Historically, conjure was thought to be the exclusive "nonsense" of African Americans with few exceptions made for a number of white practitioners who went against the grain.⁶ For Chesnutt to present a white property owner as a participant in conjure surely went against the public opinion of his time, but by doing so he grants conjure arts more humanity and universal appeal. Instead of projecting conjure as devil worship or a feast of animal sacrifice preceded by sexual orgy, Chesnutt's conjure is accessible and *useful* to both the planter class and the enslaved. Chesnutt depicts the use of conjure as a tool of resistance in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" when Aunt Peggy transforms a plantation owner into a slave as a life-altering lesson on how to treat his fellow man. He also portrays it as a deadly tool of revenge when Phillis conjures a tree on the plantation of "Marse Aleck" who is responsible for either killing or selling her children in "The Marked Tree."

Though Aunt Peggy is respected and even feared for her supernatural powers, Chesnutt is clear that her power is not limitless. When the slave Solomon realizes that Aunt Peggy has turned Mars Jeems into a slave in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," he keeps his discovery to himself as he knows that "she'd 'a' got in trouble sho', ef it 'uz knowed she'd be'n cunj'in' de w'ite folks" (Chesnutt 68). Apparently, while the masters cannot usurp Aunt Peggy's power to conjure, they can surely hold her accountable for her behavior, which, in the inhumane world of chattel slavery, could easily translate to death. In the same story, Aunt Peggy has to give Solomon a second potion to undo his negligence concerning the first, which also reaffirms that she is not omnipotent; she, too, must monitor the outcome of her spells to make sure the effect does not betray her intent. Aunt Peggy is neither malicious nor overly conservative in the type of conjure she performs. She performs for the customer who renders fair payment, putting her own needs and survival at the top of her priorities. She does, however, seem inclined to consider the suffering of fellow African Americans as she helps a grieving slave child reunite with his mother in "Sis Becky's Pickaninny," and she assumes great risk in turning Mars Jeems into a slave.

The most telling feature of Chesnutt's description of Aunt Peggy, however, is the omission of her physical appearance. Chesnutt, recognizing that conjure women simply do not fall into a fixed set of physical characteristics, allows his readers to determine Aunt Peggy's appearance within their own imaginations. She is neither an old, toothless, wrinkled hag, nor a bandana-wearing, obese, black woman. Her age, height, skin tone, weight, and the color and condition of her hair are not revealed, leaving room for her to appear as each reader sees her: a black mammy for one reader, a free Creole of color for others. Chesnutt sanctions Aunt Peggy to take the form of any number of diasporic women with or without regard to stereotype. With his simple exclusion, contemporary conjure women are free to be as beautiful as Diahann Carroll playing the role of Elzora in *Eve's Bayou* or exude as much sexual energy as Melvira Dupee in Arthur Flowers's *Another Good Loving Blues*; their literary prototype was not cast in a suffocating, unbreakable mold. This point is particularly salient as the problem of African American women's representation continues to be a contentious topic in literary, film, and popular culture forums. *The Conjure Woman*, with its obvious emphasis on conjuration and the female practitioner, serves as a precursory text for literary depictions of conjure women. It provides one of the earliest portraits of conjure women that at once reflects the seriousness with which they are considered folk heroes and reclaims her from the depths of Western racial and cultural biases. It is also one of the first published pieces by an African American that takes the oral genre of the conjure tale from spoken to written word.

As David H. Brown suggests, the conjure story constitutes its own genre: "Given the frequency and elaborateness of conjure references in the ex-slave, African survivals, and folklore literature—references that are often developed into poignant stories—it is fair to suggest that the conjure story be considered a sub-genre of African American oral literature" (26). Both John W. Roberts and Sharla M. Fett agree that the orally disseminated conjure tale functions as its own genre. Roberts argues that conjure tales were the primary means by which conjurers were hailed as folk heroes:

These brief, often first person accounts served as an ideal expressive vehicle for transmitting a conception of conjurers as folk heroes. In these narratives, narrators recalled a specific instance in which a conjurer utilized his/her extraordinary spiritual powers to overcome a threat to the physical, social, or psychological well-being of an individual known by or connected in some way to the performer and/or audience. (96)

Surmising that such tales were exchanged during "tale-telling sessions," Roberts also suggests that these tales worked to dissuade any fear and skepticism associated with conjure or to promote the uncanny abilities of a particular practitioner (96). Fett takes this idea a step further by theorizing about the narrative structure of conjure tales. Basing her analysis on oral histories of conjure collected between the years 1870 and 1940, Fett argues that the stories evolve in a four step process:

First, conjure accounts laid out a conflict, identifying a soured relationship with a well-known neighbor or family member as the source of the conjure spell. . . . Next, the narrator described his or her affliction by mapping out the bodily effects of the hoodoo "dose." . . . Third, the afflicted person searched for a conjure doctor, a healer with "second sight" into the workings of the spiritual world. Fourth and finally, the narrator recounted the steps taken by the conjurer to bring about a cure. (86)

Many of Chesnutt's tales build upon this format. Though he certainly deviates from the structure by adding more description and detail surrounding the initial conflicts his stories do incorporate all four steps of narration. Julius, a metaphorical conjurer who casts spells with his words, begins the story of the "Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" this way: "Dey wuz a cunjuh man w'at libbed ober t'other side er de Lumbe'ton Road. He had be'n de only cunjuh doctor in de naberhood for lo! Dese man yeahs, 'tel old Aun' Peggy sot up in de bizness down by Wim'I'ton Road. Dis cunjuh man had a son w'at libbed wid 'im, en it wuz dis yer son w'at got mix' up wid Dan—en all 'bout a 'oman'" (Chesnutt 97). Julius immediately identifies the conflict which sets the use of conjure into motion. The formula Fett describes, like the image of the conjure woman, evolved and was adapted as convention by writers in the late twentieth century. The

publication of *The Conjure Woman* then signaled a shift toward carving out a safe space in which the conjure woman and conjure tales could exist in the literature of African Americans in a more respectful, culturally specific, creative form. "Rather than the negative associations of witchcraft," within Chesnut's stories "conjuring has been an empowering concept. . . . Conjuring pays homage to an African past, while providing a present day idiom for magic, power, and ancient wisdom within a pan-African cultural context" (Lee 13). Such a distinction makes Chesnut's collection the single most important text of the early twentieth century for conjure fiction. Authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Mercedes Gilbert, and Rudolph Fisher would follow Chesnut's lead by publishing novels that center African American folk belief and conjure practices during the first half of the twentieth century—*Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Aunt Sara's Wooden God* (1938), and *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932), respectfully; but it was another thirty years before contemporary African American writers would take the helm from their literary ancestors.

