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Black Witch Thought:  
An Africana Feminist Religious Movement in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century America

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Black Witch Thought:  
An Africana Feminist Religious Movement in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century America

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Advisor: Dianne Stewart, Ph.D.

An abstract of a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religion, 2023.

## Abstract

### Black Witch Thought: An Africana Feminist Religious Movement in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century America

By  
Marcelitte Failla

Situated at the crossroads between Black feminist studies and Africana religious studies, this dissertation engages archival research, digital media content analysis, and ethnography, especially semi-structured interviews with influential Black witches, to explore their collective histories and thought worlds. Taking seriously a nomenclature that now defines the spiritual identity of an increasing number of Black women and femmes across the United States, my scholarship examines a lineage of Black witches who possess ontological supernatural power(s) and engage African-heritage religions. The Black witch is everywhere, with a significant presence on social media, such as @thehoodwitch, who boasts over 470 thousand followers. TikTok videos with Black witch hashtags, such as #blitch, #blackwitchesoftiktok, and #blackwitch, have accumulated over 232 million views. Offline, the Black witch gathers at conferences and kitchen tables in New Orleans, Detroit, Baltimore, and other cities and regions of the country.

I argue that an Africana religious philosophy firmly rooted in Black feminism—or what I call a Black feminist Africana religious orientation—is the framework Black witches employ for their understanding of self, community formation, and beliefs regarding material manifestation. Based on archival and primary source material, I maintain that Black conjure practitioners in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early-20<sup>th</sup> century used the terms ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’ to denote a variety of African-derived spiritual practices, thus challenging widely held beliefs that these terms only apply to white Neopagan practitioners. I then probe ethnographic accounts of spiritual abilities such as communicating with the dead and argue that a Black feminist Africana religious orientation informs a Black witch ontology. “Black Witch Thought” then examines the emerging movement’s political and intellectual lineages, particularly Black religious nationalism, queer theory, and Black feminism. Finally, I analyze how Black witches engage material manifestation narratives often structured through the tenets of prosperity gospel rhetoric and reconceptualize them based on a theological belief in mutual aid and anti-capitalism. The interventions each chapter makes crescendo into a scholarly exploration that illumines how spiritual and political beliefs are inseparable in Black witch thought and serves as a case study of how American religion is changing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## Acknowledgments

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Dianne Stewart, whose initial faith in me has profoundly impacted my life. Thank you for the patient conversations, extensive feedback on my writing, career guidance, letters of recommendation, and unwavering support. I aspire to carry forward your legacy in the field of Africana Religious Studies.

I am also immensely grateful to Dr. Gary Laderman for consistently believing in the importance of studying Black witchcraft, encouraging a creative approach to scholarship, and providing countless letters of recommendation. I sincerely thank Dr. Margarita Guillory for her invaluable mentorship and for allowing me to publish an article in the *Black Scholar*. I thank Dr. Axelle Karera for broadening my perspective beyond the field of religion.

I am indebted to Dr. Yvonne Chireau, whose mentorship and friendship have profoundly influenced my understanding of Black religion. Thank you, Dr. Chireau, for our enlightening conversations, for continuously sharing opportunities, for including me in the workshop on preserving Hoodoo, and for your guidance throughout the academic job market.

Thank you to my editor, Dr. Carrie Kholi-Murchison. Not only did you do an impeccable job with the grammatical edits, but your commitment to the content helped shape the ideas. You assisted in clarifying my findings, improving the flow and mood of the writing, and made this work a joy to read. I could not have finished this dissertation without your support.

I would also like to thank my exam committee: Dr. Kyrah Malika Daniels, Dr. Calvin Warren, and Dr. Dilek Huseyinzadegan. Your guidance and expertise have been instrumental in my growth and understanding of queer of color critique, feminisms of color, and Africana religions.

Thank you to all the faculty and staff at the Mellon/American Council of Learned Societies for providing the funding that enabled me to bring this project to completion. Your guidance during the career seminar was invaluable. I would also like to express my gratitude to Andy Boyles for his consistently prompt and efficient administrative assistance in addressing all my logistical concerns. Thank you to Dr. María Carrión and James Hoesterey in the Graduate Division of Religion.

I am incredibly fortunate to have had my friends and colleagues' support and intellectual engagement: Elaine Penagos, Christina Désert, Keith Menhinick, Amanda Anderson, and Dr. Michelle Gordon (who provided me with a wonderful teaching associate opportunity in the Department of African American Studies). You have been the best companions in academic conversations and have provided invaluable support throughout this journey.

Thank you to the leaders of Ile Ori African Cultural Center: Iyalosa Omolewa O. Eniolorunopa, Iyanifa Niniola Emilere, and Iyanifa Ayorinde Awojobi. You taught me aspects of Ifá that I could not learn from books.

To my mother, Marcelitte senior, the first Black witch I knew, who is why I study African-heritage religions, and to my father, Robert Failla, I offer my heartfelt thanks. I am grateful to my New York family—Kirya Traber, Jessie Levandov, Kjerstin Rossi, and Claudia O'Brien—for their assistance during the initial application process. To my phenomenal community of loved ones in Atlanta—Marcel Foster, Raphiel Murden, Adrian Spatzer, Adrian Kunemund, Crystal Serena, Vinisha, and Chris Rumph—I extend my deepest gratitude for the emotional support that enabled me to complete this degree.

I extend my sincerest appreciation to my husband, Marlon Hendred. Your love, compassion, presence, and unwavering support have made this journey possible.

And lastly, I thank my ancestors, Ori and Orisa who are always with me.

Ase!



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## **Introduction: The Black Witch Movement**

Mawiyah Kai EL-Jamah Bomani, an eighth-generation witch, Oya priestess in the Yoruba tradition of Ifá, and expert conjure woman, is pictured in a power pose with her hands on her hips in an all-black vinyl catsuit with locks cascading down her back.<sup>1</sup> Her chin up. Her stare to the camera. She seems to be daring her audience to make a move. The caption accompanying the photo reads, “What I wear during the witchiest month of the year.” Across social media, one can easily witness the presence of Black witches like Mawiyah. They appear on TikTok such as BossyBruja’s account offering spells to attract love, healing, money, and success, on popular Instagram accounts like the @thehoodwitch, and at local events like Dawtas of the Moon: Black Witch Convention.

Books like Lilith Dorsey’s *Orishas, Goddesses, and Voodoo Queens* (which quickly became a best-seller among spiritual seekers), YouTube series like Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde’s on Black witchcraft (which has influenced Black women for over 11 years), and Facebook group’s like Daizy October Latifah’s *The Witches’ Brew: Indigenous Rootwork and Conjure* all contribute to a Black witch discourse that spreads among the larger Black witch population. This dissertation is an ethnographic and historical study of the contemporary Black witch and her emerging religious movement.<sup>2</sup> It explores core political and theological beliefs taking shape on and offline, ultimately arguing that Black witches are collectively constructing what I call a Black feminist Africana religious orientation based on the merging of shared West

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to use the real names of interlocutors because it helps direct readers to their spiritual services, which produce an income upon which many Black witches depend.

<sup>2</sup> Although the term Black witch is not gender-specific, my focus is on Black women and femmes given their overwhelming presence in the movement and their historical demonization.

and West-Central African beliefs (such as reincarnation and ancestor veneration) and a Black feminist framework. I argue that a Black feminist Africana religious orientation serves as the philosophical basis for the Black witch's understanding of self, community formation, and spiritual discourse around manifestation narratives.

## Background

Black witches who practice African-heritage religions typically escape association with popular representations of witches in the American imagination. The term “witch” is commonly associated with a lineage of European pagan traditions that mostly white feminists revived in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. White feminists embraced pagan practices and connected the term witch to a new spiritual movement centered around the Goddess, a dedication to combating gender inequality at home and work, and environmental activism. Some notable white witches include Laurie Cabot and her lineage of initiated witches, Starhawk and the Reclaiming Witches, and Christian Day and Brian Cain, who organize HexFest in New Orleans.<sup>3</sup> European traditions affiliated with witchcraft include Wicca, Druidry, Celtic neopaganism, and Italian Stregheria. African-descended individuals can and do practice these European traditions and have even developed their own spaces, such as the Facebook group African American Wiccans and the Facebook page The African American Wiccan Society Online School. Starr RavenHawk, a famous witch of African descent, practices Wicca, organizes WitchFest USA, an annual festival in New York City, and was trained under the guidance of Laurie Cabot.<sup>4</sup> While Starr

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<sup>3</sup> “Laurie Cabot Official Website.” Accessed June 27, 2023. <https://www.lauriecabot.com>., Salomonsen, Jane. *Enchanted Feminism: Ritual, Gender and Divinity among the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco*. Religion and Gender. London ; New York: Routledge, 2002., HexFest. “HexFest 2023: A Weekend of Witchery in Old New Orleans!” Accessed June 27, 2023. <https://www.hexfest.com/index.php?>

<sup>4</sup> WitchesFest USA - A Pagan Faire. “WitchesFest USA - A Pagan Faire | A Festival Event for All from the Heart of New York City through the Magicks of The World Wide Web.” WitchesFest, June 22, 2023. <https://www.witchsfestusa.org>.

RavenHawk and many members of the Facebook group African American Wiccans identify as both Black and witches, I have chosen *not* to focus on this particular group and lineage.

Alternatively, this dissertation explores a separate Africana-oriented movement of Black women and femmes who are practitioners of African-heritage religions such as Ifá, Hoodoo, and Vodou and define themselves as Black witches. For many Black witches in what I call “Africana” lineages, “Black” not only refers to someone of African descent but encompasses their African-originated religious practices. Choosing the traditions of their ancestral past is a political decision for these Black witches, as it signifies their commitment to aligning with and uplifting Blackness. Within the population of Africana-oriented Black witches, this research examines two main groups. The first group is the broader social media phenomenon of Black women and femmes choosing to identify as Black witches. The second group is the more interconnected network of Black witches who engage in more frequent in-person, communal dialogues, offering support for each other's work.

Although I do not have precise information on the first broader group's size, it is evident that the Black witch's social presence is rapidly expanding. On Instagram, Bri Luna, popularly known as The HoodWitch @, has 482,000 followers. The Facebook group, Magically Spiritual Black Women, has 97,000 members, and Black witch hashtags on TikTok total over 232,000,000 views. Social media, a capitalist enterprise that generates billions of dollars annually, including Meta (the company behind Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), which reported a total revenue of \$116 billion in 2022, still serves as the predominant marketplace of accessible platforms for Black women and femmes nationwide to connect.<sup>5</sup> Black witches use social media to share

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<sup>5</sup> “Meta Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2022 Results.” Accessed June 27, 2023. <https://investor.fb.com/investor-news/press-release-details/2023/Meta-Reports-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-2022-Results/default.aspx>.

rituals, offer mentorship, promote their products and services, and express their political beliefs. Additionally, they employ platforms like GoFundMe to redistribute money to people in need and organize gatherings through video conferencing platforms such as Zoom.

On social media, most Black witches are novice practitioners of African-heritage religions. Some are just beginning to explore ontological abilities like communicating with spirits or healing through energy transfer. In this dissertation, these novice practitioners are referred to as seekers. Many seekers are leaving the Black church and turning towards African-heritage religions for personal and political reasons. They pursue a connection with their African ancestral lineage and are dissatisfied with the conventional structures and cultures of the church, which often replicate forms of patriarchy and white supremacy. Social media acts as a gateway for curious seekers, where they encounter expert practitioners like Juju Bae and the HoodWitch. These experts offer divination services, online classes, and spiritual products, serving as mentors for aspiring spiritual practitioners. Seekers can either request explicit paid guidance or simply follow a Black witch account that shares divination and spell tutorials. In Facebook groups, there are often “#starthere” posts that guide seekers to trusted texts and educate them about the “dos and don'ts” of Africana spirituality. For example, the Facebook group The Witches Brew: Indigenous Rootwork and Conjure provides a list of reputable diviners for seekers to contact. On Instagram, seekers engage with experienced Black witches through discussions in the comments section or during Instagram Live sessions. Thus, social media serves as a virtual gathering place for communal learning and praxis among Black witches.

Although some might assume that Black witches on social media are primarily a younger generation of witches, this vast network is actually intergenerational. Many leading Black witches on social media—like Shawna, also known as #Oshunslight (@oshunslight), and Karen

Rose (@empresskarenmrose), who owns Sacred Vibes Apothecary (@sacredvibesapothecary) in New York City—are in their 50s, given the time required to become a skilled Black witch – which includes extensive years of mentorship, initiation into a religious tradition, and the time needed to develop a reputation within broader Black witch networks.

Most of my ethnographic research consisted of engaging with the second group of witches named above—a communal network of skilled, respected, and leading Black witches engaging in localized work, that then influences practitioners across the United States.<sup>6</sup> I spoke with 30 Black witches that participate in a network much more interwoven than the broader population of witches on social media. I chose to interview people actively contributing to Black witch discourse through the publication of books on Africana religions, dissemination of information through large online platforms with in-person engagement options (often at brick-and-mortar retail locations), and/or provision of spiritual services.

Like the broader digital group of Black witches, the network of women interviewed for this project is also intergenerational, including younger Black witches like LaReina Besant (owner of Queenly Conjure in Louisiana), as well as more established Black witches like Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde in Florida. Almost all of them are spiritual service providers, meaning they offer their skills in divination, spell work, or mentorship to people needing spiritual guidance or intervention. Most are college-educated; many of them have master's degrees and maintain an objectively middle-class income. Some hold other forms of employment alongside their spiritual work – ranging from teaching, to burlesque dancing, to insurance claims evaluation – while others live solely on income generated from client services.

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<sup>6</sup> “Black Witch Thought” focuses on the beliefs and practices of Black witches living in the United States due to specific histories of African American cultural and religious development in the United States and the ways in which this history informs the practice of African-heritage religions.

As opposed to the vast but loosely connected digital Black witch networks, community-based witches tend to be regionally situated. For instance, in Detroit, Michigan, Yvette Wyatt owns the spiritual supply shop, *Motown Witch*; hosts the annual Detroit Hoodoo Festival; and holds monthly Black witch meetings called Real Black Witches of Detroit. The Detroit community includes other influential Black witches such as Ifa Abeyo, a Lucumí initiate and Hoodoo practitioner, and Doctor Beverly, a renowned rootworker.

Baltimore, Maryland, also has a sizeable Black witch community. Each year Omitola Yejide Ogunsina, a priestess of Yemoja in the Ifá tradition, coordinates the Dawtas of the Moon Black Witch Convention, where participants share skills in tarot reading, hexing for justice, or spells to navigate mental health concerns such as depression. There are also reoccurring local and regional presenters at Dawtas of the Moon, including the Osun priestess Iyalosa Osundara, a mentee of Omitola Yejide Ogunsina, and the sorceress Ada Lola Dixon. Baltimore is also home to Sam, or *Juju Bae*, a popular content creator who runs *A Little Juju* podcast, and poet and conjure person Hess Love, who co-founded The Chesapeake Conjure Society, a Hoodoo-focused social justice organization. Although Black witch communities like those in Baltimore and Detroit are mostly regionally based, social media *does* help to interweave and extend networks, bridging the digital community with real life. Most Black witches within the smaller network attend one another's events, promote and collaborate on books, rituals, and gatherings, and engage in dialogue online and offline. Through their continued engagement with one another, Black witches develop a discourse informed by a long lineage of Black religious thought and Black feminisms.

## Methodological Considerations and Interventions

Because “Black Witch Thought” focuses on practitioners of African-heritage religions, gathering data for the project necessitates a transdisciplinary approach. As religious studies scholars Dianne Stewart and Tracey Hucks argue, the study of African-heritage religions requires what they identify as a transdisciplinary method, one that “transgresses all relevant disciplinary boundaries to interlace varied tools, methods, frameworks, and datasets in pursuit of a research problem.”<sup>7</sup> They distinguish a transdisciplinary approach from interdisciplinarity, writing that, “Inter/multidisciplinary scholarship leans toward transdisciplinarity but does not necessarily proceed from problem-driven inquiries that demand consolidated research methods in the pursuit of comprehensive proposals.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, a transdisciplinary approach uses available tools to address an area of inquiry, and is *derived from the research question itself*. Remaining within traditional disciplinary boundaries excludes methods that could possibly contribute to effectively and comprehensively addressing the research inquiry.

The questions driving my research are, *who is the Black witch*, and *what is the Black witch movement’s spiritual and political lineage?* To address these questions, I initially commenced by speaking with Black witches, whom I quickly realized are practitioners of African-heritage religions alongside their identifications as Black witches. I then proceeded to conduct research in my home discipline of religion and engaged secondary historical and anthropological sources providing crucial context for the belief and practices of Africana religions both on the continent and in the diaspora. My interviewees, however, are also Black women and femmes living in the United States who are informed by political lineages of Black

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<sup>7</sup> Dianne Stewart Diakité and Tracey Hucks, “Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 28–77. 39.

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



radical thought and resistance. Thus, to properly historicize their beliefs and experiences, I examined work on Black nationalism, particularly Black religious nationalism. From there, it became clear that Black witches' significant departures from traditional iterations of Black religious nationalism are largely due to their queer and Black feminist leanings that critique the misogynoir, homophobia, and transphobia prevalent in the mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup> century radical thought. Like other Black women and femmes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they are informed by Black feminist and womanist movements that took shape in the 1980s. Identifying Black witches' religiopolitical leanings demanded engagement with Black feminisms and Black feminist theoretical lineages.

My research required attention to a wide variety of traditions – particularly religious ones. It was clear that focusing exclusively on one religious tradition would mean missing the broader Africana religious landscape, as Black witches are often practitioners of many religions. An exclusive focus on witchcraft or the witch would eclipse the African and Black orientation crucial to Black witches' sense of self, ritual, and faith. I did, however, choose to embrace the language of the witch due to the extensive occurrence of Black women and femmes choosing the term Black witch to define themselves *and* from my desire to begin at the site of self. This dissertation distinguishes between categories of religion and the witch. Religion is *structures, protocols, and intercommunal hierarchies* developed over time to connect with the divine and form community. *Alternatively*, the witch is an ontological *identity* associated with innate powers existing regardless of affiliation with a religious tradition.

The scholarship on two of the most widely practiced religions of Black witches - Ifá and Hoodoo – largely focuses on the religions themselves—with precise attention to history, cosmology, or ritual practice—versus ethnographic studies of practitioners. Religious studies

scholars, including Katrina Hazzard-Donald and Yvonne Chireau, have done significant work documenting African American Hoodoo's history, tracing its development into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> Other scholars, such as Jason Young and Ras Michael Brown, contributed critical studies on Hoodoo's specialized practices and beliefs, including Brown's examination of Simbi spirits and Young's treatment of ritual objects like the *nkisi*.<sup>10</sup> Kimbwandènde Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, Robert Farris Thomson, and Wyatt MacGaffey have also contributed significant research to the study of Hoodoo by documenting its continental cosmological roots in the pre-colonial kingdom of the Kongo.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the study of African American Hoodoo would be lacking without the research of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century contributors, including Zora Neale Hurston, Harry Middleton Hyatt, and Newbell Niles Puckett.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, practitioners like Tayannah Lee McQuillar and Stephanie Rose Bird have helped elevate Hoodoo rituals to become accessible to broader Black American spiritual seekers.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Jason R Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Kimbwandènde Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kôngo: Tying the Spiritual Knot: Principles of Life & Living*, 2nd ed (Brooklyn, N.Y: Athelia Henrietta Press, pub. in the name of Orunmila, 2001); Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1984); Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 1. Harper Perennial Modern Classics ed, Harper Perennial Modern Classics (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2008); Zora Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *The Journal of American Folklore* 44, no. 174 (1931): 317–417, <https://doi.org/10.2307/535394>; Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Place of publication not identified: Kessinger Pub; 2003); Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, 5 vols., Memoirs of the Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (Hannibal, MO: Western Publishing, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> Tayannah Lee McQuillar, *Rootwork: Using the Folk Magick of Black America for Love, Money, and Success* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); Tayannah Lee McQuillar, *The Hoodoo Tarot: 78-Card Deck and Book for Rootworkers* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 2020); Stephanie Rose Bird, *365 Days of Hoodoo: Daily Rootwork, Mojo, & Conjuraton*, First Edition (Woodbury, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2018); Stephanie Rose Bird, *Sticks, Stones, Roots & Bones: Hoodoo, Mojo & Conjuraton with Herbs*, 1st ed (St. Paul, Minn: Llewellyn Publications, 2004).

Building on Hoodoo scholars' and practitioners' contributions, this dissertation defines *Hoodoo* as a religion, and distances the *religion of Hoodoo* from its reification in popular culture as a loosely agreed upon set of spiritual practices often labeled as magic. It expands on Katrina-Hazard Donald's claim that Black Belt Hoodoo became a solidified religion in the late 18<sup>th</sup> – early 19<sup>th</sup> century and Yvonne Chireau's argument that African Americans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century did not distinguish between categories of magic and religion.<sup>14</sup> In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, after mass commercialization and exploitation by charlatans not in the tradition, African Americans largely turned away from Hoodoo, at least in the public sphere. In the last decade, however, African Americans are increasingly interested in the Hoodoo religion, and Black witches are leading Hoodoo's resurgence. The Hoodoo practitioners in this study understand the tradition as their religion, with agreed-upon divination tools, hierarchy systems, and ritual protocols. "Black Witch Thought" contributes to Hoodoo's growth by identifying the religion's core theological tenets and documenting how Black witch Hoodoo practitioners remember, define, and redefine Hoodoo in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Most Black witches interviewed for this dissertation are also practitioners of Ifá/Orisa traditions. Similar to previous studies of Hoodoo, scholars have examined Yoruba-originated Ifá and its various diasporic iterations, including Lucumí and Candomblé through a focus on one tradition. E Bolaji Idowu, Wande Abimbola, and Jacob K. Olupona have all contributed crucial studies on continental Nigerian Ifá.<sup>15</sup> These African authors' works are widely used by African

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<sup>14</sup> See Katrina Hazard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). See also Yvonne Chireau, "Video: Black Magic Matters: Hoodoo as Ancestral Religion," accessed April 4, 2023, <https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/news/magic-matters/2021/11/10>.

<sup>15</sup> Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (A & B Book Dist Inc, 1994); Ifá: 'Wande Abimbola, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, Repr. d. Ausg. Lagos 1976 (Brooklyn, NY: Athelia Henrietta Pr, 1997); 'Wande Abimbola and Ivor L. Miller, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yoruba Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 2. print (Roxbury: Aim Books, 2003); Jacob Obafemi Kẹhinde Olupona, ed., *African Spirituality:*

American practitioners, including many Black witches of the Isese Ifá religion—or those seeking to practice African continental iterations versus diasporic traditions like Lucumí or Candomblé. Previous diasporic studies of Ifá/Orisa include N. Fadeke Castor and Dianne Stewart’s work on Orisa traditions in Trinidad, Rachel Harding’s study of alternative spaces of freedom in Candomblé, and Elizabeth Pérez’s ethnographic research on Lucumí practices in a North American community of African American devotees.<sup>16</sup> There have been fewer studies of African American Ifá, with the most comprehensive being Tracey Hucks’s *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*.<sup>17</sup> These studies of African-heritage religious traditions were essential in understanding the Black witch’s relationship with religion and in framing her Africana religious orientation, but the Black witch’s sense of self, or ontological power, which extends beyond the category of religion, still needed attention.

The category of the witch is helpful for identifying her innate power as well as naming the feminist politicization associated with the identity. Previous studies of the witch and witchcraft, however, have focused on European-derived traditions, including scholarship on the online presence of Wiccan witches since the 1990s and popular books like *Witches, Sluts Feminists* by Kristen J. Sollee.<sup>18</sup> In 2002 Jone Salomonsen published her ethnographic study of

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*Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*, World Spirituality, v. 3 (New York: Crossroad, 2000)., Jacob K. Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> N. Fadeke Castor, *Spiritual Citizenship: Transnational Pathways from Black Power to IFÁ in Trinidad* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Dianne M. Stewart, *Obeah, Orisa, and Religious Identity in Trinidad: Africana Nations and the Power of Black Sacred Imagination. Volume II: Orisa*, Religious Cultures of African and African Diaspora People (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022); Rachel E. Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2003); Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions*, North American Religions (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*, Religions of the Americas Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Chris Miller, “How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok: Intersections of Digital, Consumer, and Material Culture(s) on #WitchTok,” *Religions* 13, no. 2 (February 2022): 118, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020118>; Venetia Robertson, “Deus Ex Machina? Witchcraft and the Techno-World,” *Literature & Aesthetics* 19, no. 2 (2009), <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/LA/article/view/5015>.

neopagan feminist witches in San Francisco—a vital study in naming a moment when white women like Starhawk reclaimed the term witch and interwove it with their beliefs in environmental sustainability, the mother goddess, and women’s rights.<sup>19</sup> Although studies of European-derived witchcraft are essential for considering an ontological status of innate power and analyzing how feminism integrates with broader spiritual movements, they cannot fully account for a Black witch identity, as most are practitioners of African-heritage religions and thus construct, what I argue, is an Africana religious orientation.

Scholarship that focuses less on a religious tradition, and more on broader Africana spirituality where various religions intersect, include Stephanie Mitchem’s *African American Folk Healing*, Akasha Gloria Hull’s *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women*, and more recently, LeRhonda S. Manigault Bryant’s *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women*.<sup>20</sup> Although these books help provide a model for discussing African American women’s spirituality, an examination of the current religiopolitical leanings of Black women and femmes today has yet to be written, especially in an era of social media and in a moment when African-heritage religions are increasingly practiced. Transdisciplinarity, as well as multi-religious examinations are, thus, crucial for this study. Focusing on one religion or one political lineage proved insufficient as most Black American practitioners are being informed by multiple streams of religious, spiritual, and political thought.

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Gregory Grieve, “Imagining a Virtual Religious Community: Neo-Pagans on The Internet,” *Chicago Anthropology Exchange* 7 (1995); Kristen J. Sollée and Coz Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive* (Berkeley: ThreeL Media, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: Ritual, Gender and Divinity among the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco*, Religion and Gender (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Gloria T. Hull, *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* (Rochester, Vt: Inner Traditions, 2001); LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah-Geechee Women* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014).

Likewise, a singular emphasis on the *witch*, neglects the Blackness so central to Black witch identity. The Black witch is inseparably, historically and culturally, Black *and* witch.

An appropriate formalized methodology beyond transdisciplinarity is yet undefined for Africana Religious Studies, due to decades of scholars of African-heritage religions exclusion from the field of religion. To legitimize African-heritage beliefs as ‘religion,’ and therefore worthy of study, scholars have remained within disciplinary boundaries to be taken serious within various fields. Now as the area of African Religious Studies expands, scholars can and are experimenting with methodological approaches that account for the phenomenon of religious practice *and* its theology by including more ethnographic and oral histories in addition to traditional archival and conceptual research. Scholars of Africana Religious Studies are especially paying attention to what David Hall (among others) refers to as *lived religion* or the quotidian beliefs, practices, and stories that contribute to shaping a given religion outside of doctrine and official procedures.<sup>21</sup> Hall emphasizes that “...while we know a great deal about the history of theology and (say) church and state, we know next-to-nothing about religion as practiced and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women.”<sup>22</sup> An exclusive focus on doctrine is especially insufficient in the study of African-heritage religions. For example, the Harry Middleton Hyatt collection of 1600 interviews of African Americans from the US South amassed in the 1930s and 40s is a vital resource for scholars studying Hoodoo. However, in my conversation with Sen Elias, owner of Crescent City Conjure in New Orleans, he mentioned that the Hyatt collection offers the protocols and materials needed in Hoodoo but *does not* reflect the theology and ritual proceedings crucial to the religion’s

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<sup>21</sup> David Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton University Press, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv143mdcw>. Introduction.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

philosophy. Therefore, in this study, ethnography is a critical methodology not only because of the Black witch movement's emerging nature but as a tool to understand its lived religious practice.