Following the harrowing years of the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans began to express themselves in new ways:

Responding to the needs of the black lower class, some groups such as US [United Slaves], promoted the development of an indigenous African-based cultural value system, ritualized in the ceremony of Kwanzaa. . . . Others, such as the Black Panther Party, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Republic of New Africa, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, adopted the ideology and strategy of achieving black self-determination by any means necessary, including armed struggle. (Bell 238)

The Black Power and Black Arts Movements of the 1960s, out of which many of these organizations developed, are indirectly responsible for the revivification of the conjure woman in African American literature. With an elevated interest in African history, culture, and retentions, an entire generation of African Americans assumed cultural expressions that affirmed their African heritage and pride. African American artists, musicians, writers, dancers, and the like began moving away from Eurocentric beauty canons and ideals of living. Bernard Bell summarizes the popular thought of that time: "In the late sixties . . . many Afro-Americans were encouraged by historical circumstances to continue resisting or rejecting Eurocentric models and interpretations of manhood and womanhood. They turned instead to non-Western, nonwhite communities and Afrocentric models to discover or create possibilities for autonomous selves and communities" (240). Many African Americans embraced their natural hair texture, darkly hued skin, and looked to Africa as a site of home, pride, and respect. Colleges and universities began to develop curriculum based on the new field of African American or Black Studies. Conjure, root work, and other African retentions, which had taken refuge in

underground subcultures and had not wholly disappeared, slowly became a subject with which many in the literary world became interested—both as writers and scholars. This was particularly true of the Women's Movement out of which Barbara Smith and Deborah McDowell began to call for a Black Feminist Criticism in literary studies. Toni Cade Bambara summarized the new direction in which the consciousness of women of color was heading in 1983: "We're more inclined now, women of color, to speak of black midwives and the medicine women of the various communities when we talk of health care rather than assume we have to set up women's health collectives on the same order as non-colored women have" (qtd. in Bell 241).

As Houston Baker argues, it was not until the Black Arts Movement that African American vernacular and folk traditions were appreciated, assessed, and critically engaged as "a complex of material and expressive component" within the African American literary tradition (84). Hurston and Langston Hughes had experimented with vernacular traditions, but their work was not granted critical acclaim or literary value because the white dominated publishing world still found such expressions only "quaint." The generational shift of the post-Civil Rights era redirected the reception and scholarly attention of black folk toward the vernacular, which resulted in the rediscovery of Hurston's genius and a conscious move to privilege folk belief and vernacular traditions in African American literature. African American male writers were taking part in a new black aesthetic that focused partly on the reclaimed African retentions across the Diaspora. Don Belton's *Almost Midnight* (1968), Steve Cannon's *Groove, Bang, and Jive Around* (1969), and the early works of Ishmael Reed all situate African-based cosmologies as the dominant paradigm for comprehending their novels. The explosion of black women writers in the 1970s solidified the resurgence of the conjure woman as African American women began to explore alternate spiritual paradigms and incorporate them into their creative works. J.J. Phillips's *Mojo Hand* (1966), Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1981) were among the first novels by African American women that allowed an African-based way of knowing to dominate post-1965 texts and featured conjure women as well-developed characters.

Akasha Gloria Hull in *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African America Women* (2001) posits that African American women witnessed a shift in the outward practice of their faith in the early 1980s; a shift that voiced the discontent of African American women who found the religion of the dominant culture "inadequate, inconsequential, or confining" (44). Such discontent was already being incorporated in their writing. Hull documents the movement of writers and artists like Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, Toni Cade Bambara, Michelle Gibbs, and Lucille Clifton from "having religion" to the acceptance of "everybody's ancient wisdom" (3).

African American women were practicing and reclaiming the spiritual systems of their African past. Ifá, Santería, and Voodoo worship rose in popularity as African American men and women found new spiritual fervor in the ways of their ancestors and as Afro-Caribbean populations in the United States expanded exponentially. The "new" spirituality of which Hull boasts was not really new at all. In fact, the ancestor worship, divination practices, and altar building rituals of which she speaks were from the same traditions that enslaved Africans in the New World were largely forbidden to practice. Rather, "only [African American's] enlarged capacity to accept, explain, appreciate, and benefit from [a revived spirituality was] fresh" (52).

In 1981 African American women's hybrid spirituality found substantiation in the world of popular culture when Toni Morrison graced the cover of *Newsweek Magazine* and was glorified for her use of "signs, visions, [and] ways of knowing that reached beyond the five senses"; though I might add that for a great number of readers, mainstream recognition was not a prerequisite for belief, but rather a re-affirmation of what they already knew to be true (Strouse 52). Morrison and her sisters were reinventing African American literary tradition—giving voice, mobility, and undeniable presence to women and spirit work in their narratives. Morrison, Walker, Naylor, and others pulled from the oral performances of their youth, the folk practices of the present and the ever-present vernacular language of African Americans to construct narratives that spoke not only to African American experience, but also worked toward the preservation of cultural traditions. Joanne Gabbin comments on the effect such works had on the literary establishment:

They are telling their stories, born in intimacy and nourished by communal revelation, by drawing upon a rich legacy of storytelling and myth-making. Transforming these oral forms into innovative literary structures, black women writers are giving evidence of another aesthetic experience and, in the process, using particularly womanist forms of thought and expression, are rocking the foundations of a Eurocentric male hegemony which has dominated American Literature. (246)

The authors of the late 1970s and early 1980s set into motion a literary movement toward the reclamation of the conjure woman as cultural icon. Though folktales, songs, verbal arts, and the like are present in the works in question, Valerie Lee emphasizes the ways in which authors of the contemporary period overwhelmingly invoke conjure women as the primary purveyors of folk magic: "Although the authors write works that present a full range of African American folklore, including proverbs, myths, superstitions, folk language, folktales, folk customs and customary behaviors, dance, and music, the figure of the granny midwife/woman healer provides a pivotal structural and thematic framework" (20).

The conjure woman ceased being a relic of supposed archaic slave culture and returned to the status of honored ancestor and spiritual leader. African American writers suffuse the character of the conjure woman with the intimate recollections of southern-born grandmothers that healed with cod-liver oil, predicted weather patterns, and dreamed of fish. Pilate Dead, Nurse Bloom, and Miranda Day all represent a nostalgic remembrance and reverence for the folkloric antecedents of African American literature. Contemporary writers Tina McElroy Ansa, Arthur Flowers, Rainelle Burton, and Jewell Parker Rhodes now privilege the conjure tradition and conjure women in ways that directly challenge the notion of black women as victimized other. These writers and many others construct unforgettable conjure women that take center stage in their narratives, encouraging the reading audience to see and read conjure women within the cultural space out of which they developed. The conjure woman is resurrected by contemporary authors, liberated to walk the literary world in a new body that is free of the stigmatized ideas of her past life. She strides with her head held high in unquestionable recognition of the diasporic cultural matrix that has revived her. This second life, indeed, appears to be a lasting one.

Each author paints a starkly different picture of the conjure woman, revealing the diversity and complexities within one figure; yet the history and degradation of women and spirit work unites the representations as one body meant to counteract that history and unveil the many ways that black women were *not* victims. Concerning black women and the problem of representation, contemporary authors shatter the one-dimensional views of womanhood to which African American women have historically been relegated. The fictional conjurers Melvira Dupree and Marie Lavau disrupt what western, patriarchal society would have many believe about the physical appearance, able-bodied-ness, and spiritual weakness of African American women healers. Gloria Naylor's Miranda "Mama" Day rejects the notion of the mammy, for instance, and Phillips's Eunice Prideaux is a mulatto far from tragic. The resuscitated conjure woman runs the gamut of physical characteristics and descriptions. Western standards of beauty take a backseat and the image of the wrinkled hag simply does not apply. Rather than relying on the dominant culture's ideas of how women immersed in supernatural magic should look, a number of authors take their cue from Chesnut and allow their conjure women to take on the physical diversity of the African American women after whom they are modeled.

Arthur Flowers, for instance, ignores the lore that claims conjurers are "either 'tall or dark' or extremely short and [have] red eyes, blue gums, a piercing gaze, or some unusual feature such as a shriveled arm" in his depiction of Melvira Dupree in *Another Good Loving Blues* (Fett 97). Earlier common notions of conjurers or magic women often depict them as old, dark-skinned, wrinkled, and sexless. In contrast, Melvira is a vital young

woman whose physique is well put together, according to the reaction of one Lucas Bodeen. "Thick pretty head of hair he couldn't wait to put his fingers into," he thought to himself as he approached her (Flowers 2). Melvira's professionalism, unfortunately, is questioned because of her unusually attractive appearance. "Sweet Luke" is even taken aback when she introduces herself as a conjurer: "Conjure? Didn't know if he was ready for all that . . . 'Well I declare you ain't like no conjure I ever seen . . . [and] I seen hoodoos and conjures of all persuasions'" (3).

Even the town folk of Sweetwater, Arkansas, Melvira's hometown, found it peculiar that conjure had laid claim to such a pretty girl: "Melvira Dupree was considered by folks in these parts of Arkansas to be a somewhat unconventional conjuror. First off she was such an attractive woman. Folks had very clear-cut ideas about what a conjure should look like: strange, weird and otherworldly" (28). Flowers is mindful of the impression he makes by creating "that Fox Dupree" (5). He returns to the deviation of physical appearance later in the novel by invoking the legendary Zora Neale Hurston. Zora, in the early stages of her career, finds herself in a café on Beale Street in which Melvira enters escorted by her hoodoo mentor, Hootowl. Hearing that two conjurers are present, "Zora took the opportunity to scoot her chair closer to Melvira" (118). During her interaction with Hurston, Melvira's legitimacy as a practitioner of the spiritual arts is challenged, albeit silently: "This Melvira Dupree intrigued her. She didn't fit Zora Neale's idea of a conjure woman. The clear brown eyes regarding her were open and without subterfuge. And way too attractive. It was only after she had looked closely that Zora recognized the amusement that had also been in the eyes of the really good conjures she had known back home in Florida" (118). The two women "recognized in each other sisters of the cloth," and with Hurston's endorsement of Melvira Dupree as a true source of power, the matter of her exterior form is dissolved (118). In similar regard, Marie Laveau's beauty was almost as legendary as her status as Voodoo Queen both in life and in Jewell Parker Rhodes's fictional account of her life: *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau* (1993). A free woman of color, Marie's racially mixed heritage might signify for some readers a tragic ending, though the opposite could not be truer. While Rhodes certainly allows the beauty of her conjure woman to permeate the novel, it is also important to note that the story of a mulatto woman with the power to summon gods is a far deviation from the trope of the tragic mulatto. In this sense, Rhodes challenges several problematic labels at once.