As Orisa/Ifá -based traditions were some of the most prominent belief systems among my interlocutors, I spent extensive periods of time in Ifá communities both as a scholar and a practitioner. In 2018, I was introduced to Ile Ori African Cultural Center in Atlanta, Ga. Ile Ori was launched over 25 years ago as the first Isese ile in Atlanta, Georgia. The ile is led by three women—Iyalosa Omolewa O. Eniolorunopa, her sister Iyanifa Niniola Emilere, and Iyanifa Niniola's daughter Iyanifa Ayorinde Awojobi. I began by taking classes with Iyalosa Omolewa at her house in Atlanta, Georgia, learning basic Yoruba phrases, proper greetings to the elders, and more about the orisa deities and cosmology.

When Iyalosa Omolewa felt I was ready, I began participating in Ile Ori's monthly gatherings that are open to the public, where I quickly realized that no matter how much I read in books, I would never fully be able to learn about Ifá without emersion into the lived religious practice. At Ile Ori's gatherings, I began embodying the religion by learning the dances for each orisa, saying Yoruba phrases, performing the gestured greetings, and respecting the hierarchy of elders. Many months were spent preparing the space before service, making food in their kitchen, serving the elders, and then cleaning up after events, alongside the everyday conversations that all contributed to establishing trust.

In 2019, I became an official member through a ceremony. As a member, I could attend other ritual events, such as the three-day Odun Ifá ritual, where offerings are made to Orunmila, the deity of divination, and forecasts are predicted for the upcoming year. It is an elaborate ritual during which members work until late in the night, sacrifice, clean, and cook *ebo* (offerings),

including chickens, goats, and pigeons and conduct divination. Although “Black Witch Thought” is not a direct study of Ile Ori African Cultural Center, the time I spent learning about Ifá as a practitioner of Africana religions greatly informed my scholarship on Black witches for this dissertation.

To further understand diasporic iterations of Black witches’ Africana religious practices, I also spent time in Salvador Bahia, Brazil, to learn more about Candomblé. I attended a curated trip led by African Pilgrimages Inc. and Dr. Rachel E. Harding entitled “Traveling the Ancestral Road,” a spiritual sojourn to Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. We spent about two weeks traveling throughout Bahia and attending various Candomblé temples known as *terreiros*. In Salvador Bahia, for example, I attended a ceremony in honor of the Orixá Ayrá at the Ilê Axé Iya Nasso Oká temple, popularly known as Casa Branca. Casa Branca is Brazil’s oldest, continually recognized Candomblé community, which follows the Yoruba tradition. The ceremony began with about five women of all ages, dressed in long white elaborate dresses reminiscent of the Portuguese colonial empire, circling the massive altar and honorary chairs at the center of the room. With solemn faces, they danced to the drums that summoned the Orixá. One by one, eyes fluttered closed, shoulders moved up and down, and the older woman who had difficulty walking around the altar before the ceremony got underway was dancing vigorously in front of the drums for over 30 minutes without a break. The Orixá had arrived.

It was through attending ceremonies that I began seeing the Africana religious commonalities across the diaspora. Similar ceremonies took place at Ile Ori African Cultural Center and other Black witch ritual spaces I attended across the US. Even in Bahia, some *terreiros* were informed by the Yoruba tradition, where the Orixá dominated, and in others, Vodun traditions brought by the Dahomean or Jeje nation were prominent. Vodun-influenced



*terreiros* shared Africana religious practices and beliefs with the Yoruba-informed *terreiros*. Shared religious characteristics exemplify a feature of blending customs across religions and regions, which I later learned was commonplace between modern-day Benin and Nigeria before colonialism.<sup>23</sup> These observations in the diaspora greatly informed my ideas pertaining to religious blending and multi-religiosity, a core theme in my theorization of a Black feminist Africana religious orientation. Although Black witches are in the United States and are shaped by American Black religious formations, they are also children of a wider African diaspora sharing similar Africana religious characteristics with other African-descended devotees of African-heritage religions.

In the spring of 2021, after IRB approval, I officially began my ethnographic research on Black witches. By this time, most people had received the first COVID-19 vaccination, and masked travel was in effect. My first visit was to the Detroit Hoodoo Festival in Detroit, Michigan, led by Yvette Wyatt, who owns the Africana-inspired spiritual supply shop the Motown Witch. While in Michigan, I visited Yvette's store, where she was hosting a pre-festival gathering. Here I met more Black witches and Hoodoo and Vodou practitioners, including the late Hougan (Vodou priest) Papa Hoodoo Sen Moise. Like my participation in Ile Ori African Cultural Center's events, my time at the Motown Witch entailed what Jafari Allen calls 'deep hanging out.' 'Deep hanging out' is an ethnographic approach where one is not necessarily discussing the topic of study but building the connections necessary to establish trust. It is based on Allen's research in Cuba, where he spent over four years visiting sites such as parties of gay men, HIV/AIDS organizations, lesbian performance spaces, and black consciousness networks.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Dana Rush, *Vodun in Coastal Bénin: Unfinished, Open-Ended, Global* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Allen, Jafari S. *¡Venceremos?: The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 7.

For my research, it meant eating, drinking, and spending time with people at the Motown Witch outside the limits of traditional scholarship.

During the festival, I attended talks and met with Black witches, including Ifa Abeyo, a Lucumí initiate and Hoodoo practitioner, and Mary Byrd, who practices Egyptian witchcraft. I also paid close attention to the types of questions participants asked facilitators and the conversations that occurred after the workshop, which provided insight into the major concerns of Black witch communities. For example, as Mary Byrd gave a workshop on witchcraft to heal depression, the conversation quickly turned to how to “tap in” to spiritual powers such as an ability to communicate with the dead. And in Ifa Abeyo’s workshop on Hoodoo, participants were hungry for ritual procedures on how to attract love, money, and success. My observations informed Chapter Two on ontological powers and Chapter Four on manifestation.

Later in my study, I spent time in New Orleans, Louisiana - an essential stop - as the city is rich in a long history of Hoodoo and Voodoo traditions, the most famous practitioner being Marie Laveau, a midwife, herbalist, and practitioner of Voodoo who held public ceremonies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> Because of its history, New Orleans is home to many Black witches who were either born into Hoodoo/Voodoo traditions, or migrated as part of a spiritual calling. A few Black witches shared that they believe New Orleans has such a ‘strong spiritual pull’ because it is not a transient city such as Atlanta, New York, or San Francisco. Families have remained there for generations making those that passed, or the ancestors, a much stronger and more rooted presence. The dead remain.

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<sup>25</sup> Martha Ward, *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

In New Orleans, I had the opportunity to speak with renowned practitioner Lilith Dorsey. Lilith is an initiate of Haitian Vodou and Lucumí, leads a Voodoo Temple in New Orleans, has been professionally practicing magic for over 32 years, and has written extensively on African-heritage religions. At her home, we spoke about her entry into African-heritage religions as well as current practices, beliefs, and trends in Africana religious communities. Coincidentally, at the time of my visit, she had three mentees who were also in New Orleans to undergo initiation into the tradition. Following the initiation ceremony, Lilith held a gathering to celebrate their new membership into the religion and generously invited me to the after-ritual celebration. Because I approach my research as a practitioner/scholar, I knew to bring my whites (traditional clothing attire for Africana religious rituals). I also knew the types of offerings to bring.

In Lilith's living room, I sat with a few recent Voodoo initiates, including Black witch Rebeca Spirit, whom I also later interviewed. Rebeca and Lilith traverse various spiritual and religious communities, including Wiccan and European-based Neopagan networks, such as the annual gathering Witchfest. As Rebeca and Lilith discussed the leading figures of Wiccan movements, such as Starr RavenHawk and the NeoPagan shop Enchantments in New York City, a distinction between the terms "Black witch" and "witch" emerged. In contrast, *Black witch* refers to primarily Black women and femmes who are practitioners of African-heritage religions and maintain an Africana religious orientation. This distinction remains a crucial observation, as there are leaders—like Starr RavenHawk, who is both Black and a witch—that do not fit within the framework and current movement of Black women and femmes reclaiming an Africana religious orientation; theirs is Wiccan and/or Neopagan. I drew conclusions about the differences between witch communities through a process of vulnerability, which involved sharing my journey of identifying as a Black witch and a woman of power during deep hanging out.

I used emic practitioner and scholar methods throughout my study, like in my interview with Rebeca Spirt, and while attending a Juneteenth festival at Crescent City Conjure. In Lilith's living room, I spoke with Rebecca about the importance of elevating the ancestors, a reoccurring theme that emerged in previous interviews. After being asked, she revealed, "two things are happening, your people are coming through, and so are mine." In other words, my grandmother and Rebeca's ancestors were with us in the room.

As a scholar, it was not enough to sit and take notes, nor could I bracket beliefs and intellectualize my deceased grandmother's presence. I had to believe. I had to be present. A few days later, at the Juneteenth celebration, on a hot corner outside the Hoodoo and Witchcraft supply shop Crescent City Conjure, fully participating in the event meant receiving a tarot reading. After my reading, I asked the (Black) woman if she identified as a Black witch, to which she shared that she identifies as both a Christian and a witch. My conversation with the tarot reader led to further distinctions between various witch communities that might not have occurred had I not been open to receiving a tarot reading and fully engaged in the vulnerability it requires.

My approach also frames a Black feminist epistemology as a method. Patricia Hill Collins identifies a Black feminist epistemology by the following criteria: lived experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue, an ethic of caring that values empathy, vulnerability, and demonstrations of genuine investment in positive outcomes for Black women, and an ethic of personal accountability where people are expected to be accountable to their knowledge claims.<sup>26</sup> Collins concludes that "To be credible in the eyes of this group [other Black women], Black feminist intellectuals must be personal advocates for their material, be accountable for the

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<sup>26</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2009). 269-290.

consequences of the work, have lived or experienced their material in some fashion, and be willing to engage in dialogues about their findings with ordinary, everyday people.”<sup>27</sup> As a Black feminist intellectual, I adopted Collins’s criteria and applied them throughout my research process. For example, the use of dialogue was important not only as a methodological component of ethnography in the form of semi-structured interviews, but also in establishing truth claims. Collins notes that within a Black feminist epistemology, truth claims must be validated *by* the communities being discussed.

When I began my research, before conversing with Black witches, I held two hypotheses based on relevant texts in the field. My first hypothesis was that Black witches blended multiple religious and spiritual traditions, such as tarot, Ifá, Hoodoo, Vodou, and astrology. It appeared as such based on preliminary observations on social media and scholarly works on Africana folk religion that claimed blending is common.<sup>28</sup> But while in conversation with Black witches, I learned that many heavily advised *against* blending traditions. To illustrate, tarot, a divination tool and spiritual technology originating in 15<sup>th</sup> century Milan, would not be used to communicate with the Ifá Powers or orisa. Instead, the Ikin or Opele would be employed. In this dissertation, spiritual technologies are defined as the methods and tools practitioners employ to (1) establish connections with divine energies, including deities and ancestors, (2) manipulate material outcomes, and (3) gain foresight into the future. Examples of such spiritual technologies encompass divination practices like tarot and scrying, the use of mojo bags to influence specific events, and religious initiation protocols. Black witches’ reasoning for advising against blending traditions was due to a long history of white people appropriating and mixing beliefs, practices,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>28</sup> Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007). 70.

and deities without much respect for their indigenous cosmologies or philosophies. More experienced Black witches also advised against blending to protect novice practitioners who might make costly spiritual mistakes, eventually harming themselves or others. In Black witch spaces, however, I would still encounter various religious practices and beliefs and, after extensive dialogue, I realized that theirs was instead a multi-religious practice. Spiritual technologies that had been developed over centuries within a religious tradition, like the *Ikin*, were respected within an Ifá lineage, and deities who shared similar characteristics, like the orisa Osun and the Lwa Ezili Freda of the Vodou Powers, were respected as distinct deities with distinct characteristics. Most Black witches were active and often initiated into multiple religious traditions, practicing each according to its established protocol.

The second hypothesis that required revisiting after discussing my truth claims with other Black witches concerned manifestation. Most practitioner, or how-to, books on Africana religions lead one to believe that African-heritage traditions are exclusively about materializing one's desired results—an unsurprising generalization as capitalism promotes material consumption. I initially wrote an entire chapter on material manifestation in Africana religions and began by exclusively asking my interlocutors about their beliefs in spiritual efficacy. Repeatedly, however, the conversation steered elsewhere, such as toward healing, ancestor veneration, their innate abilities, and the importance of initiation. My flexibility, commitment to my truth claims being validated in the community, and desire for my work to truly be useful to Black witches, led to my discarding this chapter and developing new research questions. Material manifestation is still an essential part of “Black Witch Thought”—as discussed in Chapter Four—because materializing one's desired world for Black women and femmes in the

afterlife of slavery is very much a Black feminist priority. It does not, however, consume the focus of this work.

Lastly, my methodology was informed by Anima Adjepong's notion of interpretive reflexivity. In their research on a Ghanaian community in Houston, Texas, Adjepong observes the homophobia and transphobia embedded in the community when members expressed disdain for Adjepong's transmasculine gender expression. Adjepong concludes that these interactions "... reveal the ways in which embodied ways of being simultaneously challenge and lend a depth of insight to how spaces are organized and ethnography is conducted. My embodiment opened me up to certain experiences that others may not have had."<sup>29</sup> In my research, I employed interpretive reflexivity in notions of Blackness. As a Black woman of mixed-race ancestry (my mother is African American and my father is white Sicilian) with phenotypically European features, I knew it was important that I acknowledge the privilege I receive from my proximity to whiteness, as well as the fact that my experiences as a Black woman are different from those with darker skin, and more phenotypically African features. Colorism/phenotypic stratification is real and is an oppressive force that harms those with dark skin and stereotypic African phenotype.<sup>30</sup> Although I am often white-assumed, I still very much identify with my African ancestry - a lineage that guides this work - and while beginning the research process, I hoped that my interlocutors would also see the complexities of my identity. And they did. For example, in a conversation with Toya Smith, a conjure woman very dedicated to ensuring African-heritage religions stay Black, she affirmed that she understands the complexities of Black mixed-race

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<sup>29</sup> Anima Adjepong, "Invading Ethnography: A Queer of Color Reflexive Practice," *Ethnography* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 27–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138117741502>. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Dianne M. Stewart, *Black Women, Black Love: America's War on African American Marriage* (New York: Seal Press, 2020). 10.

experiences as some of her family members are of various complexions. Conversations on race illuminated that notions of Blackness in Black witch networks are expansive, inclusive, and eclectic. The type of Black essentialism prominent in the mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup> century that excluded not only people of mixed-race experiences, but also queer and trans people, punks, the erudite, and anyone who chose not to conform to rigid standards of Blackness, is declining in Black witch discourse. Today, many Black witches ask African-descended people of various societal privileges, including those with light skin, financial wealth, able bodies, or a cis normative gender identity, to deconstruct how their access to status and/or opportunities harms Black people denied systemic privileges. Through a deconstructive approach, Black witch spaces can include and love *all* Black people by aiming for a more equitable world.

## **Chapter Overview**

The chapters of this dissertation have two aims. The first is to name the developing discourse and demonstrate how it incorporates an Africana orientation and a Black feminist framework. The second, and more important objective, is to show how an Africana Black feminist religious discourse is creating individual and communal power in the lives of Black women and femmes, a power unentangled from institutions of the nation-state.

Chapter One addresses the term witch, its relationship to Blackness, and its use by and relationship to practitioners of African-heritage religions. It argues that contemporary Black women and femmes are not merely adopting popularized European language, but rather employing the terms *witch* and *witchcraft* in ways reflective of an ancestral legacy of African Americans. African Americans accessed these terms to account for a wide array of spiritual tools used for the cultivation of power under oppressive conditions. The chapter also examines first-



person narratives of Black conjurers and witches between the early 19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, noting repeated accounts of (what we now might describe as) Hoodoo practitioners referring to themselves and their practices as *witches* and *witchcraft*, explaining that (as Harry Middleton Hyatt observes) the term Hoodoo only enters the typical African American lexicon after the Civil War. This chapter argues that practitioners likely adopted the terms ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’ to account for various African-originated spiritual technologies. It specifically illuminates that, as opposed to Christian-influenced European definitions of “witch,” – definitions that affiliate the figure with evil, devil alliance, and anti-social behavior – in African American folklore, there are two witch figures: the *hag*, or supernatural entity who flies by night to consume a sleeping victim’s energy, and the *conjurer* who—like modern definitions of the Black witch—uses her power for healing, protection, justice, and attraction.

Chapter Two explores identity markers for the Black witch and claims that a Black feminist Africana religious orientation informs Black witches’ concepts of self, as well as innate power. I begin by examining Victor Anderson’s critique of ontological Blackness as defined by liberation theologians like James Cone. Anderson’s analysis aids my conclusions concerning a Black witch ontology that I maintain refuses to be defined by white supremacy *and* resists its confines. Illuminating inherent Black power, I trace accounts of spiritual abilities in African-heritage religions—including among healers in Kongo cultures and African American conjurers in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century—while examining references to physical attributes denoting innate abilities like the caul or particular birthmarks. I argue that as Black witches claim their inherent powers – abilities that have been demonized by Christian supremacy – they are, as Hortense

Spillers notes, “Claiming the monstrosity... [and rewriting] a radically different text for female empowerment.”<sup>31</sup>

Chapter Three more deeply examines some of the religiopolitical lineages for Black witches’ Black feminist Africana religious orientation, focusing on Black religious nationalism. It starts with a summary of Black religious nationalism, beginning with Black Christian Nationalism in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and concluding with Yoruba religious nationalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The chapter then explores how Black religious nationalist ideologies (specifically racial separatism and Black divinity) inform contemporary Black witch community spaces and religiopolitical thought. I observe that Black witches also conceive of political decisions through a theological lens. For example, many Black witches’ commitment to Black-only spaces, or Black separatism, derives from a belief that in Hoodoo, the ancestors will only aid African-descended people. Other theological duties include multi-religiosity, where participants practice more than one African-heritage religion. I argue that Black witches are reshaping a religiopolitical lens, moving away from the homophobia, transphobia, and sexism prominent in previous iterations of Black religious nationalism toward a lens informed by Black feminism and queer radical thought.

Chapter Four considers how Black witches’ Black feminist Africana religious orientation is informing broader religious discourse by attending to material manifestation narratives. Within American mainstream spiritual and religious life, one of the most prevailing dominant discourses surrounding divine intervention is prosperity gospel—a collection of beliefs that a Christian God wants to provide believers health, wealth, and success. A growing concern with prosperity gospel rhetoric is that it omits structural inequality, placing blame on the individual for their lack of

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<sup>31</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>. 80.

social and financial access. This chapter explores how Black witches counter prosperity gospel narratives by merging an Africana religious orientation and a Black feminist framework that emphasizes healing and mutual aid. Daizy October Latifah's *Blitch* (Black witch) Fund, for instance, offers money to Black women in need and employs bone divination to decide the fund's recipients.

This dissertation is the first ethnographic exploration into Black witch thought. Although archival, primary, and secondary sources are employed to help provide historical context and develop broader theoretical conclusions, the aim of this study is to feature Black witches as the experts of their collective knowledge. Ethnographic methods including semi-structured interviews, deep hanging out, participant observation, and a personal vulnerability informed by Black feminism, serve as the methodological and theoretical frameworks that aid in elevating Black witches' stories. The project explores the thought-world of Black women and femme leaders in African-heritage religious communities. It identifies their emerging religious movement's motifs, worldviews, moral guidelines, theological beliefs, and political commitments.

Because most of the Black witches interviewed for this study are influencing seekers through their extensive social media platforms, "Black Witch Thought" is also a study of how American religion is changing. Twenty-first-century America is being challenged and reshaped during a moment when Black Lives Matter has changed discussions about anti-Blackness in the public square, gender, and sexuality are increasingly celebrated as expansive and diverse, intersectionality is taught in high schools, and the right-wing is terrified about America's new culture wars. Simultaneously Americans are moving away from orthodox religion into a spirituality informed by concepts like manifestation, intuition, and alignment— notions that are

integrated substantively into Black witch thought.<sup>32</sup> As Black Americans hunger for something more, something beyond Christian hegemony and even Black religious nationalism, Africana religions are becoming integral to the cultural revolution, and Black witches are at the forefront of this American shift. Their Black feminist Africana religious orientation (or collective worldview) reorients seekers toward the West and West-Central African heritage in religions such as Ifá, Hoodoo, and Vodou, and their Black feminist analysis instills social justice aims into religious and spiritual practice. “Black Witch Thought” offers a glimpse into how American religion is changing, who is making that change, and how Black witches are shaping the emerging nature of 21<sup>st</sup>-century American religion.

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<sup>32</sup> Travis Mitchell, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>; “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

## **Chapter One: Healing, Manifestation, and Justice: African American Witchcraft, 1860-1940**

Although witchcraft has been a subject of academic inquiry over the past century, the use of the terms witch and witchcraft bear the weight of a fraught past, particularly among practitioners of African-heritage religions.<sup>33</sup> In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, most anthropological studies on witchcraft focused non-European countries, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, where scholars applied European-derived concepts like “witch” and “witchcraft” to cultures with distinct traditions and world views.<sup>34</sup> By the 1970s, anthropologists and religionists began to argue for the employment of frameworks native to the actual individuals and cultures discussed in academic research. They recognized that the terms witch and witchcraft had been incorrectly applied to African religious traditions in ways that reduced complex practices and beliefs to mere magic, rife with inaccurate values-based connotations, further characterizing an already racialized people into one without the skills or intelligence to develop religions worthy of respect.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The term ‘African-heritage religions’ was coined by Dr. Dianne Stewart and refers to non-Abrahamic religions that originate from continental Africa. Following the transatlantic slave trade, African people in the diaspora took what they remembered and developed religions informed by available pharmacology, the religion of the oppressors, and customs derived from the region of Africa from where they came. Ifá originated from the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Benin Republic and neighboring West African regions, Vodou is a religion in Haiti, with roots in West African regions such as Benin Republic, Togo and Ghana, and Hoodoo developed among African Americans in the Southern United States.

<sup>34</sup> Ronald Hutton makes this claim in *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) 4. For examples of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship on African witchcraft, see E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); Hans Werner Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: a Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes* (Kumasi: Presbyterian Book Depot, 1959), Michael Gelfand, *The African Witch: with Particular Reference to Witchcraft Beliefs and Practice among the Shona or Rhodesia* (Edinburgh: E.& S. Livingstone, 1967).

<sup>35</sup> For a history of the use of the term witch in academic scholarship see, Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) 3-10. For the use of the term in the application of African traditional religions see, Teresa Washington, *The Architects of Existence Àjé in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature* (Orifin, Ilé Àjé: Oyas Tornado, 2018), and for a historical context see, Charles H. Long, “Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of a Problem.” *History of Religions* 20, no. 1/2 (1980): 43-61. Accessed August 06, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062335>.

In recent years, a surge of Black women and femmes practicing African-heritage religions have chosen the term witch to define themselves. However, they are doing so, not in the reductive, oversimplifying manner of early 20<sup>th</sup> century researchers, but in ways that reflect the spiritual philosophies of Southern African American custodians of African-heritage religions during that same period.<sup>36</sup> Across first-person narratives of Black conjurers between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there are repeated accounts of what we now might identify as Hoodoo practitioners, referring to themselves and their practices as witches and witchcraft. These practitioners employed the terms witch and witchcraft to account for various spiritual technologies that brought power to a people living under chattel slavery and the post-reconstruction South. They interpreted witchcraft as a powerful tool to be used in physical and spiritual healing, accountability and protection work for community members, and money and love attraction spells.

The first-person accounts of practitioners employing the term witchcraft appear most extensively in Harry Middleton Hyatt's five-volume collection *Hoodoo, Conjuraton, Witchcraft, and Rootwork*, where he interviewed over 1600 Black people in the South about their spiritual beliefs. Although Hyatt's whiteness reinforced racial power disparities between the interviewer and interviewees, these volumes are likely the most comprehensive accounts of non-Christian Black Southern spiritual beliefs. Another essential source is *The Born in Slavery Narratives*, which contains over 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and were collected between 1936 and

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<sup>36</sup> Hoodoo expert and Black witch Daizy October Latifah posted in her Facebook group "The Witches Brew: Indigenous Rootwork and Conjure" that "Black conjurers did sometimes refer to themselves as "witches."<sup>36</sup> Daizy is suggesting that there was a historical use of the term witch before contemporary mainstream identification. See, Daizy October Latifah, 2018. "Black conjurers did sometimes refer to themselves as witches." Facebook, September 20, 2018 posted. <https://www.facebook.com/october.r.october/posts/2609399932407240>.

1938 as part of the Work Progress Administration programs. Although not explicitly stated as an area of inquiry, these narratives contain vital information about Southern Black religious beliefs. Other Black first-person narratives include the *Journal of American Folklore* and *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*. These sources are vital in determining the terms practitioners used to define themselves versus how researchers categorized their practices. For example, in Newbell Niles Puckett's *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, Puckett does not use direct quotations but prefers to summarize his findings. Because he is using his language and framing, he applies the terms witch and witchcraft in exclusively negative connotations. Alternatively, had he used the language of his respondents, the term witch might have been used more diversely.

This chapter illustrates distinctions between Black Americans' understanding of the witch as a conjurer and post-medieval European definitions of the witch and witchcraft that affiliate the figure with evil, devil alliance, and anti-social behavior. This European categorization is due to a long history dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, where all forms of magic, typically known as ceremonial magic, were labeled as a form of Christian heresy and, therefore, devil worship. African Americans did not assign these same categories to the witch as conjurer because of an African-originated ethical understanding of the spiritual world that does not delineate strict distinctions between good and evil. Instead, in African American folklore, there are two witch figures: the hag, or supernatural entity who flies by night to consume a sleeping victim's energy, and the conjurer who—like modern definitions of the Black witch—uses her power for healing, protection, justice, and attraction.

The archival and primary source materials accessed for this chapter demand new considerations of the semantic world of enslaved Africans in the United States and their

descendants. Tracey Hucks and Dianne Stewart maintain that when African American spiritual and religious terms are only understood through a Western Christian and English lexicon “this interpretative stance invites methodological errors of mistranslation at definitional, conceptual, semiotic and epistemological levels. [Africana religious studies scholars] bring to our attention the necessity in black religious studies of acquiring greater translational competency before interpreting the oral traditions of African-descended peoples in the United States.”<sup>37</sup> Thus I conclude that the terms witch and witchcraft were misinterpreted by American researchers through their Western, Christian, and English frameworks. Alternatively, late 19<sup>th</sup> century African Americans interpreted ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’ in ways that reflected the broader Africana religious orientation evident among contemporary Black witches. This orientation is based on shared aspects of West and West-Central African religious cultures, including ancestor veneration, a belief in reincarnation, and a trust in spiritual objects to produce desired results. Although ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’ were demonized and criminalized within Euro-Western Christian cultures, enslaved Africans invested their own cultural understandings into these terms. Africans took the concepts associated with their continental traditions, like the belief in spiritually efficacious objects, and reinterpreted them through European terminology without the harmful value-laden ethical associations the average American Christian attached to these terms. Stripped of their maligned ethical associations, witch and witchcraft, I argue, were words to describe Africana spiritual/religious practices that were emerging and adapting to circumstances such as migration, commercialization, and oppressive conditions.

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<sup>37</sup> Dianne Stewart Diakit  and Tracey Hucks, “Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 28–77. 50.



A similar Africana religious orientation applied to the term witch is evident in Hoodoo expert Daizy October Latifah's term *Blitch* (Black witch). She defines it as a "Conjurer/Rootworker, Hoodoo saint, using spiritual knowledge of African thought, African/Afrodiasporic spiritual practice, divination, ancestral veneration, and African healing modalities to heal and fortify themselves, their elders, their peers, and the next generation of children to be."<sup>38</sup> Like this contemporary definition, Black conjurers in primary source materials use the terms witch and witchcraft to denote a wide variety of practices emphasizing healing, justice, protection, and the manifestation of one's desired result while remaining firmly rooted in African-originated beliefs and practices.