Occasionally in conjuring fiction, a practitioner appears whose prominence in the world of conjure and hoodoo stands in direct contrast to the Western religious concept of a single, sovereign god. Such personalities, like Gloria Naylor's Sapphira Wade, credit their power to a source on an equal or greater plane than the Western, Christian deity. Proving that her conjure woman is no mere witch or subordinate to the whims of a man,

Naylor positions Sapphira as an equal partner in the creation of Willow Springs, her island home: "The island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found Himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. 'Leave 'em here, Lord,' she said. 'I ain't got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people but I can lead on with light'" (110). Not only does a black woman stand face to face with God, but she seems to appear out of thin air; the text neither indicates that "the greatest conjure woman on earth" was a creation of God nor that her power was an extension of his. Sapphira, the great mother of Willow Springs, is descended from African gods that stand on equal ground with the Western god, which is why she is present at the creation and able to negotiate directly with the Creator. Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* also locates a black woman healer in the likeness of Christ, suggesting that the arms of African American conjurers are not too short to box with God, as the colloquialism taunts. In a miraculous ceremony that echoes the historical, yet sensationalized oral accounts of her priesthood, Rhodes's Marie Laveau dives into the waters of Lake Pontchartrain while under the possession of the Voodoo serpent deity, Damballah. Submerged for more than three minutes, the excited crowd of Voodoo devotees and doubters believe that Marie has perished in the dark, icy waters, however, as the omniscient narrator informs, "There was an afterlife. Christ sacrificed on the cross would rise again. So too would Marie" (Rhodes 304). Marie rises from the deathly cold waters of Lake Pontchartrain in a resurrection scene that rivals that of Biblical lore: "*Up she flew, through ageless and ancient waters, bursting into the air. Marie was convinced she could pluck the moon. Then her body lowered to the wet surface*" (307). Marie then proclaims her place as a divine entity, re-enacting the miracle of her Christian rival: "*She walked on the surface of the water as if it were earth*" (307).

By walking on water, a power usually only attributed to Christ, Marie defies the association of women, Voodoo, and African-based spirituality with devil worship and black magic. Marie performs a miracle that is historically linked to the omnipotence and grace of the Supreme Being in Christian religion. While her power stems from an African-based tradition, the association with and likeness of Marie's miracle to that of Christ clearly delineates her spiritual authority as the will of a divinity as influential and evocative, if not more, than Jesus Christ. It is an association that certainly calls the attention of the reader. Through granting their respective conjure women all but omnipotence, Naylor and Rhodes subvert fifteenth century theologians's supposition that women engaged in the workings of the spirit are the tools of an evil and usually male entity.⁷ Their conjure women, in contrast, perform rootwork that taps into the spiritual richness of the Ancestors, Africa, and a woman's autonomy. The source of their divinity falls outside the jurisdiction of Satan extending it

then to the far reaches of the universe and dating it to a time before creation.

Rhodes's Marie Laveau proves a worthy adversary for western, religious supremacy as she stands in opposition to the suffocating traditions of the Catholic Church. A Catholic priest tries to warn her that Voodoo is a path into an evil darkness that will eventually destroy her. Marie indignantly challenges the notion that darkness and evil are synonymous: "How can darkness be evil if your God made the universe? Didn't he make darkness too?" (109). She takes her interrogation of good and evil a step further when Louis DeLavier, a white, northern journalist, declares that "snakes are the devil": "Why?" Marie probed. "Because a snake taught Eve the difference between good and evil? How good is a god without a choice? Voodoo gods are like you and me—they fight, they love, they try to conquer death. They aren't perfect and remote like the white God and Virgin" (241). Arguing that Catholicism strips its flock of agency and fails to let human nature take precedence over improbable expectations of perfection, Marie articulates the very ways that Catholicism works as another patriarchal vehicle to constrict the spiritual actualization of the people of New Orleans, if not the world. As the Voodoo way becomes clearer for Marie, she becomes bold and blunt in voicing the limitations Catholicism places on its practitioners, women especially. She even disputes the power of Christ to judge her:

She looked closely at Father Christophe. Pale skin, a shaved circle on his head, a coarse tunic. He was remarkably unimpeccable. It was the setting of painted saints, gold filigree, and custom and ritual that made him seem more powerful. But a man is all he is, thought Marie. A man like DeLavier. Like Jacques. Why should he, or any man, have the power to condemn her? Even Christ had been a man once. (111)

The twentieth century has witnessed the growth of new genres, characters, and tropes within the African American literary tradition. Within the wide and varying expressions of one cultural group, conjure women emerge as a staple quickly moving from debased, remnants of "heathen" Africa to the regal vessels of divinity they had once been. Particularly in the contemporary period, African American authors have viciously confronted the false characterization of their folk heroes as grotesque, ungodly beings in league with the European figure of evil. Rather, they move to bolster the African American healing woman to a position of respect and value—a position that was deviously usurped from her over centuries of Eurocentric hegemonic rule. Gloria Naylor, Arthur Flowers, and Jewell Parker Rhodes have written novels in which women and spirit work is the basis for survival in a world meant to objectify and exploit the racialized, gendered other. Not only do African American conjure women call on their innate spirituality to survive their own hardships, but they extend their power to assist in the preservation and healing of an

entire community of people who look to them for guidance. The movement toward reclamation of the conjure woman and the alternate spirituality of African American women, however, is not confined to the literary world. As Hull points out, "In public media such as television and film, black women are playing a strong role in conveying spiritual themes and material" (152).

Hull encourages critics and scholars to look outside the literary circuit to get a fuller picture of what is taking place in black women's spirituality, arguing that looking "at these media phenomena extends our exploration of this new spirituality into arenas that are equally as important as lived experience and books" (152). Rather than being depicted exclusively in the work of African American authors, the conjure woman's character has spilled over into the realm of film. The portrayal of the conjure woman in these films moves from gross stereotype to reverence and even teeters on ambivalence in some cases. Of particular importance to this project are the ways in which African American filmmakers reconstruct the image of the conjuring woman engaging issues of body politics, stereotype, and the position of African retentions in visual texts. Take, for instance, the film *Eve's Bayou* by Kasi Lemmons. Her film works to reflect the lives and physicality of conjure women as African Americans conceive them. The film is woman-centered and highlights a conjuring community. As such, it provides a rich landscape in which to thoroughly explore the nuanced, filmic representation of the African American woman healer.