### European Depictions of the Black Witch

Before Catholicism became the prominent religion in Europe, Anglo-Saxons had terms for magic and magical practitioners, from which the words witch and witchcraft derive.<sup>39</sup>

Historian Ronald Hutton explains that,

The word "witchcraft" undoubtedly derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wicce-craeft*, just as "witch" derives from the related nouns *wicce*, signifying a female worker of that "craft" (plural *wiccen*) and *wicce* meaning a male one (plural *wiccan*). What exactly the "craft" concerned was, however, is a difficult matter. The early English had more than thirty terms for magical practices and practitioners. The meaning of some can be recovered, if vaguely, by association with known words that they embody: thus, *galdorcraeft* has connotations of song or incantation; *libcraeft* of potions; and *scincraeft* of delusion and phantasm. *Wiccecraeft*, however, is not one of these, and can only be understood, if at all, from context.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "BLITCH." The AfroMystic. Accessed August 07, 2020. <http://www.theafromystic.com/blitch>.

<sup>39</sup> In the 1950s, Gerald Gardner popularized the term witch within Europe and the United States. It was then later reclaimed by feminists like Starhawk in the 1970s. For a more extended discussion of this movement and the term's reclamation, see Chapter Two.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald Hutton, "The Meaning of the Word 'Witch,'" *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 13, no. 1 (2018): 98–119, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.2018.0003>. 103.

Although Anglo-Saxons had terms such as cunning men' or 'white witches to refer to those practicing benevolent magic and thus distinguished between harmful and helpful traditions, all *wiccecraft* was not considered evil. European witches were practitioners of any form of magic, regardless of its ethical associations.<sup>41</sup>

The Catholic Church then misconstrued *wiccecraft*, *wicce* and *wicca* to delineate malevolent magic associated with devil worship. They categorized all spiritual and healing practices outside of sanctioned orthodox belief and practice as heresy. For example, late Roman Christians "pulled a significant linguistic trick . . . : they had extended the traditional Latin term for harmful magic, *maleficium* to encompass, and so to smear and demonize, all forms of magic, including those such as healing spells and divination by oracles, which had formerly been generally considered acceptable or indeed admirable."<sup>42</sup> In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, popular texts like *The Malleus Maleficarum* were used to spread ideas about women being inherently defective witches who - because of their hypersexual nature - were prone to sexual relations with the devil. According to *The Malleus*'s author, Catholic clergyman Heinrich Kramer, the only way to eliminate witchcraft was to burn these subjects at the stake. Although most of the resulting witchcraft trials ended in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the spread of capitalism, industrialization, and secularism, beliefs about women's innate inferiority and their association with witchcraft remained in the writings of early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship on African American religious beliefs and practices.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>43</sup> See Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, (New York City: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2010), 31-59. Alison Games, *Witchcraft in Early North America*, American Controversies Series (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 83-92.

With colonial expansion and its Christian proselytizing counterpart, all forms of magic became conflated under one demonized, child-eating character, the witch. Between 1420 and 1430, we see one of the first documentations of the stereotypical evil witch in areas ranging from Northeastern Spain to the middle of Italy. Governmental and church officials committed to eradicating heresy began using propaganda to assign characteristics of cannibalism, orgiastic sex, devil alliance, and the torment of young children to anyone practicing magic. Judge Peter, who governed the Simmen Valley in Switzerland between 1390 and 1448, was concerned about magic in his jurisdiction due to the widespread outcry of citizens claiming that witches were killing their babies. According to Judge Peter,

...the murderers [the witches] ... dug up the little corpses and ate them using some of the flesh as an ointment that conferred magical powers, including flight and shapeshifting. The judge used torture to extract confessions of the accused, not just of baby-killing but of causing a range of injuries to people as well as offering magical aid to their customers... Peter had no doubt that many belonged to a devil-worshipping sect with an initiation rite which included abjuring Christianity and drinking a liquid distilled from a dead infant. He burned both those who were made to confess and those who refused to do so and seems to have claimed many victims.<sup>44</sup>

This subjective stereotyping spurred the witch hunts across Europe, spanning from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and is estimated to have killed millions. In certain cities, an average of 600 people a year were killed, and in Toulouse, France alone, 400 were put to death in a day. In the Bishopric of Trier in 1585, two villages were left with only two female inhabitants each. 85 percent of those killed were women. Studies have shown that most accusations were about property acquisition and adjustments to the new economic structure where commercialism versus rural agriculture dominated. The presence of witches and dark magic also served as a supernatural

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<sup>44</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). 175.

explanation for the daily difficulties associated with early European townships like disease and famine.<sup>45</sup>

However, another group of the victims accused of witchcraft included people who were spiritual service providers employing herbal remedies and the supernatural realm to heal physical ailments or enact changes in their clients' lives. Scholars, government, and church officials intentionally misinterpreted these practices as witchcraft to further their suppression of heresy and gain political control. In the 1460s, for example, a French professor at the University of Poitiers, Pierre Marmoris wanted to join fellow French, Italian and German authors in arguing that there was a new satanic conspiracy of witches. Marmoris, however, had difficulty finding cases of satanic witchcraft to prove his point and began compiling examples of everyday magic that he had witnessed. These included "people whom he had seen speaking incantations to heal animal bites or scare crows off crops, a man of whom he heard at Charlons Sur Marne who could make himself invisible; a Poitiers woman he had exorcised who claimed to be bounded by an exotic spell...and legal prosecutions of which he heard for magic to cause impotence."<sup>46</sup> The labeling of the magical practitioner as a witch is significant when considering 20<sup>th</sup> century depictions of Hoodoo practitioners in the American South, as many of their Christian contemporaries of all races labeled them witches and/or devil worshipers.

Tom Cross's 1919 article, "Witchcraft in North Carolina," illustrates the association of the healer and conjurer with women and tales of witchcraft and evil. Without any knowledge of African-originated spiritual principles, Cross incorrectly collapsed harming, justice, and various forms of protection work under the category of witchcraft and associated it with women.

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<sup>45</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, 2nd ed (New York City: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2010). 7-23.

<sup>46</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 179.

Alluding to his lack of knowledge concerning the origins of the observed practices, Cross admits, “The following sketch...was designed originally to deal with only one of the many phases of folk superstition, witchcraft; but owing to the heterogeneous character of the collections submitted, it has been a process of time before a sort of omnium-gatherum of North Carolina tradition regarding magic and supernaturalism.”<sup>47</sup> In one instance, Cross summarizes (and labels as witchcraft) an African originated practice where a “witch prevented a man’s wife from having a child until the “trick,” which was hidden in the chimney-corner was found, and the spell was broken.” This “trick” is a spiritually efficacious object. It is likely a version of a mojo or *gris-gris* bag, which is a collection of metonymic and symbolic items compiled to create the desired result, such as red pepper to create anger, roses to represent love, or items derived from a person’s body- typically called personal concerns – to specify to whom the work is directed. Scholars have traced the mojo or *gris-gris* bag to both Mandingo cultures in West Africa and the precolonial kingdom of the Kongo in Central Africa, where versions of this practice are referred to as *Nkisi*.<sup>48</sup> In another instance, Cross discusses the act of ‘picking up tracks,’ an African-derived practice that carries similar philosophical meaning as the mojo bag — that items or images representing a person, such as footprint dirt, may be used ceremoniously to enact some desired result. In Cross’s description, he claims, “footprints are especially liable to be used by *witches* in working their will upon the maker.”<sup>49</sup> He then provides a story about a “witch” who used footprints to break up a couple. “...a negro woman had picked up the tracks of a man and

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<sup>47</sup> Tom Peete Cross, “Witchcraft in North Carolina,” *Studies in Philology* 16, no. 3 (1919): 217–87, 217.

<sup>48</sup> See Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’: The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Jason R Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1984); Michael Angelo Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>49</sup> Tom Peete Cross, “Witchcraft in North Carolina,” *Studies in Philology* 16, no. 3 (1919): 217–87, 255.

his wife, carried them off, and buried them, interring dog's hair with the tracks of the man, cat's hair with those of the woman. Hence the couple could no more live together than a dog and a cat."<sup>50</sup> In both examples made by Cross, the mojo bag in the chimney and the collected footprints, he labels African-originated practices as witchcraft because they can be categorized as anti-social behaviors and are performed by women, two classifications that defined early European beliefs about the witch and witchcraft. Today, we would refer to most practices Cross observed as Hoodoo, which by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, was a unified tradition with initiation rites, common prescriptions for treating physical and relational ailments, and celebrated distinguished practitioners.

Within Cross's discussion of conjure practice that both witches and conjure men embraced, he genders ethical associations. According to Cross's framing, when a woman employs a spiritual practice to harm, he considers it witchcraft, but when a man enacts a similar intent, it is referred to as conjure and not inherently evil. Quoting evidence of African American witchcraft in Dalton's *County Justice*, Cross depicts an evil Black witch.

They [Black witches] often have pictures of clay or wax (like a manmade of such as they would bewitch) found in their house, or which they roast, or burry in the earth, that as the picture consumes so may the parties bewitched consume. According to a belief current as recently as 1896 in a remoter district of Georgia, a *witch* may torture *her* enemy by baking an image of dough fashioned to represent the victim and then sticking pins in it.<sup>51</sup>

Cross continues to reference similar practices, but in the subsequent scenario, a male 'conjure doctor' performs the harming ritual. He quotes a documented story taken from a respondent in Johnston County, North Carolina.

When I was a young boy, my father lived a little east of Clayton, North Carolina. There was a certain Doctor Duncan who lived somewhat more than two miles

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<sup>50</sup> Qtd in Tom Peete Cross, "Witchcraft in North Carolina," *Studies in Philology* 16, no. 3 (1919): 217–87, 256.

<sup>51</sup> Tom Peete Cross, "Witchcraft in North Carolina," *Studies in Philology* 16, no. 3 (1919): 217–87, 257. Emphasis mine.

further east. He was known as a ‘*conjure doctor*.’ He was supposed to work marvelous cures upon people who had strange ailments. If men had been bewitched, he could remove the charm. If women wished their enemies to suffer, he could perform certain curious tricks, and the victim would invariably begin their downward course.<sup>52</sup>

In this account, the conjure doctor is a man and has the choice to enact harm or cure illness. He is described as a “wonder-worker” who “would have been a joke to our household [the household of the presumably white man telling the story] if it were not for the number of people ... who halted at our door to ask the way to Dr. Duncan’s.”<sup>53</sup> Although Dr. Duncan and the unnamed Black witch are both capable of performing harming rituals, the woman is identified as the evil witch intent on achieving harm. In all of Cross’s accounts of the witch figure, her victims are men, specifically men whom the Black witch desires to separate from their wives and possibly keep as her own romantic or sexual mate, deepening hypersexualized stereotypes of Black women.

In Niles Puckett’s *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, he also genders the witch as a woman. *Folk Beliefs* contains over 580 pages of Southern African American conjure/Hoodoo/witchcraft/rootwork practices. Unlike Harry Middleton Hyatt’s collection, which consists of directly quoted interviews, Puckett’s text mainly summarizes his findings. Puckett’s methodology comprised survey questionnaires at Southern Black Universities, interviews with informants, and references to a significant amount of secondhand published and unpublished material. Throughout most of the 580 pages of summarized material, Puckett assigns the pronouns she/her/hers to the witch even after admitting in his opening paragraph that there are both male and female witches in African American folklore. For example, he describes how to catch a witch noting, “Since a witch will not step over a broom, one sure way to keep a

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 258. Emphasis mine.

<sup>53</sup> Qtd in Ibid.

witch from riding you... is to place a broom across your door.” Puckett further explains that “the hag must count every straw before *she* can enter” and then uses the descriptive language “old woman.”<sup>54</sup> He also describes violent accounts of how to kill the witch, claiming, “Should you desire to actually kill the witch, you may do so by shooting her or the animal form she takes.”<sup>55</sup> He summarizes one story where a man in Maryland unintentionally married a snake that took the form of a woman. The man’s friend tells him that his wife is a snake and to put salt in her bread to reveal her identity, as witches are repulsed by salt. After slipping salt into the bread, the woman immediately “turned into a snake and ran up the chimney where she was killed.”<sup>56</sup>

Puckett equated this gendered female figure with evil in ways that resemble both Cross’s categorization of the conjure doctor as male with positive attributes and the witch as female with malevolent intent, despite the near-identical ritual practice. Puckett asserts that “In rural districts of Georgia, reputed witches may lay a spell by baking an image of dough representing a person and sticking pins into it, thus causing the victim to suffer pain.” Ironically Puckett describes the same technique to disarm the witch by “making her image in dough, tying a string around its neck and leaving it to rise. When it is baked, she is strangled so that she can do no more mischief for a year.” If the practice of baking the dough to represent a person is used by both the witch and her victim, then the practice is not inherently evil but situational and, in Puckett’s preconceived notions, depends on the practitioner. In his summary, Puckett uses the term witch to describe the *woman* performing harm, but the alleged victim who sought to kill the witch is unidentified by any identity label or value. Puckett follows this description with a story of Ms. Boyle, whose old nurse Ellen “sought revenge for some reproaches of Ms. Boyle’s mother by

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<sup>54</sup> Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Kessinger Pub., 2003), 156.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.



making a rag image of her and sticking pins into it, ‘calling over and over again, my mother’s name.’”<sup>57</sup> Ellen is presumed to be the witch causing unjust harm to Ms. Boyle’s mother in this account. Puckett equates harming rituals with women, witchcraft, and evil by strategically placing these stories next to each other and using the term witch in the first account (note Ms. Boyle does not use the term witch).

Even Hyatt attempts to equate witchcraft with evil, but because his methodology and presentation of the material are different from Puckett’s approach, contemporary scholars can witness the discrepancy between his assumptions and the response of his informants.

Hyatt: You told me about witchcraft. Do the people here today call it witchcraft?

Respondent: Yes - whut dey all calls it, witchcraft.

Hyatt: And they called this when you were a boy – they called it witchcraft, if you were trying to harm somebody?

Respondent: Yes.

Hyatt: Did you ever hear them call it hoodoo when you were a boy?

Respondent: No, didn’t nevah hear none of dat talk - dey call it witchcraft.<sup>58</sup>

Hyatt first asks if people call it witchcraft, and after his informant responds yes, he asks again, but this time includes the phrase “if you were trying to harm somebody” in his description of witchcraft. Again, the informant responds in the affirmative and adds that they never called it Hoodoo but witchcraft. The discrepancy here lies not only in Hyatt’s framing of a leading question but also in his lack of understanding of how Blacks interpreted supernatural practices of harm and accountability.

Throughout *Folk Beliefs*, Hyatt’s collections, additional scholarly research, and collected and crafted narratives of the enslaved, there are countless records of African Americans using conjure, Hoodoo, and rootwork as a system of accountability when the governing institutions

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>58</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 1, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970), 668.

provided no justice for Black people suffering enslavement and then Jim Crow segregation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. African Americans employed these spiritual tools for protection from the police or slave owner, to hold perpetrators of sexual violence accountable, get revenge on those who performed harm, and to protect themselves from institutional and interpersonal violence. For example, in Zora Neale Hurston's article "Hoodoo in America," she documents a spell to keep the police out of one's home, which instructs the practitioner to "Take flaxseed and brown sugar and mix it and throw it at the four corners of the block and officers will never come." She also records a spell to "make sick or punish an enemy" where one takes "a soiled undergarment of theirs, hang on a bare rafter, get some hackberry switches, and whip the garment. They will be so sore they can't get out of bed."<sup>59</sup> Based on Puckett's and Cross's framings, the rituals recorded by Hurston could be categorized as intentionally evil witchcraft. However, these practices were deployed as forms of power for a people who remained structurally powerless under a system of white supremacy.

Unlike European depictions of the witch as exclusively evil, African Americans described witchcraft within an ambiguous ethical ecology, void of sharp distinctions between good and evil. African American religious historian Albert Raboteau contends that definitions of evil differed for African Americans as they descended from African philosophical concepts of supernatural power, which do not possess rigid distinctions. Raboteau notes that "in the slave community the power to heal and the power to harm resided in one person, the conjurer; in Africa, these powers resided in any one of the gods who had to be propitiated in order to avoid misfortune and illness. There is an amoral quality to conjure, which makes it stray outside the norms of good and evil. The primary categories were not good and evil but security and

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<sup>59</sup> Zora Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *The Journal of American Folklore* 44, no. 174 (1931): 317–417, <https://doi.org/10.2307/535394>, 375-376.

danger.”<sup>60</sup> Yvonne Chireau echoes Rabetau’s claims adding that this African belief transferred to African American understandings of the witch. “In the Western Christian tradition of which Anglo-Americans were inheritors, witches were seen as disciples of the devil, and theologians viewed witchcraft practices as a form of heresy. In contrast, black American ideas of witchcraft sprang from traditional African beliefs in the mixed potential of good and evil.” Chireau quotes one mid-19<sup>th</sup> century reporter saying, “Negros... seem not to ascribe any undue wickedness or malevolence to the [witches], as they tend to think of him or her gifted with an unusual capacity for good or evil.”<sup>61</sup> She assesses witchcraft accounts as resembling the trickster character, known by different names across West Africa and the diaspora, including Esu in Yoruba Ifá, Elegua in Cuban Santería, and Legba in Haitian Vodou.

### **The Witch in Hag Form**

Some of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century observer’s labeling of the Black witch as malevolent resulted from African Americans’ consistent reference to the hag figure who, like European-originated depictions, is associated with evil doing and anti-social behavior. The hag appears across the archives as usually an older woman who torments her sleeping victims at night. She has the ability to shapeshift and often takes the form of a cat or an owl. In human form, she is frequently someone the victim knows and with whom has ill relations. In “She Come Like a Nightmare:” Hags, Witches, and the Gendered Trans-Sense among the Enslaved in the Lower South,” Alexis S. Wells-Oghoghomeh discusses how for most African Americans, the hag was depicted as a spirit living within a host figure, typically an older man or woman. At night this

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<sup>60</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, Updated ed (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 287.

<sup>61</sup> Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). 84.

spirit would leave the host's body and mount someone nearby who is sleeping, causing them harm or depleting their energy. She defines the hag as a "trans-sense being" and argues that it "occupied the liminal space between human and spirit, or, perhaps more accurately, they were primarily understood as spirits embodied as humans." She further asserts that this "trans-sense" is a feature of the hag's ontology, which she rightly attributes to the "West African cosmologies from which captive Africans and their American descendants drew to construct the trans-sense realm in the wake of captivity and displacement."<sup>62</sup> The West African cosmologies that Wells-Oghoghomeh identifies descend from a few places, including the Kongo, where precolonial inhabitants believed in a cyclical version of life and death as represented by the Kongo cosmogram. Unlike Christian theology, where death implies ascending or descending to heaven or hell, for the Kongoleses, a spirit is in a constant state of motion and reincarnation. The otherworldly realms and their supernatural inhabitants are often nearby, dwelling in the natural environment.<sup>63</sup>

Although the exact origins of the hag figure in the transatlantic diaspora are uncertain, it appears to have African and European characteristics. In African American folklore, like the European counterpart, the figure shapeshifts into a cat, is primarily depicted as an older woman, and causes harm to her unsuspecting victims.<sup>64</sup> A similar figure is apparent across Africa, including in the upper Guinea coast among the Mende. They are referred to as the *honei* and are

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<sup>62</sup> Alexis S. Wells-Oghoghomeh, "'She Come Like a Nightmare': Hags, Witches and the Gendered Trans-Sense among the Enslaved in the Lower South," *Journal of Africana Religions* 5, no. 2 (2017): 239–274. 250.

<sup>63</sup> See Kimbwandènde Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo: Tying the Spiritual Knot: Principles of Life & Living*, (Brooklyn, N.Y: Athelia Henrietta Press, pub. in the name of Orunmila, 2001), Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

<sup>64</sup> See Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

described as spirit entities that possess a host and can shapeshift into animal form.<sup>65</sup> In *The Things That Fly in the Night*, Giselle Liza Anatol argues that the hag figure is a compounded cultural entity informed by various ethnic factors instead of one direct inheritance. She claims, “Rather than a direct inheritance model, I believe that the paradigm that works best is the cultural contact model, which incorporates ideas of retention as well as reinterpretation and demonstrates a certain amount of cultural fluidity as well as generational conflict.”<sup>66</sup> As the hag developed in African American folklore from a compilation of ethnic factors like Anatol suggests, the figure began exhibiting particular characteristics specific to the American South.

Unlike observers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Cross and Puckett’s highly gendered retelling of accounts of the witch, African Americans did not gender the hag/witch with the same determinacy. For example, in Hyatt’s collections, almost half of the section on hags and witches describes the hag as a man. However, like its European counterpart where the witch is an older woman, this male hag is also often an older person. Moreover, some informants do not gender the hag at all, mentioning the hag’s spirit form or “trans-sense.” Thus, Wells-Oghoghomeh argues that,

When situated in the context of southern enslavement, the hag constituted much more than a gendered sanction. Rather, she was an entity whose mythology and activities expressed bondspeople’s visualizations of uncontrollable violence in their midst: the externalization of the antagonistic and fatal forces that were constant specters in the community but could never be fully exorcised from it.<sup>67</sup>

Although the hag was likely not a reflection of a gender sanction, as Wells-Oghoghomeh suggests, Hoodoo historian Yvonne Chireau notes that most of the accounts of the hag did refer

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<sup>65</sup> Alexis S. Wells-Oghoghomeh, “‘She Come Like a Nightmare’: Hags, Witches and the Gendered Trans-Sense among the Enslaved in the Lower South,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 5, no. 2 (2017): 239–274. 250.

<sup>66</sup> Giselle Liza Anatol, *The Things That Fly in the Night: Female Vampires in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora*, Critical Caribbean Studies (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015). 19.

<sup>67</sup> Alexis S. Wells-Oghoghomeh, “‘She Come Like a Nightmare’: Hags, Witches and the Gendered Trans-Sense among the Enslaved in the Lower South,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 5, no. 2 (2017): 239–74. 261.

to her as female.<sup>68</sup> An essential and often grotesque site where this gendering occurs is in discussions about identifying a hag. In repeated accounts, we see scenarios of men employing violence to harm a witch/hag by striking her in animal form. Hyatt's collection includes the following example about a shoemaker and his wife, a hag, who turned into a cat and went down to the shoe shop where her husband was working.

One of the cats pawed at this man, and while she did it, he grabbed a shoe knife and hacked at this cat with the knife, and cut one of the cat's forefeet off. ...He picked up the foot and looked at it. And while he had it in his hand, the foot turned into a natural hand. And on this hand was a ring. It was the engagement ring he had gave his wife before he married her, not knowing he had married a hag.

Cutting off an animal's limbs and finding a ring associated with one's spouse is typical in African American folklore concerning the hag. In another account, a man's wife is described as "*hag-riding*" every night.

And that night that she came in, her husband was in the horse stable when she brought the horse in. And when she opened the door, he cut her finger off with the ring [while she was in hag form]. The next morning when he got up, she [as his wife] had her finger tied up. So, he asked her what was the matter with her hand. She said she cut it and didn't know where the finger or the ring was. So, he taken the ring and the finger and told her, "This is the ring I gave you. You've been out hag-riding with my horse. I was in the stable when you came in. You don't need to worry because I am going to kill you." And he killed her.<sup>69</sup>

This account is not the only one where there is a reference to killing the hag. Death and violent retribution are found throughout. However, in these particular stories where the ring is an identifier, we see a strong female gendering of the hag. Whether the violence that these stories portray occurred or not, they still perpetuated violence against women and animals. The violence

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<sup>68</sup> Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). 186.

<sup>69</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 1, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970). 143.

toward the cat—a creature who is often feminized—especially encourages violence toward women and femmes. Feminist historians have established a correlation between the abuse of animals and women under patriarchal rule, and contemporary studies have proven the increased likelihood of male-perpetrated domestic violence incidents when there is a history of animal abuse.<sup>70</sup>

Moreover, the added association of the Black cat with the hag further racializes the figure due to the association of the color black with darkness, evil, and the beast in the Western cultural imagination—an association that has been pivotal to justifications of colonial conquest on the African continent and the Americas. Under anti-black colonial rhetoric, Blacks were denied the category of human and instead assigned the devaluing classification of the beast, thus spreading slavery's justification. Animal studies scholar Che Gossett provides the example of the zoo as a site where the subjugation of the animal and Blackness meet. Gossett argues that “the awful history of the anti-black racist and colonial exoticizing exhibitions of people of African descent alongside animals in zoos shows how for blackness the human/animal binary is not only collapsed but is in fact mutually reinforcing through the violence inherent in the racial-colonial grammar of animalization – how black people have been historically seen as beasts.”<sup>71</sup> The black cat, her stereotyping as evil and feminine, and the resulting violence ensued upon her by both whites and Blacks exudes a misogynoir typical of the period.

Unfortunately, most of the available records on African American notions of the witch exist in documents cited in this chapter, thus making it difficult to ascertain if Black women and

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<sup>70</sup> See Andr e Collard and Joyce Contrucci, *Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence against Animals and the Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Rebecca L. Bucchieri, “Bridging the Gap: The Connection between Violence against Animals and Violence against Humans,” *Journal of Animal & Natural Resource Law* 11 (2015): 115.

<sup>71</sup> Che Gossett, “Blackness, Animality, and the Unsovereign,” Versobooks.com, accessed October 22, 2021, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2228-che-gossett-blackness-animality-and-the-unsovereign>.

men were violently persecuted for accusations of witchcraft or conjure. The available data within criminal records point mostly to witchcraft and conjure persecution of enslaved African Americans under accusations of poisoning. Whites were fearful of falling victim to lethal poisons Blacks were known to concoct and use to kill whites or even other Blacks. For example, in a 1729 case documented in the *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, an enslaved person is accused of poisoning another enslaved person. According to this court case, “Among the plantation negros, witchcraft is supposed to be the weapon of Crusquet’s [the master’s] poisoner’s tribe.” The 1729 case, however, occurred during the beginning of the American enlightenment period, when religious/spiritual practices were deemed superstitious and outside enlightenment rational. Thus, in this case, “The law followed by superior court does not admit witchery, but it does punish poisoners.”<sup>72</sup>

Violence against Black women was also severely under-documented due to legally sanctioned violence in the era of slavery and de-facto allowance of perpetration under Jim Crow segregation. Patricia A. Broussard observes that colonial laws concerning statutory rape were not applied to Native Americans or African Americans, and under Jim Crow convictions were rarely established, particularly when the perpetrator was white. Accordingly, Broussard argues that African American women often decided to remain silent, especially concerning intra-communal violence, for fear of further violence. She notes that “...few men were ever arrested, much less tried, for the rape of an African American woman. ...Appeals courts usually reversed the convictions of both white and Black men who were convicted of raping Black women.”<sup>73</sup> We

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<sup>72</sup> Helen Tunnicliff Catterall and James J. Hayden, eds., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (Buffalo, N.Y.: W.S. Hein, 1998). Vol. 3. 404.

<sup>73</sup> Qtd in Patricia A. Broussard, “Black Women’s Post-Slavery Silence Syndrome: A Twenty-First Century Remnant of Slavery, Jim Crow, and Systemic Racism - Who Will Tell Her Stories,” *Journal of Gender, Race & Justice* 16 (2013): 373. 405.



can extend this contextualization to Black women who were accused of being witches or hags. If violence toward Black women was generally under convicted, it is unlikely that any repercussions for witchcraft/hag accusations, such as removing a limb, were tried by authorities.

While it is clear that the hag was popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century African American imaginary and those accused possibly experienced repercussions, the hag was often separate from the witch as a conjurer who solely takes human form. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans interchanged the terms witch and hag, which maintained distinct meanings depending on the context. Sometimes the witch could mean the hag as in the spirit who depleted the sleeping victim's energy, and sometimes, the witch implied the conjurer who could prevent the hag's malicious acts. In the following example, we see a few things happening: the hag is gendered male, the reference to the hag as an older term, that possibly predates the term witch as a marker for the hag, and lastly, the witch who stalls the hag's power. The interviewee relays a story about a family that was constantly pestered by hags. She informs Hyatt that "they called it hags in those days," possibly alluding to witch preserving a distinct meaning when hag was the common term for this spirit entity. She further informs Hyatt that "Some people would get 'em. It seems it would bear on 'em so hard until they would just holler in their sleep." Another family member told this interviewee to sprinkle salt around her bed to deter the hag, and once she did, "she jumped in her sleep, and when she jumped up, there was a man standing there. He said, 'Skin! Skin! You don't know me!' And the woman caught him. And it was some man that the woman knew was a witch. And he pulled off his skin and laid it down, then torment her. When he got ready to put it back on that night, it had salt on it, and he could not put it back on. They

said they caught him and tortured him because *this other witch instructed them how to catch him.*<sup>74</sup>

Hyatt was one of the few ethnographers who eventually realized the distinction between the hag and the witch; hence in his section in Volume One on hags, he labels it “The Witch in Hag Form.” However, most researchers of his era were not privy to the difference between the witch and hag. In “Witchcraft Among the Negroes,” for example, the author conflates the figure of the witch as a hag and the witch as a conjurer. In his descriptions of the witch as a hag, he makes the following claim.

The negro witches have little in common with our storybooks; they never ride broomsticks or resort to the thousand and one petty arts of the Saxon or Celtic witch. Theirs is a far deeper and deadlier sorcery—a power which the negro firmly believes can waste the marrow in the victim’s bones, dry the blood in his veins, and sapping his life slowly and surely, bring him at last, a skeleton to his grave.<sup>75</sup>

By noting that the “negro witch” can sap “life slowly and surely,” the author refers to the witch as a hag who comes at night to draw the life force out of her sleeping victim. A few paragraphs later, the author describes the Black witch as more akin to a conjurer/healer figure.

Some of these old crones possess a marvelous knowledge of the nature and properties of every plant indigenous to the South. They have an herb for every ache or pain and frequently prepare little bags filled with dried roots or leaves to be worn around the neck as a charm against disease or the ‘evil eye.’<sup>76</sup>

That this author conflates the witch as the hag and the witch as the conjurer attests to two factors.

First, the author’s vantage point likely stems from 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century Euro-Christian beliefs in the

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<sup>74</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuration - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 1, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970). 141. Emphasis mine.

<sup>75</sup> Mrs. M. P. Handy, “Witchcraft Among the Negroes [Volume 8, Issue 194, December 14, 1872; Pp. 666-667],” *Appletons’ Journal: A Magazine of General Literature.*, n.d., <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acw8433.1-08.194>.

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

witch under the authority of the Catholic Church's conflation of ceremonial healing magic with malicious practices and condemnation of witchcraft as heresy. Second, African Americans were likely using the terms interchangeably to define themselves and their Africana religious orientation, as discussed in the following section.

### **An Africana Religious Orientation**

Although the witch in hag form was a present figure in African American folklore, witch and witchcraft were terms also applied to shared beliefs and practices from West and West-Central Africa—regions of the continent from which enslaved Africans were captured. Hoodoo scholar Katrina Hazzard-Donald refers to these similarities as the African Religious Complex. She identifies the belief in spiritual causes of sickness, counterclockwise sacred circle dancing, and ancestral veneration as shared elements among African religious practitioners. For example, ancestor veneration is prominent in American Southern Hoodoo and Yoruba Ifá. Among the Yoruba, the ancestors are referred to as *egungun*, or *egun* and practitioners seek out their advice and protection. In Hoodoo, practitioners also venerate their ancestors and seek material support. Hoodoo and Ifá are distinct religions with their own cosmology, cultural origins, historical influence, and specific practices, but the commonality in ancestor veneration speaks to a distinct African theology.<sup>77</sup> According to Religious Studies scholar Dianne Stewart, the African Religious Complex also includes animal sacrifice and food offerings, manifestations and mediumship, a belief in reincarnation, and the animation of objects.<sup>78</sup> Hoodoo historian Yvonne

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<sup>77</sup> The African Religious Complex appears, not only on the continent but across the African diaspora. Because Africans arriving in the Americas and the Caribbean were coming from a specific continental locale, they had shared beliefs and practices from which to build. Enslaved Africans combined what they remembered with each other and eventually, over centuries of exchange and repetition of oral doctrine and ritual practice, established regionally distinct religions such as Hoodoo in the American South, Candomblé in Brazil, and Vodou in Haiti.

<sup>78</sup> Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Chireau claims the African Religious Complex is characterized by “highly structured cosmologies, concepts of a diffused monotheism, rituals of sacred mediation, an emphasis on devotion to ancestors and the dead, and the use of spiritually efficacious objects.”<sup>79</sup> These shared beliefs are the foundation for African-heritage spiritual/religious practice in the United States, including some iterations of African American Christianity.<sup>80</sup> Terms like witchcraft and conjure merely serve as containers to describe traditions that are anchored in African beliefs as a philosophical base.

Witchcraft, conjure, and rootwork were European-originated terms that African Americans used interchangeably to describe an emerging religious tradition that combined European and Indigenous American practices with beliefs originating from the African Religious Complex. Specific African concepts and terms, such as *gris-gris*, *Nkisi*, and *wanga*, were integrated into African American Hoodoo/witchcraft/rootwork/conjure practices. As Wells-Oghoghomeh, points out “...ndozo, a Mende word meaning “spirit or magic,” became joso, meaning “charm, witchcraft,” just as *awanka*, a Temne word for a protective charm, and *wangwa*, a Mende reference to an herbal abortifacient, contributed to the widespread use of *wanga* as a reference to a “charm” or “witchcraft.”<sup>81</sup>

The terms Hoodoo, conjure, rootwork, and witchcraft have all been used to imply engagement with the spiritual and earthly realm to achieve a desired result. Rootwork or rootworker is occasionally defined separate from the other terms, indicating someone who exclusively uses herbal remedies to heal physical ailments. Still, because of African-originated

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<sup>79</sup> Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 37.

<sup>80</sup> See Theophus Harold Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, Religion in America Series (New York: Oxford university press, 1995).

<sup>81</sup> Alexis S. Wells-Oghoghomeh, “‘She Come Like a Nightmare’: Hags, Witches and the Gendered Trans-Sense among the Enslaved in the Lower South,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 5, no. 2 (2017): 239–274. 243.

beliefs regarding the lack of duality between spiritual and physical realms, rootworkers were also often considered conjurers who engaged the supernatural realm to affect change. Chireau defines conjure as “a magical tradition in which spiritual power is invoked for various purposes, such as healing, protection, and self-defense.”<sup>82</sup> Even with its roots in magic and incantation, Hoodoo is what many scholars and practitioners would define as a religion and the amalgamation of centuries of African American spiritual technologies that developed and adapted as soon as Africans arrived on the American shores.<sup>83</sup>

Katrina Hazzard-Donald documents Hoodoo’s religious evolution and claims that Hoodoo as a religion, with established rituals, processes of initiation, and a broadly agreed upon pharmacology, did not fully develop until the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>84</sup> Before that time, Hoodoo was not a distinct religion but a collection of practices and cosmological beliefs held by the enslaved Africans arriving on American shores. Captive Africans were introduced to the indigenous population’s beliefs, the British Protestant Christian faith, and French Catholicism upon arrival. Africans added elements of European Christian and Indigenous American practices to their already rich religious landscape to survive their new oppressive environments and eventually solidified a distinct religious tradition. Initially, spiritual practices developed with characteristics specific to each U.S. region. Factors impacting regional development of spiritual practice were diversity in the land and climate, crops harvested, and the ethnic majority of the

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<sup>82</sup> Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 12.

<sup>83</sup> Historically Hoodoo has been referred to as magic, depriving the tradition of its established structure. Scholars and practitioners are now referring to Hoodoo as a religion based on ritual protocols, consistently employed spiritual materials, and documented initiatory rites during the early 20th century. For a discussion of the relationship between magic and religion, see Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), Introduction. See also Yvonne Chireau, “Video: Black Magic Matters: Hoodoo as Ancestral Religion,” accessed April 4, 2023, <https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/news/magic-matters/2021/11/10>.

<sup>84</sup> See Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin: The Old African American Hoodoo System* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 55.

enslaved Africans inhabiting the land. For example, in the Southwest or Gulf Coast/ New Orleans/Mobile region, mainly populated by Senegambian- Mande speakers, Mande terms like *gerregery* appear in Hoodoo as gris-gris bags.<sup>85</sup> After 1807, cotton became the primary crop grown throughout the South, which drastically altered the institution of slavery. Enslaved Africans were moved from one plantation to another as slave owners adjusted to new planting requirements. For example, tobacco plantations did not require many workers, while one rice plantation needed at least thirty laborers. As the enslaved moved from one plantation to another, they brought their regional spiritual practices, which were shared and adopted by other bondpersons. As regional differences dwindled, a coherent religious tradition developed.<sup>86</sup>

As a coherent religion developed, the term Hoodoo also emerged. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, around the same time that Hazzard-Donald suggests the religion of Hoodoo solidifies, Harry Middleton Hyatt and many of his respondents claim that ‘Hoodoo’ enters the typical African American lexicon. For example, a few of Hyatt’s respondents inform him that Hoodoo is a ‘new’ term.

Interview one: Conducted in Fayetteville, North Carolina around 1930.

Hyatt: In the old-time, what did people used to call all this sort of work?

Respondent: Dey called it witchcraft. Sometime de people called it. De ole- time people cunjurin’.

Hyatt: Did they ever call it hoodoo years ago?

Respondent: De hoodoo? Now, dese late yeahs dey call it hoodoo.<sup>87</sup>

Interview two: Conducted in Saint Petersburg, Florida around 1930.

Hyatt: When you were a young boy what did they call this kind of work?

Respondent: Cunjuring.

Hyatt: They called it conjuring? Did they use the word *hoodoo*?

Respondent: No sir, didn’t use dat.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>87</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 2, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970), 1053.

Hyatt: It's a new word?

Respondent: It's a new word - it come out since 'mancipation.<sup>88</sup>

Hyatt notes that the interviewee in the second interview was born in 1858, which he identifies as years before the word's appearance. The interviewee's remarks and historical location might explain why Hyatt concluded that the term Hoodoo does not appear in the African American spiritual vocabulary until after the Civil War. Historian Jeffrey Anderson agrees with Hyatt that widespread usage of the term Hoodoo does not occur until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Anderson,

The English word conjure was in use during colonial times along the Atlantic Coast but was unknown in the French- and later Spanish-ruled Mississippi River Valley. Hoodoo, probably already in use before the nineteenth century, seems to have initially appeared in print during the first half of the 1860s in reference to practitioners from Memphis, Tennessee. The term's use increased throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, usually but not exclusively in connection with the Mississippi River Valley. It was not until the early decades of the twentieth century that African Americans adopted hoodoo to refer to magical practices outside the Latin Cultural Zone.<sup>89</sup>

If Hyatt's respondents and Anderson's periodization of Hoodoo are accurate about Hoodoo as a word that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, then it is important to ask what African-descended peoples in the United States were calling their spiritual practices prior? Unfortunately, most of the direct narratives from Southern African Americans were collected after emancipation, with the exception of a few autobiographies from those previously enslaved. Thus, it is difficult to know with certainty what terms enslaved Africans used for their African-derived practices during slavery. However, based on the claims Hyatt's respondents in North Carolina

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<sup>88</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted by Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 1, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970), 667.

<sup>89</sup> Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Hoodoo, Voodoo, and Conjure: A Handbook*, Greenwood Folklore Handbooks (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2008), 42.

and Florida made, it is possible that ‘witchcraft’ and ‘conjure’ were employed by practitioners who did not know about ‘Hoodoo’ or were words used before ‘Hoodoo’ became widespread.

What is evident, however, is that witchcraft, conjure, and Hoodoo were all interchangeable terms to describe various African-originated spiritual technologies. In Hyatt’s collection and the *Born in Slavery Narratives*, references to ‘witchcraft’ closely resemble 20<sup>th</sup> century descriptions of the practice we now call Hoodoo. One of Hyatt’s respondents in Waycross, Georgia, noted, “Yo’ go to de fo’ks of de road nine Sunday mornings befo’ sunup. An’ dat’s to learn de witchcraft-dat’s wut dey might call it. Dat’s whut we call it down in dis country. Some of us call it rootworkin’. Some of us call it witchcraft, an’ some of us call it hoodoo, but it’s all run into de same thing.”<sup>90</sup> In Hyatt’s records, cases of informants interchanging the terms witchcraft, Hoodoo, conjure, and rootwork appear across various Southern locales, but all refer to an Africana religious orientation.

### **The Witch as Conjurer**

Because of their Africana religious orientation, practitioners did not categorize all ceremonial magic as evil. Instead, ceremonial magic was a belief system that promoted divine intervention. Thus, for Black Americans, the witch, like the conjurer, could harm, heal or manifest depending on the desires of the supplicant and/or the practitioner. An understanding of the witch as conjurer is evident in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938*, which were stories collected around the same time Harry Middleton Hyatt and Zora Neale Hurston were conducting their ethnography. For example, in Athens, Georgia,

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<sup>90</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted by Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 1, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970), 667.



86-year-old Nicey Kinny described being “conjured” by a “witch-man.” “Some old witch-man conjured me into marryin’ Jordan Jackson. Dat’s de blessed truth, Honey; a fortune teller is done told me how it was done. I didn’t want to have nothin’ to do wid Jordan cause I knowed he was jus’ a no count old drinkin’ man dat jus’ wanted my land and stuff. When he couldn’t git me to pay him no heed hisself, he went to a old conjure man and got him to put a spell on me.”<sup>91</sup>

Although the ‘witch-man’ in Kinny’s description is, yes, performing an ethically questionable spell, witchcraft and witch were also terms to describe healers and manifesters capable of producing the client’s desired result, and diviners with power to see future possibilities surrounding a situation.

In an interview in *The Born in Slavery Narratives*, 103- or 104-year-old Ann Parker from Raleigh, North Carolina, shares a story about her mother, whom she describes as both a queen and a witch.

...did I tell yo’ ‘bout my mammy bein’ a *queen*? Yes, she wuz a queen, an’ when she tol’ dem nigg\*rs dat she wuz dey bowed down ter her. She tol’ dem not ter tell it an’ dey doan tell, but when dey is out of sight of de white folkses dey bows down ter her an does what she says.

A few days ‘fore de surrender mammy who am also a *witch*, says ter dem dat she sees hit in de coffee grounds dat dey am gwine ter be free so all o’ us packs up an’ gits out.

The juxtaposition of the descriptors queen and witch illustrates that witches were viewed as credible sources of vision and prediction. For Ann Parker’s mother, the witch was celebrated and respected by other enslaved Black people on the plantation. Although her powers were kept a secret for possible fear of white persecution, the fellow enslaved respected her as a leading matriarchal figure when whites were not around. Within African-heritage religions and among

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<sup>91</sup> *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3, Kendricks-Styles*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn043/>, 32.

my interviewees, witches and priestesses are honored as leading members in their communities. At Ile Ori African Cultural Center in Atlanta, GA, for example, an African American temple dedicated to the practice of the Yoruba religion of Ifá, the women are core figures in the center's leadership.<sup>92</sup> Special greetings are required of anyone initiated into the tradition, and older women are treated with awe and veneration by the younger participants. Within online spiritual spaces, witches like Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde are celebrated by younger spiritual practitioners who often go to her for spiritual services such as divination, ritual work, and training under her guidance as apprentices. Akin to protocols at Ile Ori, where the priestesses are consulted before any decision is made, Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde and other witches like her are considered to have the final word on spiritual conversations and disputes.<sup>93</sup> In Ann Parker's account, the enslaved Black people trusted her mother's judgment so wholly that they left the plantation when she predicted the coming of the Civil War and the end of slavery.

Alongside respected diviners, Black witches in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were also healers of the physical body. Black Americans maintained a significant distrust of white doctors due to a history of medical experimentation and lack of quality care. Before emancipation, white doctors were primarily interested in health and healing for Black people as it pertained to keeping them alive as workers and as someone's property. These same doctors had dangerous and ineffective medical practices that often caused more harm than healing.<sup>94</sup> After emancipation African Americans could not afford mainstream medical care and did not trust the doctors that originally worked for their masters. In Hyatt's collection, Hyatt speaks with a man in Waycross, Georgia,

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<sup>92</sup> These are ethnographic examples from my experience as a member of Ile Ori Cultural Center in Atlanta, GA. Visit, <https://www.ileori.com/>

<sup>93</sup> Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde, In discussion with author, Zoom, July 30, 2021.

<sup>94</sup> See Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), and Hans A. Baer, *Biomedicine and Alternative Healing Systems in America: Issues of Class, Race, Ethnicity, and Gender* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

who, although diagnosed by a medical doctor with inflammatory rheumatism, acknowledges that the doctors were of no use in curing his illness. His sister instructed him to visit her great auntie who "...wuz a woman dat worked Egyptian witchcraft all a her life. An de very moment dat she looked at mah arm, she says, "jes' wait a few minutes." She goes intuh 'er room an' comes out wit a little ole vial an' she begin tuh rub in' it lak dis, an' mah arm been straight evah since."<sup>95</sup> In this account, the practitioner of "Egyptian witchcraft" heals Hyatt's respondent with a natural remedy (likely Jimsonweed) of which, assumedly, white doctors were unaware. Black communities and the witches who served them sought their own form of medical care, relying on the rich pharmacology of the land around them and their spiritual beliefs and practices from Africa.

One of the most significant philosophical foundations of Black healing practices was a holistic one: the belief that the physical body, the mind, and the spiritual realm all affect one's health. In *African American Folk Healing*, Stephanie Mitchem documents how these African beliefs translated into African American healing modalities. She defines African American folk healing as,

the creatively developed range of activities and ideas that aim to balance and renew life... In this view, human life is understood relationally as part of the interconnected, shared web of the universe.... Consequently, death is not a final break with life because the spirit/soul continues and may be able to interact from the next plane of existence. ...Within this scheme, ...the healer, rootworker, or conjurer is important. The individual learns to orchestrate or "fix" the natural, spiritual, and relational aspects of life.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjurition - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted by Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 3, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970), 1967.

<sup>96</sup> Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 3.

This same practitioner of “Egyptian Witchcraft” informed Hyatt’s respondent that “When ah rub dese things together ah ast de Father in heaven tuh move de pain.”<sup>97</sup> Like Mitchem’s definition of African American folk healing, where the spirit or supernatural energies are very much a part of physical healing modalities, this healer has not only expertise in the local pharmacology but is also trained in harnessing the supernatural world to enhance the plant’s healing power. By calling on the “Father in heaven” to help remove the pain alongside the use of Jimsonweed, she further blurs the line between the physical and spiritual realms. This blurring reminds us that neither of these spatial concepts can be assigned exclusively to the rootworker or the witch since historically, among African Americans, a significant distinction between these categories has not existed.<sup>98</sup>

In addition to the spiritual realm, interpersonal dynamics among African and African-descended people contributed to health and general well-being. According to Albert Raboteau, “Africans conceived of the individual self... as constituted by a web of kinship relations.... Long before western medicine recognized this fact, African traditional healers stressed that interpersonal relations affected people’s health.”<sup>99</sup> One of the most significant ways relational dynamics appeared was through accusations of being ‘hoodoo’ed, conjur’ed, or witchcraft’ed, all terms employed to imply that someone had evoked the supernatural realm to cause harm. This act was often an expression of internal accountability systems when the white ruling class could not be relied on to provide justice within enslaved communities. Hoodoo, conjure, rootwork, and

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<sup>97</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 3, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970), 1967.

<sup>98</sup> See Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), and Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>99</sup> Qtd in Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 35.

witchcraft were all used to achieve revenge, seek justice, and maintain accountability within Black spaces. In line with this, Jason R. Young agrees with other scholars about the effectiveness of conjure as a form of power for enslaved African Americans. Young contends that “conjure functioned as a form of spiritual resistance that not only challenged the authority of the master class but also established an independent realm of criminality and justice, outside the immediate authority of whites.”<sup>100</sup> Although witchcraft was the term white folklorists generally applied to acts of justice, vengeance, and harm across the board, in the following example, we see the term “hoodooed” used in a harming context and the term “witch” with a positive healing connotation.

In Richard M. Dorson’s article “Negro Witch Stories on Tape,” he quotes a woman named Mrs. Smith, who associates the term witch with healing in 1908. Mrs. Smith shares that her Sister Melie became infected with a strange illness that was causing her feet, hands, and face to swell and itch and, after visiting numerous Western medical doctors, received no cure for her ailments. Finally, her neighbor suggested that Sister Melie had been “hoodooed” and advised that she visit “this ol’ hoodoo woman, Aunt Dinah.” Aunt Dinah instructed Sister Melie to return home and dig into the ground about four feet in front of her bed. Sister Melie began digging and found a cloth sack filled with “lil’ ol’ wood lice.” She quickly scooped them up and brought the lice to Aunt Dinah who began ritual work, and soon enough, Sister Melie’s “feet went down, her head went down, an’ she get back to no’ mal. An she lived all them years.”<sup>101</sup> Mrs. Smith attests, “An’ they said this woman that cured her was one of the *witches*. You know, they tried to get up everybody that was a witch. They trying to find them out to see who they was.”<sup>102</sup> Dorson further highlights Mrs. Smith’s synonymous use of the terms witch and Hoodoo by writing in the

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<sup>100</sup> Jason R Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 139.

<sup>101</sup> Richard M. Dorson, “Negro Witch Stories on Tape,” *Midwest Folklore* 2, no. 4 (1952): 229–41, 230–232.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 232. Emphasis mine.

footnotes, “Note the identification of the hoodoo woman with the witch, in Mrs. Smith’s story.” He then quotes a respondent in the 1940 collection *Drums and Shadows* who proclaims, ‘Witches an root men hab duh same magic powuh,’ and that witches are the wives of hoodoo men.”<sup>103</sup>.



*Figure 1: Mrs. Davis  
Ethnographer Harry Middleton Hyatt standing with his interviewee,  
Mrs. Davis who is a healing practitioner of witchcraft.<sup>104</sup>*

Another example of the witch as the healer is extensively documented in volume five of Hyatt’s collection in an interview with Mrs. Davis, who is both married to a healer and is one herself. Mrs. Davis informs Hyatt that, “Ah married a witchcraft man. He was uh healah. Some be blind, some couldn’t hear, some had breakin’-out skin. An’ he would cure those people.” Like Mrs. Smith’s accounts, Mrs. Davis shares a story where her husband, the “witchcraft man,” healed a woman who another practitioner had previously cursed. “We was in Louisville

<sup>103</sup> Qtd in *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>104</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 3, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970). 2783.

Kentucky, an' a woman comed to our house and she just scratched, yo' know. All the time she scratched. So ah said, "yo' ' mus' been out in the woods somewhere an' got some kinda itch." She said, "No," said, "this been on me now fo' about 5 years," said "an' there ain't no cure fo' it." So mah husband come home [and] she say, "Well ah give yo' \$500 if yo' go an' git this off o' me." He said, "Yeah, there's no thin' in yo'," he says," it's on yo." By informing the patient that "it's on yo" Mrs. Davis' husband was letting the sick woman know that she had been cursed and required spiritual as well as physical support. Her husband, the witchcraft man, then gave the ailing woman what he called a 'preparation' to help her heal. Hyatt asks Mrs. Davis if "some other witch" made the preparation or if he bought it from the store. Mrs. Davis responds, "No, when yo' buy, uh, somethin' from the store, that's not witchcraft 'caus witchcraft is something everybody can't do. An' if yo' go to the store an' buy anythin', anythin' yo' go to the store an' buy, ah'm gonna buy. An' somebody else gonna buy. That's not witchcraft."<sup>105</sup> For Mrs. Davis, the commercialization of witchcraft or the mass production of Hoodoo supplies by untrained merchants does not reflect the authentic craft. One must be born with the power to evoke healing and then should be trained in its modalities by a more established witch.

In the same breath, Mrs. Davis amends her statement admitting that since many African Americans have migrated North and find themselves void of the rich pharmacology harvested in the South, one can employ the commercial items only with the correct ritual procedures and when applied in tandem with spiritual gifts. Notably, alongside describing witchcraft as a healing practice, she also uses the term to imply spiritual harming rituals. She says, "Yo' can buy the stuff from the drug store now. An' bein' in the city an' not in the country tha' yo' can't go in the

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<sup>105</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 5, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970), 4528-4531.

woods an' git it. Yo' can but yo' got to know wha' to ask fo' when yo' go there.... Tha' would cure witchcraft. But yo' got to know." Here witchcraft is something to be cured *through* witchcraft. Mrs. Davis attributes malevolent witchcraft to the practitioner's devil alliance yet claims that witchcraft should be used for healing purposes. She asserts, "... 'cause witchcraft is a peculiar thin'. Ah'm not to hurt nobody. Yo' don' suppose to do tha'. But debe some had sol' out to the devil in the place of healin'. They are rebuked in the healin' part an' goin' in their devil side."<sup>106</sup> Mrs. Davis describes a framework where conjure, Hoodoo, and rootwork possess both harming and healing capacities. Witchcraft as a field whose ethics depend on the practitioner's choices reflects what Chireau and Raboteau describe as a defining feature of African-originated concepts of good and evil that appear in African American religion.

African Americans also used Hoodoo, witchcraft, conjure, and rootwork to resist the brutal conditions of chattel slavery. African-originated practices were instrumental in many uprisings and slave revolt plots, including Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831, the New York Slave Revolt in 1712, and the Charleston South Carolina conspiracy led by Denmark Vesey in 1822. Moreover, Black women working in a domestic capacity often employed the subtle tactic of poisoning to harm enslavers.<sup>107</sup> Poisoning was one of the most feared forms of retribution by whites and they actively persecuted people they believed to be committing the crime. Criminal records documented before emancipation show poisoning as one of the most common forms of witchcraft accusations.<sup>108</sup> Alternative forms of witchcraft not only employed herbs in poisoning but also invoked the spiritual realm to achieve justice.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 4531.

<sup>107</sup> Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 59-89.

<sup>108</sup> See Ibid., 68-77, and Alison Games, *Witchcraft in Early North America*, American Controversies Series (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 48-55.



The WPA *Born in Slavery* narratives, which provide first-hand accounts of Black life during slavery, documents a story of a ‘witch doctor’ that harmed his enslaver. In Garland County, Arkansas, Aunt Clara Walker attests to a “witch doctor... from Africa. [That] didn’t like his master, ‘cause he was mean. So he make a little man out of mud. An’ he stick thorns in its back. Sure ‘nuff, his master got down with a misery in his back. An’ de witch doctor let de thorn stay in de mud-man until he thought his master had got nuff punishment. When he tuck it out, his master got better.”<sup>109</sup> The “little man out of mud” made by the witch doctor is likely derived from the Kongo-originated *nkisi*, a manufactured spiritual object that experts would with rusty nails, pins, or needles to evoke a desired result. In parts of the South Carolina Lowcountry region, conjure doctors sold “small doll-like figures called “sufferin’ root,” which when named for an enemy, could cause a complete loss of health as pins were repeatedly stuck into various parts of the doll’s anatomy.”<sup>110</sup>

Mrs. Davis - from Hyatt’s collection of testimonies - shares a similar story in which her grandmother and the famous rootworker Doctor Buzzard use witchcraft for justice. Her Uncle Willie was once a taxi driver in Florida who mistakenly helped a group of thieves escape after killing the merchant in a store robbery. The thieves got away, and the police blamed the murder on her Uncle Willie.