Lemmons, a black, female, independent filmmaker, proves committed to challenging and reappropriating the image of the conjure woman in an overtly conscious way. She makes the image three times over in the most successful independent film of 1997. Hull describes *Eve's Bayou* as "an original and historically respectful exploration of diverse African American spiritual traditions, which tackles, in a deft and sophisticated manner, such femininely resonant topics as sexual abuse and the possibilities of personal freedom for women" (Hull 198). Set in 1962 Louisiana, the storyline has a glaring resemblance to *Mama Day*. The story surrounds the Batiste family, descendants of the slave healer Eve who was bequeathed a sizable amount of land by her master, the southern aristocrat General Jean-Paul Batiste, after curing him of cholera. Eve populated the land with sixteen of Batiste's children and the land took on her name, appropriately called Eve's Bayou. Much like the descendants of Sapphira Wade, the living Batistes are a family of healers. Louis Batiste (Samuel L. Jackson) is the local physician, who does little more than "push aspirin to the elderly," while his sister Mozelle (Debbi Morgan) is a "psychic counselor," tending to the otherworldly needs of the community (Lemmons 189, 166). Then there is young Eve (Journée Smollett), the most recent of the Batiste descendants to inherit her slave ancestor's gift of second

sight. All three characters engage in various degrees of healing, creating a battle between folk and western healing.

The conflict between folk healing and western scientific medicine is one that continually arises where conjure women are present. Miranda "Mama" Day has a complicated, but working relationship with Dr. Brian Smithfield in Naylor's novel. In *Another Good Loving Blues* Melvira Dupree surrenders a deathly ill child to Dr. Flowers, knowing that she did not have the ability to retrieve souls from the grave, and Rannie stubbornly rejects Sarah's "swamp magic" in blind faith that a doctor will come out in the rain to care for a colored baby in Alice Walker's short story "Strong Horse Tea." As Valerie Lee points out, the history of African American healing women is inextricably connected to the development of the male-dominated medical profession. The rise of the American Medical Association (AMA) is largely responsible for moving black women's healing practices "from folklore to forceps, from asafetida to anesthesia, from home to hospital, from license from God to licensing by the State" (Lee 23). A cultural and professional war was waged against folk healers with the rise of western scientific medicine, which eventually discredited and displaced even those who resisted. Once the revered seat of ancient wisdom and healing, African American conjure women became "women who lost their high cultural status, their bodies becoming the terrain where a history of desire and defiance was fought" (24).

This was a battle not easily won by the medical profession as conjurers and midwives formed a culture of resistance. Conjuring practices moved underground while many midwives fought back by assimilating to the standards, but adding their own professional touch through the contraband hidden away in their midwives' bags. Items such as castor oil, ginger tea, and other herbs and products of nature often found in the bags were "not in accordance with the new medicalization of birth [and healing], but carry-overs from their practice of folk medicine" (44). Where Lee argues, "it has been left to African American women novelists to preserve the language, lore, and learning of [women healers]," I extend her idea to encompass not only literature, but film as well (24). Lemmons does an excellent job of representing the lore and language of conjure and hoodoo practices in *Eve's Bayou*. Lemmons's film, however, more specifically engages in the ongoing discourse surrounding African American syncretized healing and the near unchallenged sovereignty of western medicine.

Eve's Bayou not only contrasts folk medicine with that prescribed by the AMA, but also sets up an even more nuanced hierarchy between two of the three conjure women in the film. The Batiste family lays claim to two adult healers; Louis Batiste is the prominent physician of the town, while his sister, Mozelle, is a healer of the soul rather than the body. It is no coincidence that the male is associated with western science and logic. African American folk healers were systematically displaced by middle-

class men, and Louis certainly represents as much. His association with the patriarchal medical field so harmful to women healers is made even more apparent during the Sunday brunch scene. He reminds the family that Mozelle "is not unfamiliar with the inside of a mental hospital" in response to his wife Roz's (Lynn Whitfield) frenzy over his sister's most recent premonition (Lemmons 169). Mozelle envisioned a child being fatally struck by the local transit. He clearly places very little stock in Mozelle's second sight, and his influence on discrediting his sister is persuasive. Not five minutes after his declaration, Cisely (Meagan Good), the eldest of the Batiste children, puts in laymen's terms what Louis only signifies: "Of course we already know. . . that Aunt Mozelle is crazy" (169). Louis pours salt into the already open wound when Eve tries to defend her aunt and conjuring mentor:

Eve: *She is not! She knows things! People trust her!*

Louis: *Sweetheart, Aunt Mozelle's a little eccentric. That fortune telling is just something we let her do to keep her out of trouble. (169)*

Here, the full extent of Louis's patronizing attitude toward his sister's profession is revealed. Not only does he belittle her spiritual power by implying that she is insane, but he also assumes control of her affairs, insinuating that she is either incapable or incompetent. He simplifies her work as colloquial "fortune-telling," refusing to acknowledge its origins and the power behind it. This is particularly problematic as the viewer learns that the Batiste name, which Louis has the privilege to pass on to his descendants, is tied to a long history of second-sight, a history to which he *must* be privy. The use of the personal pronoun "we" suggests that he is not alone in his control over Mozelle, but Roz declares herself a believer. Even Grandmère—his mother—is not quite in agreement: "Louis! She may be crazy, but them visions *always* come true. In my day, we were thankful for signs and warnings" (169). Louis is unshaken, however. He becomes more cavalier in his superior position as medical practitioner. When confronted by his signifying wife about which of his "patients" he is off to serve on a Sunday afternoon, he abruptly cuts her off: "Woman, go get your palm read and let me do my work" (170). Here the suggestion is that like Mozelle, palm reading is something in which Louis allows Roz to participate so that she stays out of trouble, or rather, out of his unprofessional liaisons with women patients, while he tends to the real work of healing bodies.