An’ so they was gonna hang Uncle Wille. An’ he was scheduled to be hung at 10 o’ clock. An’ mah gran’ mothah went to Doctor Buzzard... and when she come back, late, while daylight that mornin’ It turned dark, was a quartah to ten. An’ nothin’ but a lil o’le hole what yo’ fall in. Got four black buzzards an’ they’re just flyin’ so thick there, yo’ just couldn’t see nuthin. [At the gallows] gran’ma was

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<sup>109</sup> *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 7, Vaden-Young*. 1936.

Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn027/>, 20-21. Aunt Clara Walker uses the term ‘witch doctor,’ which appears throughout the WPA narratives, to describe a figure similar to the conjure doctor. This witch doctor is frequently sought out to disempower the spirit of the hag who is intent on harming practices. Because the hag and the witch are separate entities, and like how in Mrs. Davis’s story, witchcraft can cure witchcraft, the witch as conjurer can capture the witch in hag form.

<sup>110</sup> Qtd in Jason R Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 123.

walkin' aroun' an' smokin' her pipe with the stuff that "doctah" Buzzard give 'er when she went [to see him in North Carolina.] An' this what he give her, the one what was gonna make it turn dark that wus *witchcraft* because when they hang yo' if they said 10 o'clock it have to be 10' clock. An' aftah 10 o' clock if they didn' hang yo' then one minute aftah they have to cut yo' down. So it turned dark. An' they couldn' do nothin' with these black birds. When it did start to lighten up, it was 10 minutes aftah eleven. An' they had to cut him down.<sup>111</sup>

According to Mrs. Davis, her grandmother was practicing witchcraft by smoking Doctor Buzzard's herbs at the gallows, which caused Uncle Wille's release. Mrs. Davis does not share the race of the robbers who jumped in her uncle's taxi nor the race of the store owner who was killed. It is likely, however, that either the store owner or the robbers were white, and her uncle's conviction was racially motivated based on the town's immediate inclination to hang him. For Mrs. Davis, the use of witchcraft was necessary justice.

Lastly, like contemporary Black witches, informants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century identified witchcraft with spiritual manifestation practices. By manifestation, I am referring to the process by which practitioners evoke the spiritual realm to create some form of material abundance. In the *Born in Slavery Narratives*, Zora Neal Hurston's research, and Harry Middleton Hyatt's collection of the early 20th century, we mostly see spiritual technologies such as mojo bags for luck in gambling and in acquiring employment. This was a period when African Americans were only about fifty to one hundred years post-emancipation, reconstruction in the South was devastated by Jim Crow, and most of the available work was sharecropping, which replicated to varying degrees, forced servitude. Economic resources were minimal; thus, luck in gambling was a financial necessity as it was one of the few ways money circulated within Black communities.

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<sup>111</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 5, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970), 4543-4545.

We also see charms for attracting the desired job, especially as the likelihood of being Black and employed and paid a decent wage by racist white Southerners were slim.

In Saint Petersburg, Florida, in 1970, Hyatt interviewed a man, identified as ‘The Prophet,’ who had spent 17 years practicing witchcraft. He shared with Hyatt a ritual prescription for attracting work that included putting enchanted Bluestone powder in one’s shoe when making a job request. The Prophet then told a story about a client who performed this ritual and received work that day. The Prophet reflected,

He said he excited. He nevah had—ya see the people nevah had a mir’cle happen in theah lives. It sometin’ to make them excited about. This is the thin’ I say, make some of us that work in thah the field of mir’cles—as they say sometime relatively speakin’ differen’—is becuz everything we wan can be had. If we had thuh one thing, Thuh key to open the door wit our mind an thuh comb-nation thah will make us magnetic tuh whoever we go tuh.<sup>112</sup>

The amount of positivity and hope in this passage is astounding, especially for a people faced with financial poverty resulting from racist institutional abuse and segregation.

Witchcraft/Hoodoo/conjure all provided tangible material outcomes for a people situated in extreme lack and fostered a hope that the energies of the divine would not let them suffer.

Before sharing this story, The Prophet tells Hyatt, “An ‘ in the last, uh seventeen year, ah have been workin’ exclusively in thuh field of Voodoo, or Hoodoo as yo’ called it, an witchcraf’.”<sup>113</sup> Note that in this statement, The Prophet says that the terms Voodoo and Hoodoo are terms that Hyatt uses—as yo’ called it—and he continues that he works in the field of witchcraft. This statement reflects earlier claims made by Hyatt’s other respondents, who suggest

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<sup>112</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 5, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970). 4679.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 4614.

that 'witchcraft,' 'Hoodoo,' and 'conjure' are all interchangeable. It might also be regionally specific where 'witchcraft' is primarily employed in Saint Petersburg, Florida.

Moreover, The Prophet's use of the term field illustrates the variety in practice. If we consider an academic field with various areas of specialization, witchcraft, for practitioners like the Profit, also has subdivisions. The subdivisions are areas discussed in this section, such as divination for the Queen/witch, healing for Mrs. Davis and her husband, justice for Aunt Clara, and manifestation for The Prophet. Like Hoodoo, conjure, and rootwork, witchcraft could imply engagement with the spiritual realm for any desired outcome, regardless of ethical associations.

## **Conclusion**

It is vital to highlight that the terms witch and witchcraft (and the negative connotations associated with the practice, as well its women practitioners) are Western categories and values that African-descended peoples interpreted through their African-originated philosophical systems. As a result of European expansion and conquest, European associations of the term with devil alliance and other anti-social behaviors have a long legacy in the persecution of healers worldwide. Practices typically associated with ceremonial magic quickly became lumped under the Catholic Church's umbrella of heresy, and those accused of practicing magic were persecuted by law. In America's early 20<sup>th</sup> century folklore material, researchers like Cross and Puckett equated the terms witch and witchcraft with evil. They thus misapplied the categorization to African American Southern spiritual practices and beliefs, failing to recognize the distinction between the witch as the hag figure and the witch as the conjurer.

Additionally, like their European predecessors, many early 20<sup>th</sup> century observers assumed *all* practices labeled witchcraft were ill-intentioned and further gendered the figure of

the witch, only associating witchcraft with women seeking to harm. Unlike these white outsiders, African Americans imagined the witch as a conjurer, a healer, and someone who could enact justice in their community. No different from Hoodoo, conjure, and rootwork, African American witchcraft encompassed myriad practices that could harm or heal depending on the practitioner's wishes. Today, we see a similar Africana religious orientation in the Black witch. She, too, uses the term witch to define herself but not in reference to European magic or as a category of evil. Instead, she is approaching her engagement with spiritual technologies from an Africana religious foundation and, when combined with a Black feminist framework, understands the Black witch to be an ontology of power.

## **Chapter Two: Defining the Self: An Africana Ontology of Black Feminist Power**

As Chapter One established, the witch's being, her ontology, has primarily been defined as an innate ability and subsequent propensity to harm. Early 15<sup>th</sup>-century European stereotypes outlined in texts like the *Hammer of Witches*, characterize her as a hypersexualized, devil worshiper and destroyer of men. Although African Americans at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had more nuanced versions of the witch—characterizing her mainly as a conjurer—negative images still loom, resulting in many self-identified witches (and non-identified people with innate abilities) quieting their power for fear of retribution. My research shows that most self-identified contemporary Black witches, however, do *not* fear their power and – through mentorship or initiation into a religion – have found tangible ways to harness these abilities.

I spoke with 30 Black women and femmes in New Orleans, Detroit, New York, Atlanta, and Baltimore. Each one is actively contributing to Black witch discourse by publishing books and disseminating information on social media. Almost every interviewee with whom I spoke expressed an innate ability to connect with the divine. They do this through seeing or hearing the dead, witnessing glimpses of the future, or gathering information about a stranger through physical touch. Most of the witches I interviewed described these abilities, not as gifts bestowed upon them by a divine entity outside of themselves, but as something intrinsic—an ontological *is-ness* inseparable from and innate to their being. These abilities distinguish the Black witch from non-witch spiritual practitioners or religious initiates that might employ spiritual technologies to engage the divine but do not possess this power within themselves. However, this *is-ness* of the witch with abilities to see the future or connect with the dead is not unique to the

Black witch. White and other non-Black witches have similarly discussed these abilities as being a known part of themselves since childhood.<sup>114</sup> What is unique, however, is the Black witch's Africana religious orientation – her approach to notions of the self and spiritual practice that emerge out of shared West and West-Central African religious principles. Out of her engagement with African-heritage religions— most frequently Yoruba-originated Ifá and African American Hoodoo—the Black witch constructs an Africana religious orientation. Thus, an interdependent relationship emerges where ontological power can be interpreted through their Africana religious orientation. Moreover, the Black witch also understands herself and her power through a Black feminist consciousness. Like the white witches of the 1970s and 1980s who associated the witch with women's resistance, the Black witch often sees her being as oppositional to patriarchy. But as a Black woman or femme-identified person, she recognizes that her ontology opposes patriarchy *and*, in reclaiming a powerful, self-actualized self, opposes misogynoir. Through her identification with an ontological Black feminist Africana-informed power, she, as Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers describes, is “claiming the monstrosity”<sup>115</sup> of both Blackness and the witch. To further comprehend this ontology of interdependent powers, let us begin by exploring Black ontology in the field of religion.

### **Black Ontology**

Ontology is typically understood as an aspect of metaphysics that frames categories of being. In the study of Black religion, ontology has primarily been discussed by theologians through reflection on Black ontology. Most notably, James Cone argues that ontological

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<sup>114</sup> Based on discussions with white and non-Black witches.

<sup>115</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>. 80.

Blackness is defined by the experience of anti-Black racism, survival, and resistance within its confines. In his 1970 book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone writes that the Black experience is a “totality of black existence in a white world where babies are tortured, women are raped, and men are shot... The black experience is existence in a system of white racism.”<sup>116</sup> But also, for Cone, Black existence is shaped by resistance to this oppressive state. It is where “...blacks recognize that it is incumbent upon them to throw off the chains of white oppression by whatever means they regard as necessary,”<sup>117</sup> which can involve “...attacking the enemy of black humanity by throwing a Molotov cocktail into a white-owned building and watching it go up in flames.”<sup>118</sup> For Cone, as Black people experience anti-blackness while resisting oppressive brutality, they internalize and construct a divine notion of self. Cone claims Blackness is,

...catching the spirit of blackness and loving it. It is hearing black preachers speak of God’s love in spite of the filthy ghetto, and black congregations responding Amen, which means that they realize that ghetto existence is not the result of divine decree but of white inhumanity... Black soul is not learned; it comes from the totality of black experience, the experience of carving out an existence in a society that says you do not belong.<sup>119</sup>

Womanist theologians espouse similar beliefs, albeit they incorporate more analysis of the interplay between gender and race. Emilie Townes, for example, defines a womanist ontology as,

...a radical concern for is-ness in the context of African American life. This concern for being is not rooted in trans empirical realities or with a world behind the world of Black life in the United States. Its primary concern is concrete existence (lived life) and the impetus for a coherent and unified relationship between body, soul, and creation. In this sense, it is consonant with African cosmology that understands all of life as sacred. A womanist ontology seeks to rediscover this apprehension in Black life in the United States.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> James Cone quoted in Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016). 88.

<sup>117</sup> Cone quoted in *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>118</sup> Cone quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Cone quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> “To Be Called Beloved : Womanist Ontology in Postmodern Refraction | Semantic Scholar,” accessed July 5, 2022, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/To-Be-Called-Beloved-%3A-Womanist-Ontology-in-Townes/6e919b42dd3c4a9e23f198d936d156da3b4f3046>. 94.



Both Townes and Cone emphasize that Black ontology is characterized by its contextual existence. Blackness *is* in its relationship to white supremacy. Townes further elaborates, “The task of a womanist ontology is to illuminate, question, and begin the eradication of radical oppression and devaluation of the self and the community in the context of structural evil.”<sup>121</sup> In *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, Victor Anderson highlights an essential missing piece of the argument that Blackness is ontologically informed by white supremacy. Anderson argues that if a Black ontology is contingent on whiteness for its existence—both in survival and in its cultural and internalized iterations—then true liberation can only exist in theory. He contends that by this definition, “Blackness cannot exist without white domination. Existentially, the new black being remains bound by whiteness. Politically, it remains unfulfilled because blackness is ontologically defined as the experience of suffering and survival.”<sup>122</sup> By Anderson’s observations Blackness is thus null without white violence and its supposed supremacy. This theological conundrum leaves out the space for a liberatory world for Black beings without the violence of anti-Blackness or a world where the self is not defined by its harm.

In the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a significant number of African Americans were leaving the church due to radical Black thought. They turned to the Nation of Islam, the Moorish Science Temple, Kemetic traditions, orisa/Yoruba-based religions, and even New Age eclecticism. These religious movements offered a more ‘authentic’ connection to Africa. For example, Wallace Fard Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam, told Black Americans that Islam was the true religion of the Black man. The Black church, although often a place of solace and support during Black uprisings, was based on presumably European-derived ecclesiology and white theological accounts. Moreover, it largely failed to address the political concerns of the most under-

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>122</sup> Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016). 93.

resourced African Americans due to its strong assimilationist agenda. Christianity thus became understood as the white man's religion with little application to Black life.<sup>123</sup> Anderson notes that as African-Americans sought to connect to their African heritage and began leaving the Black church, Black liberation theologians felt inclined to prove Christianity's authenticity as a Black/African religion.

In the mid-20th century, Black liberation theologians began accessing Black sources, including slave narratives, African-heritage religions, and folklore, to legitimize the identity of the Black church. Scholars like Dwight Hopkins argue that the theology of enslaved Africans was the blending of "white Christianity with the remains of African religions under slavery."<sup>124</sup> However, Hopkin's engagement with African-heritage religions remains merely superficial and seems only to aim to authenticate Black Christian theology. For instance, Hopkins casually compares African gods with Hebrew ones to demonstrate similarities in theological thinking and attributes Black community formation (versus individualism) as inherently African and derivative of African-heritage religions.<sup>125</sup> Emilie Townes alludes to this African past as well when she mentions an "African cosmology that understands all of life as sacred,"<sup>126</sup> but she, like Hopkins, does not further engage specific aspects of this African cosmology. Black witch ontology differs from this limited Black Christian ontology in a few ways.

Black witch ontology, first, is profoundly shaped by an Africana religious orientation because Black witches practice African-heritage religions. An African cosmology is not superficially mentioned. Rather, it is deeply engaged with as a religious and spiritual way of life,

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<sup>123</sup> See Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed., (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1998).

<sup>124</sup> Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016). 94.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>126</sup> "To Be Called Beloved : Womanist Ontology in Postmodern Refraction | Semantic Scholar," accessed July 5, 2022, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/To-Be-Called-Beloved-%3A-Womanist-Ontology-in-Townes/6e919b42dd3c4a9e23f198d936d156da3b4f3046>. 94.

ultimately informing how the Black witch understands herself. Furthermore, instead of being defined by resistance to white supremacy (and therefore reliant on its existence), Black witch ontology is characterized by Black power, in the most literal sense—varying powers such as the ability to see the future, heal through energy transfer, feel the emotional state of others through physical touch, or call on spiritual entities to manifest desired results. These powers exist *independent of whiteness* and characterize the Black witch’s multiple iterations in precolonial states - such as the *Ndoki* in the kingdom of the Kongo or *Iyami Aje* among the Yoruba.

### **Religion and the Black Witch**

Almost all of the Black witches interviewed for this study practice an African-heritage religion. Some are deeply invested through the long and dedicated process of initiation, while some are solely practitioners engaging in Africana religious rituals, following cosmologies, and venerating deities. Most respondents practice African American Hoodoo, Yoruba originated Ifá, or Haitian Vodou, and accordingly identify as *Manbos*, *Iyanifas*, *Iyalosas*, and *Rootworkers* as well as Black witches.<sup>127</sup> Black witches view these religions as distinct traditions and—alongside a profound honoring of the practitioners that aided in their religions’ development—recognize the religions for their complex and unique rituals, cosmologies, and established hierarchies. Unlike the early 20<sup>th</sup> century witches, who used “witchcraft” to refer to what is now widely known as Hoodoo, contemporary Black witches do not typically employ the term to denote any particular religion. Witchcraft usually refers to a broad engagement with the spiritual realm, natural world, or use of personal power, while Hoodoo refers to the religion with established rituals and protocols solidified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. More commonly, the women and femmes in

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<sup>127</sup> *Mambo* is a priestess in the Haitian Vodou tradition. *Iyanifa* and *Iyalosa* are initiated into Yoruba-derived religions. Rootworkers are Hoodoo experts.

this study distinguish the Black witch as an ontology, a self of power that employs and engages established religious traditions.

Sam, also popularly known as Juju Bae, addressed some of the differences between religion and ontology. She is a young woman in her late 20s and, after attending the historically Black institution, Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, moved to Baltimore, MD, to pursue her life as a content producer. Sam now identifies as a “spiritual advisor, medium, Hoodoo practitioner” and is currently one of the most prolific Black spiritual leaders on social media. Through her podcast, social media posts, workshops, and spiritual services, Sam advocates for “Black folks returning to our ancestral ways... [and aims] to help us all tap into our own innate powers to successfully manifest our own realities.”<sup>128</sup> In her podcast episode 15, “There’s more to this Witch Sh\*t,” she discusses what she means by innate powers.

Not everyone is a witch. Sometimes people confuse being a priest or practicing some African traditional religion or some type of religion outside of Christianity as witchcraft... A witch has innate powers. Generally, a witch don’t need no initiation into any tradition to work their sorcery. Just because you are initiated don’t mean that you gain powers. You either got it, or you don’t. Every priest can’t manifest or get you out of certain situations. They learn the tools to assist you, but that doesn’t mean that they come with power.

Here, Sam makes an important distinction, one that is crucial when discussing the Black witch, witchcraft, and Africana religions. Initiated priests and priestesses within these traditions are not inherently witches; they are trained in a specific religious lineage. Although Black witches can practice these religions, their innate power is not dependent on rituals, deities, or spiritual technologies to communicate with the dead or achieve desired results.<sup>129</sup> This distinction lies in differences between the subject and ontology.

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<sup>128</sup> Juju Bae, “A Little Juju Podcast,” [itsjubae.com](https://www.itsjubae.com), accessed September 30, 2021, <https://www.itsjubae.com/podcast>.

<sup>129</sup> Some initiated priests and priestesses also possess innate power and do not identify as witches because of its negative historical connotation.

The subject, as understood through a branch of continental philosophy, is shaped by and through external influences impacting the sense of self. Factors such as gender roles, cultural or ethnic expectations, class disparity, and subsequent ideological convictions inform how the subject is fashioned. The subject is thus a social construction.<sup>130</sup> The religious subject is further shaped by what Pierre Bourdieu calls a *habitus*, or one's repeated practices informed by socially acceptable behaviors. These behaviors ultimately produce the subject's conditioning, who then performs unconscious acts based on the likely response from their community. Over time these acts become integrated into the body to such a degree that they become part of the self.<sup>131</sup> As an example of how habit produces subjectivity, Saba Mahmood describes a young Muslim woman who, after repeatedly wearing the hijab, felt herself become more pious. The material act and subsequent response to her veiled body informed the religious subject.<sup>132</sup> In Africana religious studies, scholars have highlighted how repeated ritual and domestic acts shape practitioners' subjectivity. In her ethnographic study of Lucumí devotees in Chicago—Elizabeth Pérez argues that the religious subject is formed through daily habitual practices such as cooking or abstaining from alcohol. Pérez identifies these acts as micro-practices, arguing that they shape both the subject as well as the religion itself.<sup>133</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander also discusses how spirituality becomes what she calls a type of “body praxis.”<sup>134</sup> Like sleeping, eating, and getting sick, the act of serving the Lwa in Haitian Vodou or engaging in orisa rituals becomes a habituation of the

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<sup>130</sup> Michel Foucault and other post structuralist scholars discuss the subject as a social construction. See Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95.

<sup>131</sup> Pierre Bourdieu *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010).

<sup>132</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012). 50-51.

<sup>133</sup> Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

<sup>134</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (London: Duke University Press, Combined Academic, 2006), 297.

body—a mechanism of unconscious action. Alexander claims, “Far from being superficial, these markings on the flesh – these inscriptions – are processes, ceremonial rituals through which practitioners become habituated to the spiritual, and this habituation implies that requirements are transposed onto the body.”<sup>135</sup> Religion shapes the subject through habitual, repeated practices producing an embodied knowing of the divine. But the Black witch – born with innate powers – is innately divine, not dependent on religion for her abilities to manifest, internally or externally. The divine is not outside the Black witch but intrinsic to her Black being.

However, the ontological status of the Black witch does not negate the effects religion has on informing her subjectivity. The two are not in opposition. For Black witches, religion is often the structure through which she harnesses her natural capabilities and enhances her power. Hereditary witch, Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde shared how becoming initiated in Ifá helped her harness her innate ability to interact with spirits. Iyalosa Osunyemi, a woman in her early 50s, is initiated to Osun, practices Hoodoo, is a pivotal founder of the Black witch movement, and is a scholar completing her Ph.D. at Florida State University. She has been mentoring and influencing Black witches through her YouTube channel that began over 11 years ago, and through Black witch classes that cover topics such as “Africanjujuism: Importance of the Black Woman’s Narrative” and a class called “All Witchcraft is Black.” She also has a large social media following where she engages in thoughtful dialog on topics of religion, race, and gender and is regarded as a voice of authority in online community spaces. Iyalosa Osunyemi shared,

I watched my mother and my grandmothers not be able to handle how volatile the energies were. They didn’t know they could set parameters around their interactions with spirits. ...Getting initiated made my engagement with spirits safer because of its protocol. There’s a space in your house to do work with your ancestors, and there’s a space for Osun so they can’t bleed over into other areas

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

and make ... life chaotic. Initiation very much kept me from seeing my abilities as chaos. Instead, it can just be a way of communication.<sup>136</sup>

In New Orleans, LA, I sat with Laurita Marie, a woman in her mid-life who is initiated into both Haitian Vodou and Lucumi. She is a leading member of her New Orleans community by organizing burlesque shows, working with youth LGBTQ+ groups, and conducting religious ceremonies. Like Iyalosa Osunyemi, she shared that after initiation, her capacity to feel spirits and energy became more powerful.

I had always heard and saw spirits but was afraid of them as a kid. I prayed for them to go away, and they did. It wasn't until I set up my *egun* [ancestor] shrine that spirits started coming back, and I could hear them again. My clairvoyance and clairsentience have enhanced since getting my hand of Ifá. And since I've come back from *Itefa* [initiation], my dreams have become more vivid.<sup>137</sup>

Iyalosa Osunyemi and Laurita's relationship with religion is typical of Black witch thought. In my interviews, almost every respondent spoke of natural abilities such as clairvoyance or clairsentience. Through mentorship and initiation into established African-heritage religions, they enhanced their innate powers. Furthermore, the Black witch's combined experience of being of African descent *and* a practitioner of African-heritage religions distinguish her from white and non-Black witches who might also possess ontological powers.<sup>138</sup>

Black witch and expert Hoodoo practitioner Daizy October Latifah's definition of *Blitch* (Black witch) emphasizes engagement with Africana spirituality. As mentioned in Chapter One, she defines a *Blitch* as a "(*Conjurer/Rootworker/Hoodoosaint*) using knowledge of African thought, African/Afrodiasporic spiritual practice, Divination, Ancestral veneration, and African healing modalities to heal and fortify themselves, their elders, their peers, and the next

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<sup>136</sup> Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde, in discussion with author, July 30, 2021.

<sup>137</sup> Laurita Marie, in discussion with author, June 23, 2021.

<sup>138</sup> To identify as a Black witch, someone must be of African descent not only because of the racial term "Black" but also because, as discussed in Chapter Three, many community members believe practitioners should possess an ancestral connection to African-heritage religions.

*generation of children to be.*”<sup>139</sup> Here, there is an emphasis on African-descended practices and beliefs to qualify the Black witch. My research indicates that this sense of self is articulated differently than that of Black women and femmes practicing European-derived traditions. Although they continue to identify as Black, witches working within a European tradition do not reflect the type of Black witch Daizy has so eloquently defined above, the same witch that serves as the focus of this study.

In July 2021, for example, I attended Witchfest USA – a “Pagan Faire Festival Event for all from the Heart of New York City through the Magicks of The World Wide Web.” I virtually attended two days of workshops by self-identified witches of various religious and spiritual affiliations. Although the founder Reverend Starr RavenHawk is a Black woman and Pagan witch, Witchfest does *not* reflect the Black witch ontology discussed within this text. Instead, it reflects a lineage of primarily white pagan witches who began popularizing their craft in the 1970s with the fame of Laurie Cabot, her Salem, Massachusetts store, and her mentorship of witches, including Starr RavenHawk.<sup>140</sup>

Witchfest USA was overwhelmingly white, exhibited racist overtones and microaggressions that tend to occur in predominantly white spaces. Of a total of 66 presenters, ten are known (to me) to be of color, eight of which are known to be Black.<sup>141</sup> Alongside spiritual practices without religious affiliation – often categorized under the umbrella of witchcraft – religious traditions represented at this event included Wicca, Druidry, Hoodoo, and a variety of loosely affiliated East Asian beliefs and practices. Hoodoo was the most frequently

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<sup>139</sup> Daizy Latifah, “BLITCH,” The AfroMystic, accessed January 20, 2022, <http://www.theafromystic.com/blitch>.

<sup>140</sup> See “Starr RavenHawk,” Festival of Witches, accessed January 5, 2023, <http://www.festivalofwitches.com/starr-ravenhawk.html>., “Laurie Cabot Official Website,” fashion-stylist, accessed January 5, 2023, <https://www.lauriecabot.com>.

<sup>141</sup> “Presenters | WitchesFest USA - A Pagan Faire,” accessed July 5, 2022, <http://www.witchsfestusa.org/presenters-2/>.



represented African-heritage religion and was largely taught by white practitioners claiming some form of acceptance into the Black tradition. Amy Blackthorn, for example, a witch and Hoodoo practitioner, offers that her practice “isn’t a gimmick, appropriating someone else’s culture.” She claims she was ‘invited in’ and one of the “proudest moments of her life was being called, “Sister” by a Gullah chef in Baltimore.” She also lectures on appropriation and was “told as an apprentice, that it doesn’t matter what other people think of my work.”<sup>142</sup>

Blackthorn’s reflections on her inclusion into Hoodoo demonstrate the type of excuses white people often make for cultural appropriation.

Understanding the representation of witchcraft and the learned and assumed traditions in predominantly white spaces like Witchfest serves as a vital contrast to this study’s representation of the Black witch, as those spaces and self-perception are not anchored by the Africana religious orientation so foundational to Black witch ontology. The Black witch’s notions of self is shaped by ancestral and cultural beliefs and traditions directly related to their innate abilities, including but not limited to connecting with the dead, knowing and creating herbal remedies to be used for physical health, and divinely communicating through dreams.

### **Africana Notions of Innate Power**

Because almost all of the Black witches interviewed for this study practice an African-heritage religion, they develop an Africana religious orientation similar to that of African Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when concepts and shared diasporic beliefs informed perceptions of self. Many of their notions of innate spiritual abilities are common within the transatlantic African Diaspora. In the Hoodoo sources referenced in Chapter One,

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<sup>142</sup> “About the Author,” *Amy Blackthorn - Author & Psychic* (blog), accessed July 5, 2022, <https://amyblackthorn.com/about-the-author/>.

there are repeated accounts of conjurers or witches mentioning ontological power often characterized by physical attributes, such as being born with the caul. Because Hoodoo is primarily derived from pre-colonial Kongo beliefs and practices, as most enslaved Africans in the United States descended from west-central Africa, a Hoodoo understanding of innate power likely has some origins in the pre-colonial kingdom of the Kongo.<sup>143</sup>

Describing *kindoki*, which is a term to signify power or force in Kongo culture, Simon Bockie writes,

The usual meaning denotes this power as evil. But it is susceptible to being exercised in any sense, in a good sense, as well as evil. It is a question of an ambivalent, ambiguous power, which arouses fear: of a dangerous and good power, capable of harming but also protecting.<sup>144</sup>

This power of *kindoki* and its ability to harm or heal depending on the practitioner is very similar to African Americans' concepts of the witch in early 20<sup>th</sup> century folklore. They, too, believed that energy was neutral, and that ethics remained in the person instead of the energies themselves. Bockie also explains that the *ndoki* is someone with extraordinary abilities or a person who is exceptionally good at a particular skill, such as an excellent leader or businessperson. These people "...are *ndoki* both by their arts and by their uniqueness, which can only be explained by their having the gift of unusual powers."<sup>145</sup> People who possess this unique capacity for *ndoki* and have the guidance of a benevolent spirit or *nkisi* are referred to as *nganga*.

According to Wyatt MacGaffy, the term *nkisi* is also linked "...etymologically to Central African words often translated as 'spirit.' Such a translation captures an important feature of *minkisi* [*nkisi* singular]; they are local habitations and embodiments of personalities from the

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<sup>143</sup> Mechal Sobel displays a graph of African American African origins in *Trabelin' on: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1988). 24.

<sup>144</sup> Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). 43.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

land of the dead, through which the powers of such spirits are made available to the living.”<sup>146</sup> A *nganga* (spiritual leader) works with this spirit, employing its power to achieve desired results while *ndoki* do not possess this spiritual guide. According to Bockie, the *nganga* is “a bridge between the communities of the dead and the living beings.”<sup>147</sup> Although every *nganga* works closely with the spiritual realm, they possess different skill sets, such as divination or tracking down evil. *Ngang’a mbuki* or *ngang’a nkisi* is the medicine person who cures physical and spiritual sickness. “He openly uses his *nkisi*, or spirit, materialized into *futu*, a small bag containing several objects more or less whimsical. For *nkisi* cannot participate in the healing process without the material support of *futu*. The indigenous medicine or herb the *nganga* prescribes to his patient must have been recommended by *nkisi*, otherwise, it will do no good. ...the *nkisi* is the provider, and the *nganga* is the ‘spirit carrier’ [or] in other words, he is *nkisi*’s servant.”<sup>148</sup> Bockie provides an example of this relationship between the *nganga* and the *nkisi*/spirit through a conversation he had with a man who was a practicing *nganga* for many years. When Bockie asked how he became a *nganga*, he told him that at around 25 years old, he “was recommended to heal the sick in a dream.” Bockie asks how he came to know the correct medicines to use for a specific disease, and the *nganga* described his innate power saying,

I often dreamed it. My ancestors, chiefly *nkaka* Nayengika [our grandmother], were always with me. At night when I was asleep, they not only revealed the names of the *minti* [herbs and plants] to use, they also showed me how to use them. This is the reason why I hardly ever experienced failure in my career. I was well equipped.”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Wyatt MacGaffey, “The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo “Minkisi” *Stitching Etnofoor* 1, no. 3 (1990): 45-61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25757709>, 56.

<sup>147</sup> Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). 70.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

The African American conjurer (or witch) of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also possessed innate powers. They, too, healed people with herbal remedies shown to them in dreams by spirit guides.

In an interview in the Harry Middleton Hyatt's oral collection on Hoodoo, conjuration, witchcraft, and rootwork, Hyatt asks a respondent if he was taught about herbal remedies or if he learned it himself. The conjurer responds, "Naw sir, ah was gifted to date. All ah'm talkin' about ah was gifted - took it up mah owns elf. When ah was twelve years old ah was showed [by] de spirit - diff 'rent herbs jes' fer about twelve-thirteen nights, until ah could go to 'um and tell dem." He then gives Hyatt the example of the five-finger grass. "De five-finger grass dat's one of de luckiest grasses in de world - jes' like yore han'. Juh evah seen dat? (No, I never saw it.) Wall, dat's in dis country - it's hard to find without yo' know dere's some at. An' ah kin go to it right now."<sup>150</sup> Hyatt's respondent then explains how he came to know the herb's location.

It showed me. Den ah went anywhere in de woods to find the same stuff what ah seed in mah sleep and bring it back to de house and showed de people and de older people say, "Well, dat [boy] must goin' be a doctor [or] somepin." Wall, then another night ah lay down and them things arrive befo' me again and ah see jest little things, but ah go in de woods and ah couldn't find them. Wall, de, same thing arrive befo' me de next night; ah go in de woods an ah keep a huntin' till ah find that thing - dig it up and carry it back to de house.<sup>151</sup>

Like in Bockie's interview with the *nganga*, this conjurer reports that the herbal remedies appear to him in dreams brought to him by a spirit guide. In both African American and Central African beliefs, dreams are an important site of knowledge production. In the Kongo, for example, dreams are where the spiritual realm communicates with the living. Kongoleser scholar Kimbwandende K.B. Fu-Kiau explains, "A dream is a voiceless communication. It is at the same time, a means and a message. This message can be audible, pictorial, and scenic. It has an origin

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<sup>150</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuration - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 1, Memoirs of the Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (Hannibal, MO: Western Publishing, 1970). 273.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 273-274.

(*tutu*), a channel (*ngongo/n'landa*), with or without an addressee receptor (*tambudi*). The origin source of the message can be natural, spiritual or supernatural.”<sup>152</sup> In the Kongo, dreams are understood to be either typical ruminations on the day’s events or prophetic, telling the dreamer of good or bad news. According to Fu-Kiau, “There is a lot to learn through the dream state (*ndozi*), about people and their health, about societies and their organizations, about science, the past, the present and the future of humanity and the world.”<sup>153</sup> Among African American spiritual beliefs, dreams are also a site where the divine communicates with the living.

In the Black Christian tradition of seeking, dreams are an essential component of spiritual development, a phenomenon LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant explores in her ethnographic study of seven women from the South Carolina Lowcountry. Seeking is a process where young people venture out into the wilderness to find God and to identify a church in which they will become a future member. They spend days or weeks in a ritual called tarrying, which consists of fasting, meditating, and being in solitude to receive a divine message. Ultimately, seekers look for a sign of God’s acceptance and the message or sign is usually communicated through a dream. For instance, one of Manigault-Bryant’s respondents shared a dream in which she was standing in a field of flowers when down came “a stairway from the heavens [and out stretched] a huge brown hand...I reached up, and it grabbed holda me, you know, and I woke up ... [this dream] let me know I accep’ you, you know, you’re worthy.”<sup>154</sup> Manigault-Bryant’s respondent knew she was accepted by God and ready to join a church based on this divine revelation. Dreams such as these are then told to a designated elder—sometimes called a spiritual parent—who is not associated

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<sup>152</sup> Fu-Kiau Kimbwandènde Kia Bunseki, *Tying the Spiritual Knot: African Cosmology of the Bântu-Kôngo: Principles of Life & Living* (Brooklyn, NY: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2000), 17.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>154</sup> LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah-Geechee Women* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014). 125.

with a particular church but identified by the community as someone with the skills and ability to determine the accuracy of the divine message. If the spiritual parent does not believe that a seeker is ready, the parent instructs the seeker to continue their quest through the process of tarrying. Margaret Washington Creel traces this African American ritual to the Sande and Poro secret societies of Central West Africa, where similarly, seekers would go into the bush and communicate with the dead and the natural elements. The messages divine forces communicated were also brought back to a respected elder who determined the accuracy of the information.<sup>155</sup>

In these processes, dreams are a site where the ancestors communicate to the seeker. Sometimes the ancestors are relatives, and sometimes they are members of the seeker's future church. For example, one respondent, Yenenga, dreamt about her great-great-grandmother and a St James Presbyterian Church member. She recalled, "One night I dreamt about my great great-granny who was in conversation with me, and I told that to them (the elders), and they said, 'oh yeah.'"<sup>156</sup> A few nights later, Yenenga dreamt about another woman she spoke with but could not identify. Again, the elders confirmed her visions and informed her that this woman was a member of the Presbyterian Church who passed away before Yenenga's birth. By communicating with the dead through dreams, Yenenga received vital information that shaped her lifelong membership in the St James Presbyterian Church.

In the Kongo and African American traditions, religious practitioners who listen to these divine messages receive tangible beneficial outcomes. Bockie, for example, shares another story about a family who had abundant resources due to the father, who was an excellent hunter. This family had the nicest house in the neighborhood and ate better than anyone around. When the

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<sup>155</sup> Margaret Washington Creel quoted in LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah-Geechee Women* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014). 123.

<sup>156</sup> LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah-Geechee Women* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014). 128.

father unexpectedly died, his brother took all the riches and left the wife and children in poverty. In desperation, the sons visited their father's grave and told him of the tribulations they had experienced since his death. The father's spirit then appeared in the eldest son's dream and instructed him to quit school and begin working for a white man. He told his son that this was the only way they could make it out of poverty; this was how he would be able to afford to put his siblings through school comfortably. The son abided by his father's guidance and found a job in the city as a shop owner's aide. He quickly moved up in the business, and when the shop owner was forced to flee the country, the eldest son took over the establishment. He grew wealthy and pledged to care for his entire town.<sup>157</sup>

Hyatt's previously mentioned interviewee (who found five-finger grass for luck), similarly shared that his ability to identify plants through information received in dreams resulted in upward social and financial mobility. He told Hyatt that after he found the rare herbs, he would sell them to members of his community. One day a white doctor asked his guardians,

“how old is he? “[They] Said, “He is twelve years old gwine on thirteen. “He said, “Well, I would like to have this boy wit me. “Wal, ah did not have no mother an’ no father. Ah was jest a motherless child, jes’ like ah am now - ain’t know mah mother and mah father, be’s a step-baby. But he’s mah step-daddy. So he raised me.<sup>158</sup>

Although both of these stories reference wealth generated from affiliation with white men, it is crucial to remember that these tales were relayed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when whites were primarily the exclusive holders of wealth. Both stories convey the importance of listening to the ancestors and sharing their wisdom with the community. As a result, the respondents

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<sup>157</sup> Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). 112-115.

<sup>158</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 1, *Memoirs of the Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation* (Hannibal, MO: Western Publishing, 1970). 273-274.

experienced personal benefits such as financial wealth and adoption. Receiving material favors from the divine realm, particularly the ancestors, is a common theological understanding among African and African diasporic peoples.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Van Wing noted that people of the lower Congo “ask the deceased ancestors for positive favors like a good hunt, a good harvest or fertility. They go to the graveyard and pour libations reciting prayers such as: ‘Oh father! Oh! Elders come to drink the salutary wine, increase fertility and human wealth.’”<sup>159</sup> A better life cannot happen without the “ancestor’s material and social support.”<sup>160</sup> In the Kongo, these ancestors are perceived as mini gods with the power to impact their descendants’ lives. Bockie observes, “Before death, we are just ordinary beings with no godlike status. But after death, we find ourselves in the process of becoming gods’ surrogates, or little gods... Using their powers to improve the welfare of their living brothers, they become saviors and little gods for their particular relatives. Each ancestor’s power is limited to his own *kanda* [family]. Outside his *kanda* he does not intervene. Because of their liberating role they deserve people’s respect, prayers, and veneration.”<sup>161</sup> As Bockie claims, in the Kongo, these mini-God ancestors choose the *nganga* to convey healing remedies and material abundance, but in some African cultures, this ability to connect with the realm of the dead is a hereditary power, one passed down, such as among Azande witches located in modern-day Republic of Sudan, Zaire, and the Central African Republic.

In E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s study of the Azande’s spiritual beliefs, he defines a witch as a person with innate abilities to heal or harm without the assistance of spells or herbal medicine.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). 119.

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

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>162</sup> Like African American understandings of the hag, this witch possesses a spirit counterpart that can leave the body and perform the witch’s wishes. At night it appears as white light, and during the day, this light can only be



The witch possesses an ontological state of being that is both hereditary *and* something that manifests as a physical substance in the body typically known to be attached to the liver. The substance grows with power as the individual ages—a similar association with age and power that we see among the Yoruba as *aje*.<sup>163</sup> According to Evans-Pritchard,

Witchcraft is not only a physical trait but also inherited. It is transmitted by unilinear descent from parent to child. The sons of a male witch are all witches, but his daughters are not, while the daughters of a female witch are all witches, but her sons are not.<sup>164</sup>

By this definition, it would seem all descendants - men or women - in a clan would thus be witches, but the Azande does not treat everyone as a witch. Someone may have inherited the witchcraft substance in their body but may choose not to use it, at least not to harm other community members. Understanding this, Evans-Pritchard concludes, “Azande is interested in witchcraft only as an agent on definite occasions and in relation to his own interests, and not as a permanent condition of individuals.”<sup>165</sup> For instance, if someone is concerned that another community member performed malevolent witchcraft on them, they consult an oracle, typically asking about anyone who holds grudges against them. Similar to the Azande association of ontological power with the physical substance in the liver, in Namibia, some believe the caul denotes innate power.

The caul is a sheet of an amniotic membrane that covers the newborn’s face during childbirth. One respondent told the German researcher Sigrid Schmidt that she had a dream that

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seen by other witches or witch-doctors equipped with the appropriate medicine. See E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Eva Gillies, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). 10-11.

<sup>163</sup> *Aje* a power specific to older women. According to Montreï Aza Missouri, *aje* is “often simultaneous with witches and granted to menopausal and postmenopausal women ensuring the reverence of older women.” See *Black Magic Woman and Narrative Film: Race, Sex and Afro-Religiosity* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). 24.

<sup>164</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Eva Gillies, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). 2.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

her grandmother died on a distant farm, and the next day this event occurred. She said, “When I dream a [bad] dream, this oppresses me much. My mother says I am born in the caul.... When I was smaller and talked perhaps about an accident, an accident had happened.”<sup>166</sup> It is believed that the caul must be removed correctly by a trained midwife so that the child will continue to possess the innate abilities associated with its presence. If removed incorrectly, the abilities are believed to disappear. Once removed, the midwives dry the caul and then feed it to the child. When these two protocols are followed, the child will begin to show natural abilities early in life. The caul is also revered in Europe but, there, is seen more as a symbol of luck. For example, fishers were known to take the caul to sea to ensure safety and a good catch. In contrast, Namibians believe the appearance of the caul at birth to be associated more with internal versus external influence; they see it as a sign that the child will be able to see the future, or at least be highly intelligent.<sup>167</sup>

Although most African descendants in America did not come from Namibia, there are still important similarities between Namibian stories of innate power and folklore of the Black diaspora in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>168</sup> For African Americans, too, the caul is seen as an early prediction of supernatural abilities. Like Namibian accounts, 20<sup>th</sup> century African American folklore shows the caul as signifying an ability to foresee the future and communicate with the spirit realm. So much so, that Hyatt’s collection designates an entire section specifically to respondents sharing their accounts of being born with the caul. One respondent recalled,

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<sup>166</sup> Sigrid Schmidt, “Born in the Caul, Born in the Rain: Damara and Nama People with Extrasensory Abilities in Namibia,” *Southern African Humanities* 33, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 119–33. 120.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Schmidt notes that his conclusions are based on interviews he conducted beginning in the 1960s with the Damara and Nama people. *Ibid.*, 119. The people he interviewed likely mixed with Bantu-speaking people whose ancestors were from the Kingdom of the Kongo. African Americans also have ancestors from Kongo cultures, making it possible that beliefs about the caul’s power could descend from this region of Africa. See “Namibia - History | Britannica,” accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Namibia/History>; Marion Wallace, *History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

I was home in the yard one evening just about dusk, and I happened to see an old lady coming up to the house. I run in the house and told mama I seen aunt Jozrah. Mama said, "If you don't stop coming in here and telling me about you seeing spirits, I'm going to whip you." My father said, "Don't whip her. You know she was born with these spirits." They tell me when I was born there was a cord [caul] around my face, it went under my nose and caught over my head and against my eyes.<sup>169</sup>

Similar to some Namibians' belief that there is a specific procedure for removing a caul to ensure that the child maintains their abilities, Hyatt records a respondent in the US South who also suggests specific protocol is necessary.

If yo' evah had a child be bo'ned veiled yo' take dat veil an' don' nevah throw it off; always take it off farwards, don't take it off backward. Takes de luck away from 'em to take 'em off this way, jes' (demonstrates over their head - forward.)... An' den yo' take those veils - yo' have tuh keep 'em. Sew 'em up in somepin where dey'll keep 'em, yo' know. Co' se, yo' may have tuh resew 'em or else dey supposed tuh be split heah, an' put in dere an' sew it up. Yo' see [why] some people be so lucky an' so successful.<sup>170</sup>

In another story documented in *Drums and Shadows*, the caul is similarly associated with luck in finding treasure while also denoting an ability to see spirits. Nathen Lewis tells the ethnographers, "I was birthed with my wisdom because I was the seventh child an bawn with a caul." The researchers ask Lewis if he can see spirits, to which he responds that he does indeed see them. He then shares a story about encountering these spirits when searching for treasure in an old house. When Lewis and two men went out to find the treasure that he intuitively knew was there, he "...saw three spirits, one man and three women [along with] the pot of money."<sup>171</sup> These spirits frightened Lewis and his crew, preventing him from returning to the money. It is possible that because Europeans colonized both Namibia and African Americans, that they

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<sup>169</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted by Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 1, Memoirs of the Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (Hannibal, MO: Western Publishing, 1970). 26.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>171</sup> Georgia Writers' Project, ed., *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986). 15.

adopted Western beliefs about the caul. Either the caul is originally a European signifier of innate ability and luck that African and African descendants adopted, or it is also originally African and modified in its correlation to luck while maintaining an African framework of prophecy and spirit engagement. Regardless, it still speaks to an Africana orientation where physical characteristics signify ontological power.

African American conjurers and people of extraordinary gifts were also marked by defining physical characteristics. Nat Turner, who led the 1831 rebellion against slavery in Southampton, Virginia County, was known to possess prophetic powers. According to someone who knew Turner,

Nat was no preacher, but... he had acquired the characters of a prophet. He traced his divination in characters of blood, on leaves, alone in the woods; he would arrange them in some conspicuous place... have a dream telling him of the circumstance... and he would interpret their meaning.... By means of this nature, he acquired an immense influence over such persons he took into his confidence.<sup>172</sup>

In *Confessions*, Turner himself speaks to these abilities noting, “I had a vision—and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, ‘Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it.’”<sup>173</sup> Turner’s divinatory prophetic ability that aided in the most successful slave revolt in American history was, self-proclaimed to be marked on him at birth. He admits, “I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth. And my father and mother

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<sup>172</sup> Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). 64.

<sup>173</sup> “Nat Turner, 1800-1831. The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va.,” accessed July 6, 2022, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>.

strengthened me in this first impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought *from certain marks on my head and breast*.<sup>174</sup>

In Hyatt's collection, conjurers are also defined by other abnormal physical characteristics, such as red or blue eyes. One respondent explains, "When you see these old people and their eyes is red, they're conjures." Another woman spoke about her mother, who went to a rootworker to get a curse removed. "...this woman had blue eyes an' she was re'l funny lookin'. She must of been a root woman. She [the mother] said she looked so funny."<sup>175</sup> Interviewees also described conjurers as having exceptionally long beards and wearing large earrings in both ears. Some were depicted as living in houses far from the general population and leading relatively solitary lives. Although the Black witches in this study do not explicitly comment on the physical attributes of the witch or conjurer, the text highlights a crucial factor when conceptualizing Black witch ontology— she is other, outside of the broader public, with powers that make her exceptional and extraordinary. Both to be feared and to be loved. She is a marked woman.

### **Black Witch, Black Femme Power**

In this study, each witch began with stories of finding their power when they were young. These included tales of dreams coming true, abilities to feel others' emotions through mere proximity, or the ability to connect with spirit guides manifested as children's dolls. In the Kongo, witches might have been called *ndoki*, due to her natural power. Among the Yoruba, she might be considered a woman with the power of *aje*—an innate ability housed in the pit of her

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., Italics mine.

<sup>175</sup> Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 1, Memoirs of the Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (Hannibal, MO: Western Publishing, 1970). 295.

belly. And among the Azande, she'd be considered *mangu* with the choice to do harm or heal, as she chooses. Here, she is the Black witch— someone not exclusively shaped by the subjectivity of religion but by the ontology of her intrinsic capacity to connect with the spiritual realm.

I had the privilege of interviewing Daizy October Latifah, a pivotal founder of the Black witch movement, referenced earlier for her creation of the term *Blitch*. In Los Angeles, CA, Daizy offers services in hypnotherapy, rootwork, and astrology at a community healing center. Through her Facebook group (The Witches Brew: Indigenous Rootwork and Conjure), spiritual services, her mutual aid fund that supports Black women, and the creation of the term *Blitch*, she has redirected an emerging contemporary movement of Black witches toward an Africana orientation. Daizy began our discussion by telling me about her early connections with spirit.

My first connection with the divine was through the forces of nature. Some of my earliest memories are being maybe like two or three years old and going outside on a windy day and being able to see the wind. It looks like oil in water or like that rainbow that swirls, and it's like floating through the air. I remember standing in the direction the wind was coming from and letting it blow on me and hold me up as I leaned into it. And I could feel myself being cleansed by it. I felt refreshed. I would also have conversations with the sun and talk to crows as a child. For me, it is about being able to sense the divine through the forces of nature. It wasn't until I was a preteen that I could pick up some of the tools and strategies for deepening that connection with spirit.<sup>176</sup>

For Daizy, her power is interconnected with the natural world— something that is profoundly reflective of an Africana orientation. This reverence for the environment is evident in each Yoruba orisa's connection to a particular element, such as Osun being the river or Oya, the wind, or even in the Kongo and the Southern United States where the simbi spirits become the caves, trees, and the swamp. In these traditions, the deities or ancestors are not separate from the natural world—they are it. Osun does not govern the river; she is the river. The simbi do not live in the

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<sup>176</sup> Daizy Latifah, in discussion with author, October 1, 2021.

swamps; they are the swamps, reincarnated from a human self into oneness with the natural world.<sup>177</sup>

Daizy descends from a long line of African American Southern rootworkers who employed their connection with - and use of - the natural world to achieve their desired results. Her family made the bold decision to pass down their knowledge to future generations resulting in Daizy and her great grandfather becoming skilled practitioners. She shared,

On my mother's father's side, my great-great grandmother Leona was from Mississippi by way of Alabama and South Carolina. She was a rootworker and a midwife, which are professions that tend to come together in people's family history. She was also responsible for doing a lot of money work for people in the community. Her husband was a serious gambler, so she knew all about how to make the hands for gambling, which was a skill that was passed down to her son, my great grandfather. She was just known for being a very potent person. Things that she said manifested. Things that she said, don't do, you knew not to do. From what I hear, she was very kind. And her energy got passed down to her son, who's the spitting image of her. He then married my great-grandmother, who is also from Mississippi and a good Christian woman, but very clearly, from the things that are said about her and what I know of meeting her when she was alive, she's very much so Obatala's child—meaning that she was cool as a fan and always wore white.<sup>178</sup> So much so that there was a story going through the neighborhood that she was born with a white dress on and a broom. She was a very clean energy type of person. So, the gambling rootworker family married the Obatala and then, [laughs] you know, made my grandfather, my mother, and then me.<sup>179</sup>

Most of the Black witches I spoke with had similar stories about family members who were practitioners of Africana religions or exhibited extraordinary spiritual talents. Curious about African peoples like the Azande and popular claims regarding the hereditary nature of being a witch, I asked Daizy if she thought innate abilities were passed down through lineage.

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<sup>177</sup> Some of these observations are based on ethnographic research but also see Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). 3-30., Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). 111-115.

<sup>178</sup> Note Daizy's reference to Obatala, a Yoruba orisa, although Daizy is a practitioner of Hoodoo. This cross-referencing of African spirits speaks to the broader Africana religious orientation spreading across Black witch networks.

<sup>179</sup> Daizy Latifah, in discussion with author, October 1, 2021.

I think divine gifts are hereditary, but I think about it from the perspective of all of us as individuals who have descended from a single female African origin. And therefore, certain people or bloodlines have created systems of connecting to that divine hereditary power. So, it shows up more in particular people, bloodlines, or even generations. So, yes, it's hereditary, but not to the point where if you don't have any immediate stories in your ancestral legacy, that doesn't mean you don't carry the connection.<sup>180</sup>

Soraya, a Haitian-born self-described “black feminist futurist, visual scholar, ancestral alchemist, witch healer, mama, femme-boi and queer,” shared similar experiences to Daizy's both in family lineage and in the innateness to her power. Also, the co-founder of Wildseeds: New Orleans Octavia Butler Emergent Strategy Collective, Soraya is currently designing tarot card imagery for a deck based on Butler's science fiction work. We met on a 95-degree New Orleans day in a crowded beer garden to discuss her work and spiritual interests. Adorned in brilliant tattoos, a head wrap, and red lipstick, she shared stories of her divine empathetic abilities, perceived at a young age. Soraya's mother told her that even when she was a toddler, she would always touch people and, after contact, try to give away jewelry to strangers whom she deemed were in financial need. As Soraya grew, she began noticing her gifts more acutely.

I remember being probably twelve-ish, taking a bus for school, and I wanted to give this older woman my seat. I held her hand to help her sit down, and when I did, I felt all her emotions. Then it would happen with family members. Someone hugged me, and I knew her husband was cheating on her. I wouldn't say it. But I would know it. Or I knew someone should get their breast checked for cancer cells. A part of me didn't want to feel this because it wasn't just a knowledge, it was also the physical expression of whatever I felt. So, if you had a heart issue, my heart would race. If you had stomach issues, I would feel nauseated.<sup>181</sup>

Soraya began cultivating her spiritual talents by watching her grandmother, a card reader, and nurse who “worked at St. Luke's hospital and on the weekends and when she wasn't working, would open up her home with its separate room, full of spiritual tools.” Soraya's parents were

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Soraya Jean-Louis, in discussion with author, June 28, 2021.



Haitian Catholics who very much opposed any spiritual practice that was not Catholicism and prevented Soraya from explicit training with her grandmother. Although prohibited, Soraya would sit in her grandmother's spirit room and just watch her practice— no instruction, just observation. Soraya continued to cultivate her abilities by working in a botanica (spiritual supply shop) in Brooklyn, one she'd randomly stopped in for candles after walking down Fulton Street, thinking to herself that she needed a job.

I went in there, and the owner was like, are you looking for a job? She said, you know you have sight, right? And I replied that yes, I know. She then asked how does it show up for you? And I explained my experiences. She said, "If you want a job, you can have it. But the only thing I really want you to focus on is just dressing candles. I don't want you touching people. Cause I think you're so young, and you need mentorship. And then she invited me to be part of her ile [Ifá or Lucumí temple], but I didn't want to do that. I worked there for like a year, dressing candles, talking to people, learning, reading the materials, and watching what was important to the elders in their spiritual practice.<sup>182</sup>

In New Orleans, I also spoke with LaReina, a widely renowned burlesque dancer in her late 20s, currently investing in her business, Queenly Conjure, which sells divine teas, bath bombs, baked goods, and oils.

At Queenly Conjure, each product has a physical purpose, such as teas to alleviate inflammation, but also spiritual uses - like oils used in rituals to manifest a desired result. Alongside her business, LaReina works at one of the few Black-owned Hoodoo shops in New Orleans, Crescent City Conjure, where she attends to the shop's daily functions. I initially met up with LaReina at a Juneteenth event organized by Crescent City Conjure, where drumming, tarot readings, and vendors selling spiritually effective crystals were met with discussions of Black pride and ancestral reverence. I asked LaReina when she discovered her divine abilities and referred to her power as divine 'gifts' to which she responded as follows:

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

I don't think I thought of it as a gift. It was just who I was ever since I was a child. I was the child that people would say don't talk too much to her. She knows things, and she talks too much.