Lemmons plays devil's advocate by exposing frames of Mozelle that project her as the crazy eccentric Louis declares her to be. Following her third husband Harry's death, Mozelle falls into a deep, dark grief. Mozelle not only mourns the loss of another husband, but also wallows in the realization that she may be cursed. Eve saunters up to Mozelle's home, which is dark and unattended, and enters the front door without knocking or using a key. The door is left unsecured—an indication of just

how detached from the outside world Mozelle is at this point. Upon entering Mozelle's boudoir, Eve has to untangle the cursed, black widow from her own web of despair. She pushes the sheer, white, weightless valance aside to reveal a naked, wild-haired Mozelle who refuses to get out of bed. Eve is finally able to rouse her aunt by reminding her that she is expecting clients, but just as Mozelle rises from bed and is convinced that she must face the day, she is startled by the haggard reflection of herself in the mirror. As if her appearance does not connote an altered state of mind, Mozelle hears Harry's voice whisper her name. Upon looking back into the mirror, she meets the ghosts of all her deceased husbands, much to her dismay. For those viewers who do not believe in the spirit world, this particular frame may only solidify Mozelle's break from reality.

The second scenario in which Mozelle's mental state is questionable appears in the scene that Lemmons affectionately titles "Two Witches Face Off." Roz and Mozelle walk to the farmer's market and decide to get their fortunes told. Mozelle is appalled at Elzora (Diahann Carroll) for reasons unclear, but something during Roz's divination compels Mozelle to inquire what it is that Elzora has to say about her own future. Mozelle has quite a reaction when Elzora, her professional rival, affirms that she is indeed cursed—just as Mozelle suspects—and that any man who marries her will be doomed to the same fate as her previous husbands. "Sale menteuse!" Mozelle screams, which roughly translates as "dirty liar." She grabs the glass jar that holds Elzora's earnings and smashes it to the ground right before wailing, "You're a horrid, old lying witch!" with huge, tearing, mascara smeared eyes. She stumbles out of the booth, her picnic basket and other belongings cast aside and runs, arms flailing, out of the market leaving Roz to chase after her.

While viewers might interpret these scenes as a corroboration of Louis's prognosis of insanity, I argue that Lemmons's depiction of Mozelle is quite a normal portrayal of human behavior. Mozelle is, after all, only human and thus vulnerable to the pain and grief of everyday life. Her emotional reactions to the death of a loved one and an attack on her character are grounded in reality. Indeed, if she had not responded with such emotion then perhaps such a prognosis might be warranted. On the contrary, Mozelle is very poised and professional in all other scenes. As she prepares to see her clients, Mozelle transforms herself. The frame of her seeing her husbands' ghosts in the mirror cuts directly to a view of Eve and Mozelle—stylishly dressed in mourning colors, high-heeled, fully made-up, and hair in an up-swept fashion—sitting in the parlor patiently awaiting the arrival of her first client. And much to Louis's disapproval, her spiritual gift proves to be more than adequate.

Mozelle's second sight was bestowed on her at a very young age; she recalls a time when she was younger than Eve she could simply observe perfect strangers and the story of their lives would unfold before her very

eyes. Her visions are very accurate and detailed. She is able to tell her first client the exact location and date that she and her husband will be able to find their missing, drug-addicted son. There are limitations to her power, however, as Sandra Grayson points out: "Although Mozelle can view other peoples' lives very clearly, she laments that she is unable to see her own life. She looked at each one of her husbands, who all died tragically, and never saw their futures" (55). Though her visions are very specific, she needs clarity of mind and focus in order to see clearly. The premonition she receives following her tiff with Elzora is badly misinterpreted, a result of Mozelle's flustered state of mind:

In addition to Mozelle's inability to see her own life, in times of emotional distress her interpretation of images she receives can be clouded, indicating another limit of her abilities. In a moment of anger after an encounter with Elzora, for example, she misinterprets images connected to one of Roz's children. Mozelle is infuriated because of the fortune that Elzora reveals and runs across the street in front of a bus. . . . When looking at the bus destination sign, she [envisions] a man walking down train tracks and a child fall then she faints. She has actually seen Lenny Mereaux shoot Louis because [he] is having an affair with Lenny's wife Matty; as the train passes by, Louis pushes Eve out of the way when he sees Lenny's gun. However, in her emotional distress coupled with her and Roz's misinterpretation of Elzora's warning. . . . Mozelle believes that she has seen one of Roz's children hit by a bus. (Grayson 56)

Mozelle's second sight is refined and as modern as she may seem, Mozelle is still connected to the ancient ways of healing. She opens her divinations with a prayer, very similar to the tradition of Voodoo ceremonies: "Lord, lead us in the direction of righteousness. Advise us that we may become wiser in Thy will . . ." (Lemmons 163). Her visions are readily evoked through a laying on of hands. She is also closely associated with water, an element often evoked in such divination practices as water gazing. The cinematic emphasis on water—the bayou—symbolizes Mozelle and her spirituality. Even in the digitally enhanced premonition scenes, black and white frames of the bayou appear in Mozelle's mind before she can focus on the information she is seeking and the image returns to bring the visions to closure. Mozelle's association with water also suggests an affiliation with Oshun, the river goddess. Her trouble with men and love implies a troubled relationship, or unfulfilled obligations such as a sacrificial offering to the orisha who rules over love, sexuality, and conception/fertility. That Mozelle is barren only strengthens this hypothesis.

Mozelle's in-depth knowledge of folk healing and conjuration is revealed during her consultation with Madame Louise Renard. When Madame Renard is overwhelmed with emotion after learning that her niece has swindled her out of her life savings, Mozelle prescribes a charm to

protect her from any further wrongdoing. Mozelle quietly walks Madame Renard from the door and sits her down at a table. Mozelle then walks discreetly across the room to a large chest from which she removes a small wooden box. She instructs Madame Renard: "I want you to get a small bag made of the skin of chamois. In it place this piece of lodestone and John Conqueror root. Tie it with a piece of devil's shoestring and in your right hand, sprinkle five drops of holy oil. Keep the bag next to your skin" (Lemmons 163). Coincidentally, Madame Renard is a patient of both Batiste healers. While Mozelle does not challenge or even criticize her brother's profession, it appears that her methods produce results that certainly rival the good doctor's. During the scene sequence in which Louis makes his rounds with Eve in tow, he visits Madame Renard who, much to his surprise, is making an extraordinary recovery which he attributes to her "pills." Madame Renard laughs mockingly, exclaiming that indeed, everything will be just fine. And as Louis continues on to his next patient, the frame focuses on Madame Renard as she pulls out the charm that she wears faithfully under her clothing.