I had an aunt to whom I was really close. And when I was about like four or five, she passed away. Because everyone thought I was a weird child, I was not allowed to attend the funeral. My family also tried to keep young children away from death because you're a new spirit coming in. They want to ensure that you're protected from older spirits lingering in those places that could feed on you. At dinner one evening, when everybody was quietly eating, I spout out, "my auntie, she's in the ground, she's in the ground like this. [LaReina demonstrates someone with their eyes closed and arms crossed over their chest.] And I had never seen anything like that. Nobody showed me any movies or TV shows or anything like that about death. But I just knew that. And then a couple of days later, we drove around and passed by so many different cemeteries, but the one where she was, I pointed and said, my auntie, is right there. ...So yeah, it never really seemed like a gift. It just seemed like this is just how I live. *How to live.*<sup>183</sup>

LaReina disclosed that her mom is also spiritual and a practitioner of the Yoruba religion of Ifá. She said that sometimes she and her mother are in sync with their spiritual visions.

She [LaReina's mother] went to the Dominican Republic to work with an orphanage and do religious initiatory work. On the same day, I was walking with a friend in Humboldt, Northern California, where there weren't many brown people. We came across a group of people doing this fire ceremony ritual, and I instantly got mounted. My friend said I got really angry and started storming off, so she just took me somewhere safe until the spirit left. She also said my eyes were completely black. The following day I called my mom, who told me that while I was mounted, she got mounted too, and people said that she flipped tables over and was cursing. We later discovered that the orphanage was bringing people from spiritual communities in the States and taking their money without giving any of it to the children. Hence the anger.<sup>184</sup>

Unfortunately, with the rise of Christianity and subsequent demonization of innate spiritual power, numerous Black women and femmes who are beginning to tap into their abilities do not have mothers like LaReina's to help guide them. Instead, they seek out books and conferences on African-heritage religions, hoping to find mentorship.

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<sup>183</sup> LaReina, In discussion with author, June 28, 2021.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

At the First Annual Detroit Hoodoo Festival in April 2021, Black women and femme audience members sought information on cultivating intuitive ways of knowing. At this conference, Mary Byrd, aka the Queen of Swords—a Black woman in her 50s adorned in purple (the color of personal power), an African print skirt, short deep purple hair, and a tee-shirt that read “I do Witch Shit”—facilitated a workshop on witchcraft and depression. The around 30 young Black women and femmes attending Mary’s workshop were moderately interested in how witchcraft can help heal depression, but what was most captivating was a conversation about personal power. One attendee shared a story about her relationship with a spirit.

I believe I am somewhat of a seer like I can see spirits... As a kid, since about eight years old, I would always have these dizzy fainting spells. And over the years no doctors could figure out what was happening. I was told that a spirit was riding me or something like that. This spirit could be hovering, walking toward me, or standing in the doorway. And I’m trying to figure out how to tap into that, to get more clarity on who or what it is, cause, in the sleep paralysis stage right now, it’s almost like I wake up fearful because I can’t move. And I’m so focused on not being able to move that I can’t focus on the energy. Once I wake, I miss my moment to try to harness that power.<sup>185</sup>

Mary first responded to the young woman’s question by explaining the differences between types of extra-sensorial abilities—or the clairs.

Clairaudience means that you hear something like a voice or a ringing in your ear, and you turn around, and there’s nothing physically there. So, you figure what you’re hearing is from the other side or another realm of reality, not on this plane. The same thing with feeling. You may feel one of your ancestors in the room. My father passed away three years ago. And I would feel him there. Sometimes I would see the indentation on the end of the bed where he was sitting, but I didn’t physically see him. Clairience means smelling aromas that are not there. For instance, my dad always smoked cigarettes. I don’t smoke. I would come home and smell smoke. So, I’m like, dad, did you not die and didn’t tell me, or...what’s going on? Clairsentience is when you feel like somebody is in the room, but you look around, and that person is not there. Like when you get tingles down your spine, your hair stands up on your arms or something like that.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Anonymous, In discussion with author, April 16, 2021.

<sup>186</sup> Mary Byrd, In discussion with author, April 16, 2021.

She further advised that the young woman seek divination to inquire what that particular spirit wanted from her. Mary also affirmed that this woman had the power of clairvoyance, the ability to see the dead, and must find a mentor to help her develop her innate skills. In this brief exchange, Mary, an older, established witch, helped a younger generation of primarily Black women tap into their ontological divine power, an ability that, if not cultivated, could potentially wither away or cause harm to the subject. Mentorship in the cultivation of self is crucial for the Black witch.

In my interviews, I not only heard people discuss this ontological power of seeing or smelling spirits, but I experienced it in my interview with esteemed Black witch Rebeca Spirit. Although Rebeca lives in upstate New York, she was in New Orleans visiting another respected witch Lilith Dorsey, for initiation into the religion of Voodoo. I sat with Rebeca expecting a typical interview where we would intellectually discuss our connection to spirit. What I experienced was something very different. I began by asking what it means to heal the ancestors—a common topic among my respondents. What follows is our dialogue.

Rebeca: Two things are happening. One, your people are trying to come through. And two, a spirit that I channeled was trying to come through. Your maternal grandmother is passed. Did she have an accent?

Marcelitte: Maybe. I didn't know her. She might have had a Creole patois accent.

Rebeca: And she was shorter?

Marcelitte: Probably. She was a light skin Black woman with red hair.

Rebeca: But you favor more the paternal side. Cause she's going, "she didn't look nothing like me." Was there a struggle between her and your mom, like a division where they stopped talking for a couple of years or weren't as close?

Marcelitte: My mom has never said that. My grandmother died when my mom was in her early 20s.

Rebeca: It might be a sense of abandonment from your mom—feeling like her mom left her here. I would bet a hundred bucks they had an issue where they stopped talking for a while.

So, to your question about healing the ancestors—keep asking your mom questions. How did you and grandma do? What did you learn from her? What did she teach you? Pulling those threads is what heals the ancestors and elevates them into a space of immortality. Because then we keep calling on them. We ask for their help. We go to them for these things. The relationship between you and your mom heals those other relationships too. And the work you do in changing some of the spaces where you and your mom don't agree helps what will happen for you and your children. You're breaking the generational curses. Now, that doesn't mean that you must agree with everything she says and go to her house for thanksgiving and everything else and call her every day. That's not what that's about. You don't even actually have to talk to her to do the work and continue healing generational timelines. It's really about seeing the disconnect and doing the healing work within. The magic in say, writing her a letter and burning it so that her spirit hears and feels it. It then becomes released.<sup>187</sup>

Tears were shed in this exchange as I reflected on my relationship with my mother and as I, too, felt the ancestors surrounding us.

Rebeca's abilities of mediumship also came to her at a young age. For years she would talk to spirit dolls who spoke back to her, communicating all kinds of practical advice for Rebeca's young life. Rebeca became ashamed of her abilities as she grew and actively worked on suppressing them. But by her teenage years, she had no choice after visiting a graveyard with her friends and becoming overwhelmed with voices from the spirit realm. Since then, Rebeca has committed to her calling as a Black witch.

Rebeca, Daizy, Soraya, LaReina, and Mary all have power and abilities that make them unique and distinct from white Christian normative understandings of personhood. They define themselves through and within an innate, often shared, and/or inherited Black femme power. The

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<sup>187</sup> Rebeca Spirit, In discussion with author, June 28, 2021.

presence of their inherent powers—like mediumship— not only informs a unique ontology but also *defines* a self that, when immersed in patriarchal rule, opposes its dominance.

### **Claiming the Monstrosity**

Intrinsic power is not only understood by Black witches in conjunction with an Africana religious orientation—due to their religious practices but also in tandem with a Black feminist framework. Like broader witch movements, Black witches fathom the witch as a figure who opposes patriarchy but do so through a Black feminist analysis invested in resisting both patriarchy *and* anti-Blackness. The Black witch integrates Black feminist analysis into her notions of self by adopting an identity that is non-normative, outside of, and intentionally opposed to white Western Christian supremacy. She claims an expression of sexuality categorized by whiteness as the jezebel, religious traditions marked as heathen, and a power to materialize another world not inclined toward dominance. She claims the monstrous.

Black witch and Hoodoo practitioner Zoë Flowers captures an ontology of the non-normative exquisitely in her poem “In Praise of The Wytch.”

We are immortal. Reincarnated in the poems of our daughters. We are phoenix.  
Eyes in the back of our head. We are Sankofa bird. Live betwixt worlds. Float  
through walls that you build around us. Blowing cigar smoke in your face. We are  
juke joint. Speak out both sides of our mouth; see your future in eggshells-it’s not  
looking good for you. Familiars at our side. We tag Miami, Haiti, and Nawlins  
with chalk circles, drink with Legba at the crossroads.

...

Black cat crossing your path. That poem you wish you smart enough to write. The  
rhyme you are too afraid to spit. Fucking up the mood. We are the ejaculation that  
comes too quickly. Gas on a crowded elevator. The uninvited party guest flirting  
with your boyfriend and eating all your food. An inconvenient truth. We are the  
shoes you can’t afford to buy. That thing you hate but can’t let go. Those pants  
that are too tight around your waist now. The song that keeps playing in your  
head. That chic you know you’re not good enough to bang. The one your mama

warned you about. We are trouble. Urban sprawl haunting your daydreams. We are muse; inspire you to get your game up, teaching by example. We are Root Worker, Obeah Lady, and Conjure Womyn. The scary broad living at the end of the road alone. Glamouring you through forked tongue. We make miracles. And yes, mothafucka we DO Ride on Brooms. You should be afraid of Womyn like us. Chastity belted, we fuck anyway. We do what we want to do. Walk butt naked in the daytime. And come to you at night.<sup>188</sup>

To Flowers, the Black witch is othered, outside of and in opposition to normative notions of womanhood. And still, she is very Black, very oriented toward her Africana spirituality, noted through the reference to the Haitian and New Orleans Papa Legba, the Jamaican Obeah woman, and the African American Rootworker. While her ontology directly resists white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (unlike James Cone's definition of an ontological Blackness that is innately about resistance and thus, at least theoretically, depends on whiteness for its existence), the Black witch's powers live *outside of* whiteness. She existed before by other names such as *ndoki* in the pre-colonial Kongo or *Iyami aje* in Yorubaland. But when violently placed within Anglo-American Puritan value-based norms, she, by her very being, resists.

According to Black witch Soraya, "Just saying the word Black witch, is like saying 'get thee back white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalistic demon. Get thee back.'"<sup>189</sup> Expert Hoodoo practitioner, priestess of Oya, and Black witch Mawiyah Kai EL-Jamah Bomani shares a similar refrain: "By saying that I'm a witch. It's like saying, you know, fu\*k the society, fu\*k the system. It's my liberation. It's a woman who owns her power. That evokes fear in many men and the women who side with them. And they should be afraid of somebody who is saying that I'm reclaiming me and not allowing you to define me."<sup>190</sup> In this same vein, Daizy's definition of *Blitch* connects this Black feminist analysis to an Africana orientation by noting the combination

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<sup>188</sup> Zoe Flowers, *In Praise of The Wytch*. (S.L.: Balboa Press, 2021). 67.

<sup>189</sup> Soraya Jean-Louis, in discussion with author, June 28, 2021.

<sup>190</sup> Mawiyah Kai EL-Jamah Bomani, in discussion with author, June 12, 2021.

of “African thought, African/Afrodiasporic spiritual practice” with the social justice aim of healing and fortifying themselves and future generations.<sup>191</sup> *All* of the Black witches interviewed in this study defined the Black witch as someone with power that is innately opposed to patriarchal rule.

White Neopagan movements have also identified the embodiment and concept of the witch as one with a power that opposes patriarchal supremacy, constructing a subject that exists outside normative standards of womanhood. This association began in the 1950s with the founding of modern witchcraft by Gerald Gardner, who started what we now know today as Wicca. As second-wave feminism was rising in the 1960s, many white feminists took an interest in witchcraft as an alternative to patriarchal Christian traditions. Witchcraft offered the worship of female goddesses alongside male gods. Women could be initiated and become priestesses, and covens organized themselves non-hierarchically. In 1979, one of the first explicitly feminist covens, Reclaiming, was established in San Francisco by longtime feminist and ecological rights activists Starhawk.

Popular in the 1980s to mid-90s, the Reclaiming witches combined activism, feminism, and an anarchist analysis and social structure with an earth-based spiritual belief system. Their goal was to dismantle and break away from sexed divisions of power and labor such as parenting and marriage, as well as inequality in the workforce - systems that keep women in subservient roles. Instead, they sought to reclaim agency in both domestic and public spheres and to regard reproductive capacities as life-affirming and sacred. The term witch then became the chosen term

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<sup>191</sup> Daizy Latifah, “BLITCH,” *The AfroMystic*, accessed January 20, 2022, <http://www.theafromystic.com/blitch>.



to denote such power, as well as deviance from patriarchal normative standards.<sup>192</sup> Starhawk writes,

The word “Witch” carries so many negative connotations that many people wonder why we use the word at all. Yet to reclaim the word “Witch” is to reclaim our right, as women, to be powerful as men to know the feminine within as divine. To be a Witch is to identify with 9 million victims of bigotry and hatred and to take responsibility for shaping a world in which prejudice claims no more victims.<sup>193</sup>

This movement and reclaiming of the term witch as one of feminist power was crucial for shaping the current generation of witches across racial backgrounds, including Black witches.<sup>194</sup>

Because culture does not emerge in isolation, it is likely that the Black witches interviewed in this study had connections to white witch frameworks of feminist and spiritual analysis. Lilith Dorsey, for example, is a renowned Black witch who continues to organize with white feminist Wiccan and Neopagan communities.<sup>195</sup> But Black witch ontology and white witch ontology are very different. Black feminists like Audre Lorde and bell hooks argued in the 1980s that Black women’s experience of gendered oppression was racialized in ways that white women, not only *did not experience* but, often perpetuated. Additionally, the choice to identify with feminist deviance has drastically different implications for Black women than for white women in the afterlife of slavery.

Black women and femmes have always been defined as deviant and thus outside of white femininity—stereotyped as hypersexual, bestial, and not human. In “Carceral Constructions of

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<sup>192</sup> Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: Ritual, Gender and Divinity among the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco*, Religion and Gender (London; New York: Routledge, 2002). 3-37.

<sup>193</sup> Starhawk quoted in Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: Ritual, Gender and Divinity among the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco*, Religion and Gender (London; New York: Routledge, 2002). 75.

<sup>194</sup> Initially released in 1979, Starhawk’s book *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, was a best seller that significantly impacted Neopagan movements. A second edition came out in 1989 and a third in 1999. See Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

<sup>195</sup> Based on conversations with Lilith Dorsey.

Black Female Deviance,” Sarah Haley analyses the racialized disparities in two cases of criminal accusations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She first presents the case of African American Eliza Cobb, who was accused of killing her newborn child after giving birth in a shed. Cobb was sentenced to the grueling labor of cutting down trees among mostly male inmates, one of whom likely raped her. This violence took such a toll on Cobb’s body that she suffered a major face burn and a growth on her neck. As such, the authorities deemed her unable to work, and some favored reducing her sentence. A photograph in which Cobb is garbed in a striped inmate uniform, with a noticeable burn, and positioned against the jail cell was circulated to promote the idea that Cobb was deviant, ugly, and ignorant. One official noted she was “very badly burnt about the face” and “her mind was not as strong as the average negro’s.”<sup>196</sup> These attributed characteristics contributed to her initial conviction and were used by her advocates to construct a palatable racialized subject. In contrast, Haley presents the case of Martha Gault, a young white woman who was accused of assault with intent to murder and sentenced to five years in prison. Like Cobb, a picture circulated, but in this one, Gault was smiling, holding a pet dog, and wearing a lovely dress. There are no visual cues of incarceration or deviance depicted in this photo. Quickly authorities revisited her case and argued that she was “of a very modest and refined nature” and, with a bit of training, would make “a splendid woman and good citizen.”<sup>197</sup> The stark contrast between how this Black woman, Eliza Cobb, and white woman Martha Gault were treated led Haley to conclude,

In the white imaginary, “black woman” was an oxymoronic formulation because the modifier “black” rejected everything associated with the universal “woman.” The black fe-male subject occupied a paradoxical, embattled, and fraught position, a productive negation that produced normativity. She was an invention

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<sup>196</sup> Sarah Haley, “Carceral Constructions of Black Female Deviance,” in *No Mercy Here* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469627595.003.0001>. 19.

<sup>197</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 22.

of a white supremacist imaginary defined in part by subjection to extreme violence and terror.<sup>198</sup>

In other words, the Black woman was necessary for the pinnacle of white femininity to exist.

White femininity necessitated the ugly other to measure its supposed pristine nature.

Hortense Spillers' theorization of the Black female body also helps contextualize differences between white and Black witches. Spillers argues that under chattel slavery, Black people were stripped of gender altogether—a process she refers to as ungendering. Ungendering is due to the objectification, the 'thingness' of Black people under slavery leading Spillers to differentiate between the flesh and body. She describes the body as possessing personhood and humanity, which was left on the shores of Africa, while flesh becomes the object to be owned, ruptured, and sexually exploited under chattel slavery. Spillers claims that in the crossing of the Atlantic, enslaved Africans became object/flesh, and thus without gender—being that gender would demark a sense of personhood. She points to the lack of gendered description in the slave logs, noting that instead of subjects, they become an object—merely undifferentiated items. She further highlights the inability of the gendering categories of mother and father to exist as the enslaved held no rights to ownership over their children. Because the master owned them, motherhood or fatherhood was an impossibility in the parental capacity.

By both Spillers and Haley's definitions, Black and woman are terms that contradict each other. The Black woman was stripped of womanhood during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, marked as an object, and characterized as deviant, ugly, and the opposite of white femininity in order to perpetuate enslaved labor and subsequently post-emancipation prison labor. Spillers concludes, however, with the proposal that in this liminal space of ungendering, the Black

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<sup>198</sup> Sarah Haley, "Carceral Constructions of Black Female Deviance," in *No Mercy Here* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469627595.003.0001>. 21.

woman can define herself anew—outside of the confines of white patriarchal definitions of subservient womanhood. She suggests,

This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out* of traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject. Actually, *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to “name”), which her culture imposes in blindness, “Sapphire” might rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment.<sup>199</sup>

Spillers begins the article by identifying “Sapphire” as a “marked woman, but not everyone knows my name.”<sup>200</sup> In this ending, she offers a way out of the violence of the ungendered object by proposing that this Sapphire can do the work of naming herself by claiming the monstrosity.

It is the claiming of the monstrosity, the ugly, the othered that Black witches like Zoë Flowers do when they identify with, as she puts it, the “trouble, urban sprawl haunting your daydreams. [The] Root Worker, Obeah Lady and Conjure Womyn, the scary broad living at the end of the road alone.”<sup>201</sup> The Black witch is the ontological embodiment of the rewriting of “a radically different text.”<sup>202</sup> She has always been here—even when marked as flesh—but here and now, she gets to define herself as someone with a power unentangled from the white supremacist state and gendered and/or racialized chains. She can claim the monstrosity that they called Black and the monstrosity that they called a witch and situate herself as a threat to, as bell hooks would say, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>. 80.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 66

<sup>201</sup> Zoe Flowers, *In Praise of The Wytch*. (S.L.: Balboa Press, 2021). 67.

<sup>202</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>. 80.

<sup>203</sup> bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, 1. paperback edition (New York London Toronto Sydney: Washington Square Press, 2005).

When Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley explores the Haitian Vodou Lwa, like Flowers, she too, encourages readers to love the parts of oneself deemed unlovable or ugly within the white Western imagination. In *Ezili's Mirrors*, Tinsley theorizes Black queer genders through the lens of the Lwa. She examines the gender expression of a Black cis-femme dominatrix named Domina Erzulie through the Lwa Ezili Je Wouj. Ezili Je Wouj is the red-eyed Lwa that is dangerous, quick to anger, and seeks justice for her children, characteristics similar to the governing force behind Domina Erzulie's practice of 'BDSM.' Affluent white men pay Domina Erzulie to inflict pain on them, humiliate, and top.<sup>204</sup> She delights in "leaving light red marks across his white flesh."<sup>205</sup> Hers is a scene of race play. It is a space where a pause is placed on the power dynamics outside, where white cis men can be punished for their guilty sins by the Black woman. Like Je Wouj, it is, if only momentary, an act of vengeance, role reversal, and in some form, justice. It is an enactment of a "cosmic tantrum...Not the tantrum of the spoiled child, but of some cosmic innocence that cannot understand - and will not understand - why accident would ever befall what is cherished, or why death should ever come to the beloved."<sup>206</sup> It is not just BDSM as traditionally understood, but a version that seeks social justice, a cosmic tantrum, red-eyes, an anger that Tinsley claims is the epistemology of Je Wouj.<sup>207</sup> She is nasty, freaky, and divine. She jolts you out of an oppressive haze to "bring you into 'consciousness of other realms.' Realms where the Black woman transforms pain into her own uses, power, and pleasure."<sup>208</sup> By performing this rage, Domina Erzulie embodies a spiritual identity that is not separate from her ontology. Je Wouj is the expression of Domina Erzulie's rage. Domina Erzulie

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<sup>204</sup> Topping refers to the person taking control or dominating the sexual acts as opposed to the submissive role.

<sup>205</sup> Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). 117.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

is Je Wouj and Je Wouj is monstrous. Tinsley then invites the reader to step into Je Wouj's power.

...maybe you've come in search of Je Wouj: the lwa who exists to take care of all of those parts of you because they're parts of her, all aspects of her cosmic force, all reclamations of the edges of our bodies and psyches we've been taught to be ashamed of but that fuel her red fire. Well, if that's what you want then go on and get it, girl! Go on and get what you need from the red power femme and know you deserve it, all of it.<sup>209</sup>

A significant part of reclaiming the Black witch is in loving oneself fully. Loving the ugly, monstrous parts of ourselves that Tinsley so beautifully highlights in her discussion of Je Wouj. Black witches' express self through reclaiming their ontological power, such as mediumship or clairvoyance, which then translates to a broader love of all parts of oneself deemed inappropriate for traditional white womanhood.

Tinsley's association of the monstrous with vibrant expressions of sexuality and anger are also some of the avenues through which Black witches' express self-love. LaReina and Laurita, for example, are both burlesque dancers in New Orleans and see a strong correlation between their sensual expression and spiritual power. LaReina reflected on her burlesque work, noting,

This divine feminine power is what you're feeding your crowd, and as you feed them, they reciprocate that energy. It's powerful being connected to your sensuality, how your body moves, and how it works. It's also a reflection of healing and developing a sense of self-love and confidence. When on stage, you're sharing that with the world to see.

There was one show where I didn't feel ready to perform, but I reached out to my divine self and said, "I'm honoring you in this way. And I'm allowing this time to be a moment of spirit. I'm not caring about money or applause." And I remember performing and just allowing that divine energy to come through and send it out. And it was just such a beautiful moment. The audience loved it and threw down lots of money, which was nice to see, but it was also more beautiful to really vibe in that sensual, beautiful inward spirit.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>210</sup> LaReina Besant, In discussion with author, June 28, 2021.

For LaReina, at the moment in question, being on stage was less about other people's approval and more about tapping into her divinity, her power, which is very much intertwined with her sensuality. This is no insignificant endeavor in a world where Blackness has been defined as paradoxical to femininity; Black expressions of sexuality are painted as adverse to respectable Christian womanhood; and divine ontological power, or the witch, is ugly, othered, and inherently threatening to patriarchal rule. LaReina's love for her beautiful, Black, sensual, and divine self—a self who possesses the innate power of one who “knows things” and “talks too much”—is an ontological expression of defiance. Unlike white witches who expressed their defiance through labor redistribution and the worship of the Goddess, LaReina and other Black witches like her are defining their power through a Black feminist lens—one where Blackness, an Africana orientation, and ontological power culminate in a claiming of the monstrosity.

## Conclusion

Although Black ontology is a contested area in the field of Black studies, theologians like James Cone and Emilie Townes did important work in identifying how external forms of oppression shape the subject. However, I offer that, perhaps, resistance to white supremacy shapes a subjective experience, not an ontological one. While the Black witch opposes white Christian normative notions of identity, her ontology is not exclusively informed by anti-Blackness. Instead, it is an ontology of *innate power* that exists with or without white supremacy, such as Soraya's ability to know personal information about someone merely through touch, or Rebeca's ability to channel the dead. As LaReina said, it's not a gift but “just how I live. How to live.”<sup>211</sup> Furthermore, because the Black witch practices African-heritage religions like Ifá, Vodou, or Hoodoo, she embraces an Africana religious orientation that is also profoundly

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

embedded in an ontological experience of innate power, reinforcing – ancestrally – her own contemporary self-knowledge, with her notions of the self, reflecting Africana concepts such as the *ndoki* or the conjurer born with the caul. But these Africana religions do not define the Black witch; they are used as structures and containers for her already innate ability. In this way, the Black witch’s sense of self is both inherently defiant of white supremacy simply in her existence, and, yet, *not* dependent on oppression and manufactured oppositional identities to exist. Due to her Black feminist consciousness, she claims the parts of herself that oppose this supposed supremacy, such as expressions of sexuality, her religious traditions, and abilities like clairvoyance that are demonized under a Christian state. She claims herself as monstrosity, rewriting a radically different text for female empowerment, one owning “the edges of our bodies and psyches we’ve been taught to be ashamed of,”<sup>212</sup> defining a self that is ontologically powerful, very Black, and rooted in her Black feminist Africana religious orientation. As addressed in the next chapter, this Africana Black feminist orientation not only defines notions of self, but shapes community thought and community formation in ways that descend and depart from a long line of Black religiopolitical movements.

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<sup>212</sup> Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili’s Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). 117.



**Chapter Three:  
A Discourse for Us All:  
Religiopolitical Thought in Community**

A Black feminist Africana religious orientation is readily apparent in Black witch community spaces and within typical Black witch discourse. Although not formally institutionalized, Black witches' emerging temporal spaces frequently look like conferences meetings, social media groups, and celebratory gatherings such as the Facebook group The Witches Brew: Indigenous Rootwork and Conjure and Dawtas of the Moon: Black Witch Convention. Black witches and their emerging community spaces demonstrate a profound commitment to Black power and self-determination through elements of Black feminism, queer thought, Black separatism, and multi-religiosity. However, unlike secular movements affiliated with radical modes of thinking, the Black witch primarily understands Black power to be a theological endeavor, one required of her by her spiritual guides.

Black witches come to Black space and religiopolitical thought through a long history of Black religious nationalism. Within Black nationalism, "adherents are united neither by common geography nor by a common language, but by the nebulous concept of racial unity attempting to unite the entire Black racial family, assuming that the entire race has a collective destiny."<sup>213</sup> Similarly, Black religious nationalism unites through a common religious or spiritual belief system. Black spaces like praise houses, churches, mosques, and the culturally Yoruba ile serve as environments where political thought deeply entrenched in theology comes into fruition. Black religious spaces also permit experimentation to integrate elements like Hoodoo into

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<sup>213</sup> Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*, Religions of the Americas Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014). 139.

Christianity, sacralize Blackness by preaching Black divinity, and - most importantly - allow Blackness to simply *be* instead of being predicated on anti-Blackness.<sup>214</sup> Alongside Black community spaces emerge ideological commitments to Black liberation, such as Black separatism and Black economic and social power. In movements like the Black Christian nationalism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Black Islamic nationalism of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and more recently, Yoruba religious nationalism, a theological undercurrent shapes how members understand individual and community empowerment and the methods by which said power should be harnessed. Similarly, for Black witches, the religious and the political are inseparable from commitments informed by Black religious nationalism. The correlation is often direct – for instance, many respondents are affiliated with Black religious nationalist groups like The United Nation of Ifá-Orisa-Vodun. Although there are derivative elements of Black religious nationalism in Black witches’ religious orientation, they depart from some of its notions. Black witches alternatively possess a West and West-Central African theological framework and a Black feminist consciousness that prioritizes the needs of women, queer and trans people, ultimately producing a new religiopolitical discourse in the context of Black religion. To comprehend how Black religious nationalist ideas inform Black witch thought, it is crucial first to examine the rise and proliferation of key movements associated with Black religious nationalism.