Louis might do well to take a lesson or two from Mozelle and humble himself to the power of roots and spirit. Much like her brother, however, Mozelle Batiste also places herself and her work in a hierarchal scale. Her hierarchy has more to do with her class status than cultural and folk tradition. She positions herself as the superior, professional rival to Elzora. Mozelle refers to herself as a "psychic counselor," whereas she calls Elzora a "side-show attraction" (166). When Roz suggests that they get their fortunes read, Mozelle takes one look at Elzora and comments, "She couldn't predict heat in August" (166). Mozelle's superiority complex must stem from the material possessions that seemingly make her the more modern and cultured of the two conjurers: an incomparable wardrobe, cosmetic accessories, and a home from which to run her business rather than a booth at the marketplace. Mozelle uses a very refined and sophisticated language as she engages in her work, a performative aspect that reflects the airs of southern, middle-class living. Mozelle proves herself knowledgeable about the African origins of her spirit work, but obviously only performs those rites for special clients. She otherwise steers away from an association with Voodoo and conjuring. She does not even acknowledge that what she performs for Mrs. Renard is, in fact, Voodoo until Eve questions her about it. Even then she remains ambivalent:

Eve: You told Daddy you didn't practice no voodoo.

Mozelle: She was desperate.

Eve: Does it work?

Mozelle: We'll see.

Eve: Well, what if it don't?

Mozelle: (Laughing) I don't think she'll sue me. (Lemmons 164)

In a later scene, Eve inquires more about how one can use Voodoo to kill. Mozelle tries to intervene on the troublesome happenings she suspects are about to take place, but an ambiguous battle of will and spiritual clout takes place between her and Eve, in which Mozelle "shies away from the power and revelations emanating from her young niece's hands" (Hull 204). In a weak attempt to discourage Eve from whatever it is she is contemplating, Mozelle insists, "You can't kill with Voodoo. That's ridiculous!" (Lemmons 183). It is unclear, however, whether her statement reflects her own feelings about Voodoo or just a ploy to steer Eve away from the harmful effects of the craft.

Elzora, on the other hand, makes no pretense of hiding her deep connection to African-based traditions. Described as a "southern hoodoo woman" and "sensationalist" by Kasi Lemmons, Elzora practices her root work in the local marketplace (*Commentary*). Her booth is filled with lit candles, charms, Catholic iconography, and other hoodoo paraphernalia. She wears white face paint making her very much a spectacle.⁸ It is the performative nature of Elzora's conjuring with which Mozelle seems most disgusted. Mozelle literally frowns at Elzora and stands at a distance while she divines for Roz. Interestingly, Elzora's performance—the face paint, lit candles in broad daylight, her staccato speech pattern, and dramatic admonition for Roz to "look to your children"—holds Mozelle spellbound (Lemmons 168). She stares intently as Elzora uses cat bones to divine for Roz, removing her sunglasses to scrutinize the exchange more closely. She is caught in the rapture of Elzora's act. Elzora's power emanates even to those who resist because her magic is far older and more potent than what her rudimentary booth and face paint suggest, as Lemmons implies when she comments that Elzora "sensationalizes something very serious" (*Commentary*).

Elzora relies heavily on her African past to inform her spiritual power. Unbeknownst to Mozelle, Elzora does her more serious work not in the market place, but in what she tells Eve is her "office." When sought out by Eve, Elzora does her consulting at her private home, a wood and sheet metal boathouse sitting on stilts in the midst of the swamp. When she agrees to cast the death spell for Eve, she asks for the hair from the person Eve wants to harm, a sure sign that her technique follows in the tradition of conjurers long past.⁹ On the first shot of Elzora's home, there is nothing visible that links her to conjure and Voodoo; when Eve returns after nightfall, however, several allusions to Elzora's ancestral faith are revealed. As Eve walks up to the wooden front door, two drawings in white chalk come into focus. On close inspection, these become more than simple chalk drawings; they are *vèvès*—the sacred symbols, signatures of the Voodoo *loa* used in ritual. The *vèvès* clearly associate Elzora with the Voodoo tradition so prominent in Louisiana. Upon entering her home, Eve witnesses Elzora lighting the candles on a very large altar. It takes up the entirety of the wall on which it rests. The remainder of the

house is also decorated with the accoutrements of conjuration — mason jars with unidentifiable matter, bones, an owl, herbs, roots, and the like.

Although Mozelle insists on differentiating herself from Elzora, the only real distinctions that set them apart are social class and Mozelle's safe distance from the African origins of her craft. In terms of healing methods, both conjure women are gifted and well-versed in the workings of the invisible world. Both women are trying to keep a tradition of folk healing alive that is invariably subject to criticism not unlike the derision leveled by Louis. They are more alike than probably either would like to admit. Mozelle's middle-class lifestyle, not a difference between healing practices, is the great divider between her and Elzora. Their rivalry is steeped in western capitalist ideology rather than in debates over medicinal cures. In many ways Lemmons's hierarchy of healing creates on screen what Lee argues black women's fiction has done on the page:

Repeatedly, black women's narratives demonstrate what happens when men of science meet women of faith on landscapes that still bear what Patricia Hill Collins would term the contours of an African-centered feminist epistemology: concrete experience can and does contribute to meaning; knowledge comes through dialogue and is governed by an ethic of care; the community expects personal accountability. By violating these principles, men of science and learning whether black or white, become targets of critique and ridicule in the narratives. (63-64)

Louis's criticism and ridicule are lasting; his dismissal and non-belief in his sister's spiritual authority make him blind to his own undoing. Elzora understands how these things work; she explains to Roz, "Sometimes a soldier fall on his own sword" (Lemmons 168). By placing conjure women — in their various forms — at the center of her cinematic narrative, Lemmons reaffirms the prominence and license vested in these cultural icons. She does not sugarcoat the issues of class and western hegemony, however, bringing critical attention to the innumerable ways in which conjure women have been marginalized and discredited, even by each other. "Elzora, as voodoo lady," Hull concludes, "represents a black cultural tradition, one way that diasporic African people have used to try to put themselves in relation with spirit and exercise superhuman power. Though her character is informed by knowledge and treated with dignity, her way is . . . shown to be a lesser path since it traffics in secrecy, fear, revenge, and other base human emotions" (204). Eve's fear of Elzora, as well as Roz and Mozelle's reactions, exemplifies the attitude across race and class that has been partly responsible for the negative stigma attached to women and African-based spirit work.

"The Black Feminist narrative style" of *Eve's Bayou* is, as Machiorlatti suggests, "one of recollection and remembering so that stereotypes can be subverted, inaccurate historical representation corrected, and new aes-

thetic choices and forms merge that diffuse dominant forms" (98). Lemmons's film undeniably engages in black feminist criticism, challenging the place of black women in history, the imagination, and their roles in creative processes outside of the literary realm. Much like Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, *Another Good Loving Blues*, and *Voodoo Dreams* before her, Lemmons creates a narrative surrounding black women, history, and spirituality that gives voice to a very particular cultural experience and aesthetic, extending a branch of this well-established theme in African American artistic lineage from the page to the screen. The political and social positioning of conjure women in contemporary film and literature comes only second to the innovative representations of a beloved icon. Flowers, Naylor, Rhodes, and Lemmons do away with mamies and tragic mulattos finally, to replace them with images of black women that reflect the diversity in physical attributes, spiritual disposition, and lived experience of the millions of women of color across the diaspora.

These contemporary artists paint refreshing portraits of conjure women that do not easily fit into the early molds cast for them by a western gaze. Instead, they have created new molds and models of inquiry for hoodoo ladies that will continue to extend this ever-evolving archetype into the twenty-first century. The work of these artists has proudly called the attention of the literary and cinematic world to the conjure woman. The issues of body politics, authority, and western ways of knowing that arise with the study of women and the supernatural are thoroughly explored and nuanced within each work. A number of authors and filmmakers are engaged in the work of reappropriating the conjure woman from the depths of the uninformed. The conjure woman is enjoying her second-coming, finding shelter and safety in the creative works of many, but resurrection is only the first step. The conjure woman is abundantly present in current artistic traditions; now it is left to scholars and critics to employ themselves in dissecting the complexities and layered dimensions of such a worldly figure. The absence of such work is surely felt as authors such as Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Jewell Parker Rhodes, Tina McElroy Ansa, and Nalo Hopkinson continue to invoke the conjure woman in their work and older texts such as Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928), Zora Neale Hurston's *Joni's Gourd Vine* (1934), Mercedes Gilbert's *Aunt Sara's Wooden God* (1938), and J.J. Phillips's *Mojo Hand* (1966) are reevaluated for their conjure content. The proliferation of conjure women such as Tia Dalma¹⁰ and Mama Odie¹¹ in films by pop culture giant Disney signals a specific cultural moment in which Sistah Conjur is swiftly moving (again) into mainstream consciousness. A critical understanding of African American healing women is significant and necessary to engage such representations and extend the dialectic between black women, spirituality, and self-determination into the twenty-first century. The re-imagining of the conjure woman by literary and filmic

artists is focusing our critical gaze in a new direction; it is up to us to determine if we like what we see.

NOTES

1. Images of the female conjuring figure can be found in such films as *Chloe, Love is Calling You* (Neilan 1934), *The Devil's Daughter* (Leonard 1939), *Eve's Bayou* (Lemmons 1997) and *The Skeleton Key* (Softley 2005).
2. As early as 1712 reports of conjurers aiding slaves in revolt were in circulation. The conjurer Gullah Jack Pritchard was in cahoots with Denmark Vesey in the squandered revolt of 1822 in Charleston, South Carolina. The West Indian colonies were rampant with conjuring cooks who would poison their masters.
3. See *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.
4. The incident with Sandy Jenkins is told in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* originally published in 1845.
5. Conjuring moment is a term coined by the author which refers to the specific moment within a given narrative when the conjurer invokes spiritual power through prayer or incantation, performs healing rituals, concocts potions, charms, or other conjuring agents. The conjuring moment is a critical point in the story usually helping to move the action forward.
6. The original Dr. Buzzard, a famous conjure man from South Carolina, was a white man whose name was inherited by his African American successor upon his death; however, there is not an over abundance of white conjurers in the historical record. See Anderson, 14.
7. According to Michael Bailey, Johannes Nider is the first clerical authority to position women as being prone to seduction by the devil and thus becoming witches. Heinrich Kramer who in 1486 published *Malleus Maleficarum*, a guide for hunting and prosecuting witches, follows Nider's example.
8. Lemmons discusses in the Director's Commentary how Carroll adapted the face paint from a picture of a Yoruba woman in order to appease the producer's concern that she was too beautiful.
9. Sharla Fett reconstructs the historical make-up of conjure "hands" and "charms" as they are often called, with hair being an important ingredient: "Animal parts, such as rabbit paws, chicken gizzards, or reptile skin, frequently accompanied the hair, fingernails, or footprint dust of the targeted person . . . Hair and other bodily materials from the targeted individual personalized the conjure packet, directing spiritual forces toward the intended recipient" (102-103).
10. Tia Dalma is the name of the Obeah woman who assists Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (Verbinski 2006) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (Verbinski 2007).
11. Mama Odie is the name of the Voodoo Queen who acts as the fairy-god-mother figure for the first African American Disney Princess, Tiana in the New Orleans-based animated film, *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements and Musker 2009).

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