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<sup>214</sup> Religious studies scholar Dianne Stewart has highlighted the construction of the sacrality of Blackness within Black religious nationalism in class lectures. Dianne M. Stewart, “Black Love” (Lecture, Emory University, Spring 2019).

Kevin Everod Quashie discusses blackness as being instead of being predicated on anti-Blackness in *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

## **Black Religious Nationalism in the United States**

Black religion in the Americas has always been political. As soon as captive Africans arrived on foreign shores, they began using the spiritual technologies they remembered such as poisoning the enslaver or engaging local pharmacology to heal themselves in the absence of medical support. People gathered to learn spiritual skills, venerate ancestors, and rejoice in community, but due to white plantation oversight, there were no formalized spaces where Black religion could develop without the white gaze and subsequent violence. Under the cloak of Christianity, enslaved Africans created spaces that provided minimal safety, such as praise houses, which were the first known built institutions of African American religious autonomy. They were often small plantation buildings, sometimes slave quarters, where Blacks gathered to worship, dance, hold meetings and plot slave revolts. The praise house functioned as a home where enslaved people could resolve community disagreements and as a place for momentous occasions such as baptisms, weddings, or funerals. The praise house was also a space where Blacks could integrate elements of the African-derived religion of Hoodoo with their emerging exposure to Christianity.<sup>215</sup>

The first institutionally recognized Black churches in the United States took formation in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, they were not immune to the sociopolitical struggles affecting the country at large. Some churches were initially mixed congregations that eventually split along racial lines, like The Gillfield Baptist Church of Petersburg, Virginia, which became exclusively Black in 1810 with 270 Black members. Others were established as solely African

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<sup>215</sup> It was an emerging exposure because, as many historians have noted, African Americans (outside some of Kongo heritage) were not typically exposed to Christianity until the First Great Awakening in 1740 when Christian missionaries sought to proselytize the South, and even then, Blacks were not widely converted until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, we see practices like the ring-shout as a frequent form of worship in the praise house. Hoodoo historian Katrina Hazzard-Donald claims that the ring-shout was the official dance of the Hoodoo religion and links its counterclockwise motion to the precolonial kingdom of the Kongo. The Kongo people developed a cosmogram, which in a counterclockwise circular motion maps the four moments of life and death.

American from their founding. The first Black church was formally recognized (between 1773 and 1775) in Silver Bluff, South Carolina. Originally founded by a white preacher and seven enslaved members, the church soon moved to all Black leadership, as white preachers were no longer allowed to lead Black congregations for fear that they would spread too much knowledge among the enslaved during the American Civil War. In the white minister's absence, member David George took leadership, moved the church to Augusta, Georgia, and renamed it the First African Baptist Church. In later years, white Baptist leadership enacted laws aimed at dismembering it and Black institutions like it. Still, Black churches continued to emerge despite racist pushback.<sup>216</sup>

Because an exclusively Black religious space was essential to providing African Americans emotional, economic, and social support, numerous Black Christian leaders continued to challenge white Christian institutional authority in the cultivation of their spaces. Alternatively, where predominately white leadership was present, Black churchgoers received theological messaging promoting subservience to white officials. A restrictive white gaze and external imposition meant congregations also lacked the freedom to more overtly integrate and experiment with culturally specific song and dance, especially Hoodoo practices like the ring-shout and group singing, which were frequently integrated into the Black Christian faith. Black churches were not, however, always exclusively Black by purposeful exclusion. Traditionally, pastors and their congregations did not need to intentionally ban white members from joining. By simply being a cultural entity, Black church communities cultivated a space for Blackness as totality. For more obvious reasons, white pastors and parishioners avoided Black churches.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, Updated ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). 139.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-150.

Thus, many early Black churches existed as the first sites of practice for Black religious nationalism. Black churches were the first Black spaces that provided material and social support while shifting theological interpretations of Blackness outside of racist doctrines like the myth of Ham and its justification for slavery.<sup>218</sup>

Christian leaders also reinterpreted the Bible's message to account for the horrors of slavery and their eventual freedom. One of the most popular reinterpretations was that of Exodus, the story of Moses leading the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. African Americans understood their plight to be akin to the Hebrew people and believed that they, too, would soon be set free by God's intervention. Psalm 68:31, also known as the Ethiopian prophecy, further served as a call for Black emancipation in its claim that the "Princess shall come forth out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God."<sup>219</sup> Black Christian leaders subsequently interpreted the psalm as a call to emigrate back to Africa.

Using similar scriptures as justification, the American Colonization Society—founded in 1816 by Reverend Robert Finley—launched attempts to send African Americans to Africa. Desiring to quell an expanding free Black population, Robert Finley and other members proposed returning to Africa and converting "heathen" Africans to Christianity. The campaign did not garner much support, as free African Americans refused to leave their enslaved brethren, and many of the white churches did not have the financial resources to support such a complicated endeavor. Although the early Christian Black missionaries in Africa were not political and were established solely on the misguided purpose of providing Christian salvation to non-Christian Africans, later emigration movements were founded on separatist leanings

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<sup>218</sup> Sylvester Johnson, *Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

<sup>219</sup> Roy Kay, *The Ethiopian Prophecy in Black American Letters* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/17962>.

characteristic of Black nationalism. 19<sup>th</sup> century emigration movements were led by Black Christian leaders such as Martin Delany, Edward Blyden, and Alexander Crummell, who believed simultaneously that Christianity was a blessing brought to African-descended peoples in the Americas, that it should be espoused directly on the continent, *and* that the United States would never be a habitable location for Black people due to white supremacist rule. Delany, Blyden, and Crummell’s ideology was the beginning of a founding principle in Black nationalism - Black separatism.<sup>220</sup>

Physician and journalist Martin Delany was one of Black separatism’s leading proponents. Delany espoused rhetoric couched in theological underpinnings of Psalm 68:31, promising African Americans a better life outside the US, initially proposing emigration to Central and South America, then later—after meeting Nigerian Christians—suggesting West Africa. As opposed to the growing number of Christian churches preaching docility and moral obligation as the path toward Black redemption, Delany advocated for African Americans to find liberation through collective efforts. He was a proponent of the theologically affiliated belief that God helps those that help themselves. According to Delany, no amount of prayer without consecrated action could create the type of change necessary for Black liberation. And consecrated action involved – at least for Delany – “self-efforts,” “attainments,” and necessarily, emigration. He wrote,

We are no longer slaves, believing any interpretation that our oppressors may give the word of God, for the purpose of deluding us to more easy subjugation; but freemen, comprising some of the first minds of intelligence and rudimental qualifications, in the country.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998). 125-162.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

In addition to Black separatism, Delany also advocated for racial destiny, another significant theological foundation of Black nationalism.

Mass understanding of racial destiny was based on Bible passages specifically referring to the revelation of God's justice, a justice that "put down the mighty from their seats and exalted them of low degree," and a justice that gathered the scattered children of Israel under Nehemiah and helped them to build the wall of Jerusalem—because the people had mind to work." Based on biblical doctrine, Delany and a growing number of Black Christians believed that they were destined for greatness following the struggle against the evil powers evident in their experience of an oppressive nation-state.<sup>222</sup> Based on biblical text, Black people were thought to follow a predetermined racial trajectory of contesting white supremacy and eventually moving into a Black separatist state, which for Delany meant a final return to West Africa. Black separatism, racial destiny, overcoming the evils of the white state through personal and collective physical action, and a collective Black exodus were all foundational to an emerging Black religious nationalism in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Still, under the pressures of white supremacy, the Black church (as observed by Delaney) became increasingly assimilated to white authority and theology. Violent racial backlash following emancipation increased in the Southern states, and between 1885 and 1915, over thirty-five hundred African Americans were the victims of racist violence. In 1892 alone, 235 Black people were lynched. And Black churches could do little to address the violence. Many Black church leaders were adopting an increasingly passive approach to social change based on the influence of white Christian theology that invoked a non-violent Jesus enduring earthly suffering only to be rewarded in heaven. By the second World War, the Black church at large

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 138.

had become a respectable institution with close ties to the NAACP. Reflecting an emerging Black middle class, with multiple investments in the white state, networked Black churches and leaders preached incremental change instead of sudden action. Increasingly, working-class Blacks, more subject to daily racial violence, expressed frustration with the Black church's lack of effective intervention and began looking toward other iterations of Black religious nationalism.<sup>223</sup>

Around 1930, the Nation of Islam's (NOI) founder Wallace Dodd Fard, later known as Wallace Fard Muhammad (or Master Fard Muhammad) preached across Detroit a new religious approach that explained racial disparity while promising a profound racial destiny. Muhammad taught that Islam was the authentic Black religion and that whites were devils, descendent of a people created by a scientist named Yakub, who sought to create a new race through eugenics. The new race would maintain its existence and supremacy through theft and lies. Muhammad also taught that, eventually, Black people would overthrow white devils to take Black people's rightful place as the rulers of the earth. Although the Nation of Islam's theology was not derived from the Koran, NOI leadership constructed the message to help explain the dire circumstances of Black Muslims living in America *and* their divine potential. According to the NOI's doctrine, Black people existed as the chosen people, and Islam connected them to an African past as well as a sense of pride in culture and heritage. The Moorish Science Temple (MST), founded in Newark, NJ, in 1913, had a similar message, asserting that there was no distinction between man and God and that moral, earthly responsibilities were necessary to achieve one's divine nature.<sup>224</sup>

A crucial component of addressing racial and economic discrimination affecting African Americans was establishing moral guidelines for members. The Nation of Islam and the Moorish

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 165-195

<sup>224</sup> Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).



Science Temple's rules encouraged members to change their habits. Elijah Muhammad, who succeeded Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, argued that personal choices and actions impact, not only the individual, but the community at large. He taught that it was necessary to eat nourishing foods and relinquish vices plaguing the Black community, such as drugs and alcohol. The Holy Instructions listed in The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple included similar requirements, especially the prohibition of pork consumption.<sup>225</sup> Thus, most religious converts began their journey by learning to restrict diet and behavior. When Malcolm X joined the Nation of Islam, he reportedly gave up pork, cigarettes, gambling, and dating white women.<sup>226</sup> Still, both the NOI and the MST recognized that problems of the African American community could not be fixed exclusively through personal choice, at least not while living within white America.

Separatism proposed an alternative economic solution for Black communities, as organizational leadership saw a need to create alternative institutions where investment in personal growth could flourish with as little interference as possible. The NOI and MST began encouraging Black community members to create Black-owned businesses, Black publications, and Black schools that would hire other members and teach the Black community about self-love and ancestral identity. Elijah Muhammad commissioned farms in Georgia and Alabama, created a modern printing press, and provided apartment buildings for members of the NOI in addition to sponsoring entrepreneurial businesses such as restaurants, fish markets, and clothing factories. The Mosque served as the community's economic, social, and educational center and received millions of dollars in investments raised from their businesses. The NOI created an alternative economic system that kept the community insular and intra-dependent, and consequently, most

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> See Les Payne and Tamara Payne, *The Dead Are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X*, First edition (New York, N.Y: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, 2020).

members of the NOI advanced into a financial middle class.<sup>227</sup> Followers of Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple also found work during the great depression when – before joining – most had been unemployed. The NOI and the MST’s economic advancement is a considerable accomplishment given the national financial and racial obstacles Black people faced in America.<sup>228</sup>

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple were at their peak national influence, they succeeded in solidifying some Black religious nationalist theological beliefs such as separatism and Black divinity, which Martin Delany and other early Christian nationalist and pan-Africanist leaders espoused. However, by the 1960s and 1970s, as Black nationalism took on new secular forms and cultural iterations within movements like the Black Panthers and Afrocentrism, African Americans began searching for other African-originated religious traditions outside of Abrahamic Islam and Christianity. African Americans developed interest in Egypt and Kemetism, Ghana and Akan traditions, and what was most prevalent across the transatlantic diaspora, West African Yoruba-originated practices.

The Yoruba religion of Ifá was introduced to African Americans primarily between 1940 and 1960 due to Cuban immigration to major US cities like New York and Miami following the 1959 Cuban revolution. Cuba has a significant Yoruba religious culture because Africans were still being imported to the island relatively late in the timeline of the wider Atlantic slave trade. Yoruba captives flooded the trade to Cuba, especially between the 1830s and the 1860s. Orisa/Ifá religious customs were, thus, vivid in the minds and cultures of arriving Yoruba Africans. To survive the brutal repression of chattel slavery and forced Catholic conversion, they disguised

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<sup>227</sup> Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974). 154-157.

<sup>228</sup> See *Ibid.*, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order*, 1. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010); Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

their African deities, the orisa, with Catholic saints. Thus, emerged the religion of Lucumí, more popularly known as Santería. When Lucumí priests (referred to as Santeros) arrived in the United States, they shared their traditions with African Americans who yearned for an African ancestral connection.<sup>229</sup>

One of the pioneers in what we might identify as a trans-religious movement to connect African Americans to African ancestral roots was Walter Eugene King—later known as Oba Efuntola Osejeman Adelabu Adefunmi. Adefunmi is credited as the first African American initiated into the Yoruba religion after being introduced to Ifá through Cuban migrants in New York City. Eventually, Adefunmi no longer engaged with Lucumí practitioners because he did not want to incorporate the Catholic saints into his practice. He is quoted admitting, “it would have been embarrassing if some of the people in my society and organization came to my house and found I had an altar for Santa Barbara. They wouldn’t have been able to understand it. It took me a year before Oliana [his friend and mentor] clearly described to me that Santería only had a veneer of Christianity and that underneath it, everything else was purely African.”<sup>230</sup> Many leading Cuban initiates were unhappy with Adefunmi’s decision, resulting in division among the groups. Adefunmi then traveled to Nigeria, where he was initiated into Ifá as a Babalawo and, upon his return, started Oyotunji Village in South Carolina with a group of people dedicated to living a de-Europeanized African way of life. At Oyotunju Village, community members implemented what they referred to as the Isese tradition: Ifá practiced as akin to precolonial African traditions as possible. Adefunmi and members at Oyotunji Village had a profound

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<sup>229</sup> Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*, Religions of the Americas Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014).

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. 80.

impact, initiating hundreds of African Americans into Ifá and spreading the tradition's rituals, beliefs, and philosophy in the United States.

Like Delany's push for emigration to Africa and the NOI's emphasis on Islam being the authentic religion of African-descended peoples, Oyotunji Village shared a commitment to reconnecting with West Africa. Founders established a township with customs that reflected the material culture and lifestyle of Yoruba and other West African peoples before colonial contact with Europe. Community members mostly live off the land, honor the orisa, practice polygamy, and possess West African leadership structures such as the presence of an elder's council. Financial resources are generated through divinatory services, Ifá initiation fees, festivals, and village tours. As religious studies scholar Tracey Hucks explains, "Africa firmly rests at Oyotunji's philosophies. ...Oyotunji Village stands as a tiny Yoruba enclave, a full lifestyle alternative, struggling to survive in twenty-first-century North America... Its founder did not intend to exactly replicate precolonial Africa but instead saw Oyotunji Village as a monument to their African past."<sup>231</sup>

While Black religious nationalist groups like those discussed above made significant strides in advancing racial unity, promoting economic attainment, and connecting Black Americans with their African past and cultural history, they also created a particular type of Black essentialism. It was an essentialism which endorsed patriarchal family and economic structures and excluded members of the LGBTQ+ community. In one 1970s pamphlet from the Nation of Islam, members claim, "... [the man] is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his understanding is fuller, and his

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 170.

application of this information is wiser...”<sup>232</sup> The Moorish Science Temple exhibits a similar sentiment toward women and LGBTQ+ people. On their current website, in response to the question of whether queer relationships and people of a transgender experience are permitted in the group, they write, “In our Moorish Holy Koran, ... chapters 21 and 22 speaks about the relationship between man and woman, husband and wife. It would be going against our own divine laws and instructions to allow homosexuality, transgenders, sex benders, ect [*sic*] in our Temple and in the Moorish movement period. For it would cause confusion for our young men, young women, and children.”<sup>233</sup> African American Yoruba Ifá communities also struggle with patriarchy. It is often disguised in gender roles deemed traditionally masculine or feminine that ultimately replicate the same power imbalance witnessed in the West. Women are tasked with cooking and cleaning instead of being taught the sacred text of the Odu or ritual praxis. According to one senior priestess, “Women have the opportunity to get initiated, but they will not be taught by the men. It won’t happen. That’s why I started a group where women can teach women... but the men will not teach the women.”<sup>234</sup> Many women Ifá practitioners are also critical of plural marriage as it keeps wives focused on the children and on ensuring they receive enough financial and social support from their husbands.<sup>235</sup> Ifá practicing interlocutors interviewed for this study also frequently spoke about how, although women are increasingly respected in the tradition, men are still predominantly in leadership positions.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Qtd in the Combahee River Collective Statement, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2017).

<sup>233</sup> “Can Homosexuals, Transgenders, Ect. Be A Member And Join the Manor – Moorish Science Temple: The Divine and National Movement of North America, Inc #13 The Moorish American National Republic,” accessed January 5, 2022, <https://moorishamericannationalrepublic.com/can-homosexuals-transgenders-ect-be-a-member-and-join-the-m-a-n-r/>.

<sup>234</sup> Qtd in Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*, Religions of the Americas Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014). 325

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 326

<sup>236</sup> My gender disparity observations are primarily based on the Ifá leadership in Atlanta, Georgia, where Ile Ori African Cultural Center remains one of the only Iles with female leadership. Iyalosa Osunyemi, along with other

Notwithstanding the patriarchal and sexist trends in Black nationalist religious cultures, the 1980s saw a more public development of Black feminism alongside (and in lieu of) nationalist power and patriarchy. Publications included numerous feminist texts, including bell hooks' *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981); Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), and *Sister Outsider* (1984); and Angela Davis' *Women, Race, and Class* (1981). Black feminists created the basis for a public theory and praxis advocating for the critical examination of not only race (as was characteristic of Black nationalist and Black religious nationalist movements), but also gender, sexuality, and social, and economic structures. Black feminism openly challenged second-wave white feminists who failed to account for race in their gender analysis. Important theoretical frameworks that came out of the Black feminist movement include Kimberlé Crenshaw's conceptualization of intersectionality theory. Crenshaw popularized the term in her 1989 article on the ways Black women experience both racial and gender discrimination in the workplace—an occurrence the courts at the time were ill-equipped to prosecute as definitions of discrimination were exclusive to racial *or* gender categories.<sup>237</sup> bell hooks' concept of postmodern Blackness, also had tremendous influence in Black feminist thought. Postmodern Blackness examines how African American thought has been excluded from postmodernism as well as myriad discussions on sexuality and gender by activists and authors.

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interlocutors, also confirmed similar patriarchal leadership structures in other cities. At many gatherings, however, such as the Baba Medahochi Festival in Atlanta, GA, and the United Nation of Ifá, Orisa, and Vodun Gelede Festival, also in Atlanta, GA, the divine feminine and the mothers are honored. There thus, appears to be a community-wide desire to resist patriarchal traditions regarding women's visibility and centrality as deities and mothers. Leadership, however, has not reflected more egalitarian investments.

<sup>237</sup> Kimberle 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 (1989): 139.

The Black feminist movement reflects an African American political turn to a more secular approach to social change than the explicit religious nationalism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Black church was profoundly deradicalized, the Nation of Islam began its decline with the departure of Malcolm X from the organization and the passing of Elijah Muhammed in 1975, and Yoruba religious communities never took up the political cause in the same way as other Black religious nationalist groups, preferring instead to remain cultural entities.<sup>238</sup> In 1979 Alice Walker coined the term Womanism in her short story “Coming Apart” to account for the interplay of spirituality, culture, Blackness, and feminism in Black women’s experiences and collective outlook. The term gained traction among Black women theologians in the 1980s and 1990s with popular works by Jacqueline Grant, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Delores Williams, among others. Black women theologians, however, were Christian-centered, and some exhibited elements of heterosexism and homophobia akin to the Black religious nationalist groups previously discussed.<sup>239</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a growing queer and Black feminist discourse has surfaced on social media, in policy debates around gendered violence and sexuality, and throughout the academy. As Black feminist discourse infiltrates mainstream media, and as it couples with Hoodoo’s resurgence, a politically informed emphasis on spirituality emerges from Black women and femmes that is multi-religious and actively critical of intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality while being firmly rooted in African religious heritage. However, Black witches’ Black feminist Africana religious orientation would by no means exist today if it

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<sup>238</sup> In the Conclusion, Tracey Hucks notes that “Several orisa practitioners express deep concern that political activism is no longer central to African American Yoruba identity and that African American Yoruba are not always committed to organizations, movements, or causes that alleviate the suffering of African descended people domestically or African people globally.” Ibid., 320.

<sup>239</sup> Many scholars such as Pamela R. Lightsey have added a queer discourse to Black womanist theology. See Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

were not for the religiopolitical efforts of their Christian, Islamic, and African traditional religious predecessors who contributed to many of the contemporary movement's core principles.

### **Black Witches Spaces and Black Separatism**

The Black religious nationalism and subsequent separatism of 20<sup>th</sup> century Black religious groups represent the kinds of Black worldmaking described by Kevin Quashie. Like the Black communities created by the NOI or Ifá/Orisa religious practitioners, Quashie imagines a Black world as,

... a world where blackness exists in the tussle of being, in reverie and terribleness, in exception and in ordinariness. This Black world is not one where the radical logics and harming predilections of antiblackness are inverted but one where blackness is totality, where every human question and possibility is of people who are black.<sup>240</sup>

In past and present Black religious communities, members foster a cultural and social space allowing them to focus on engagement with the divine and personal and communal uplift.

Anti-Blackness is not always at the front of members minds in Black religious communities.

Quashie continues, "...what I want is the freeness of a Black world where Blackness can be of being, where there is no argument to be made, where there is no speaking to or against an audience where we are all the audience there is ... *An antiblack world expects blackness from black people; in a black world what we expect and get from black people is beingness.*"<sup>241</sup>

One Black space that reflects the investments of Black worldmaking and Black religious nationalism is the Dawtas of the Moon: Black Witch Convention. The convention occurs annually in Baltimore, Maryland, but since COVID-19 presented health risks, it was held online

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<sup>240</sup> Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 1-2.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10. Emphasis mine.



for the years 2020-2023. Founded by Iya Omitola Yejide Ogunsina, a priestess of Yemoja, a Rootworker, and a doula, Dawtas of the Moon convention seeks to bring together “the Witches, *aje*, Daughters of the Iyaami, Women of Conjure, Rootworkers, and Shamans...to heal [themselves], each other, and [their] community by reconnecting to our ancestral magick.”<sup>242</sup>

The convention is intentionally Black, requiring photo identification of all registrants. According to Iya Omitola, creating an intentionally Black space allows participants to be entirely comfortable. She announced at the 2020 convention that,

This is a safe space, and we don’t have too many safe spaces. I think that one of the things that continually brings sisters back to Dawtas of the Moon is being able to walk into a space and seeing people who got on their crystals, got their locks, got their afros, look like them, have similar experiences, we can talk a certain way without having to monitor ourselves, we can do the head roll. We can talk sh\*t. We can laugh. We can do all of those things because we are around people who understand it, relate to it, and *it is just a part of who we are.*<sup>243</sup>

Another significant emerging community space of the Black witch is on social media. Facebook groups, Instagram accounts, and Tik-Tok videos all serve as spaces where Black witches can exchange ritual information, act as virtual mentors for the novice practitioner and suggest books related to the traditions. Some spaces include “Melanated Witchcraft: Hoodoo for Black Women,” which grew to over seventeen thousand members in only four months, and the group “Magically Spiritual Black Women,” which draws a crowd of over fifty-eight thousand members. One particular social media group that strongly emphasizes Black feminism, queer thought, and a commitment to Blackness is “The Witches Brew: Indigenous Rootwork and Conjure.” The group was founded in 2016 by Daizy October Latifah of TheAfroMystique.com, and has over 10,000 members, with additional daily requests for membership. Resources abound

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<sup>242</sup> “Dawtas of the Moon: Black Witch Coven | Facebook,” accessed January 5, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/dawtasofthemoon>.

<sup>243</sup> Omitola Yejide Ogunsina, discussion at Dawtas of the Moon Convention, October 2020.

in The Witches' Brew with hundreds of downloadable files, including books on Ifá, spells for glamor, lists of reputable diviners, and scholarly texts on the histories of Black religions. Like Muslim, Christian and Ifá/Orisa religious institutions, Black witch digital spaces also possess informal hierarchy systems with people such as Iyalosa Osunyemi, Daizy, and Toya Smith positioned as respected voices of authority. Black witch leaders acquire their authority through years of vetted spiritual contributions such as performing divinations or selling efficacious magical oils. I had the opportunity to speak with Daizy and Toya who both expressed a Black religious nationalist commitment to Black separatism while emphasizing a commitment to Black feminism, queer and trans bodies, and a multi-religious nature characteristic of the Black witch space. Daizy's description of the Witches' Brew Facebook group—the first introduction seekers encounter when they join—exemplifies Black witch political commitments.

The Witches Brew: Indigenous Rootwork and Conjure is *\*the first\** original FB group created by and for Black Rootworkers, Conjurers, and Black Witches of African descent. The group was founded by Daizy October of TheAfroMystic.com and moderated by Anika Rich of BlackGirlBliss.com. The group's admins have roots in Traditional Black Belt Hoodoo (the system of African Spiritual Practice maintained by Black folks in the Black American South), but practitioners of all African spiritual systems are welcomed as this is a Pan-African celebration of the spiritual systems practiced by our Ancestors across the globe. All genders of African/Afro-diasporic people are welcomed. NOTE: This is a safe space, so absolutely no antiBlack sentiments are allowed in the group. Even certain groups of Black folks are asked to check your privilege at the door. Adding to the group requires a visible photo on your profile and answering ALL of the submission questions.<sup>244</sup>

I spoke with Toya, a conjure woman, Ifá practitioner, and Black witch living in Baltimore, Maryland, who expanded on the group's description and purpose.

The Witches Brew is so Black, right? It is so full of love and wisdom and holding space for one another and allowing a place for us to be as Black as we possibly can without recrimination and without code-switching, and without feeling like

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<sup>244</sup> "The Witches Brew: Indigenous Rootwork & Conjure | Facebook," accessed January 5, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1338273066200347>.

you have to defer to anybody else. It is a safe space for those of us who are marginalized in other ways, such as those of us who are women or non-men. Those of us who are queer or questioning and those of us who have different styles of loving. It feels even in the moments when we're dragging each other or 'memeing' each other to death, it feels like a place where I can be completely myself and say what I want to say, ask the questions that are on my heart, speak to people who are still finding their way. You know? Offer to others the same gentleness, the same patience, the same wisdom that was offered to me when I was figuring my way out. And I've made so many friends and formed a community there with folks who I would never have met otherwise. A lot of folks live right in this area, but I would never have known them otherwise if it wasn't for Facebook in general and the Witch's Brew in particular. I'm really thankful that it's a space that exists and that I've been trusted to pipe up in there and talk to folks. It's been a beautiful experience.<sup>245</sup>

For Toya, "The Witches Brew" must stay Black because, without white people, members are free to express themselves, learn from each other and hold one another accountable without fear of judgment. It allows for Black vernacular, African American cultural references, and a shared understanding of anti-Blackness and its iterations without censoring or explaining anything to non-Black members. Cultural familiarity and a general sense of comfort noted in contemporary Black witch spaces were also crucial to Black spaces during slavery such as the praise houses and Black churches. Black folks have always needed a community that could exist without the violence of whiteness and the white gaze. Curious about the development of her political stance, and the presence of Black community in her upbringing (prior to joining The Witches Brew), I asked Toya to expand on her own sense of familiarity and comfort in and with Black space.

It's very much a part of my family. I never understood other ways to be. I'm confused by Black people who care about respectability or the things of whiteness. That's never anything that I was raised with. I was raised by grandparents and parents who centered Blackness, who actually taught me not to trust white people at all and raised me in an environment that was almost exclusively Black. So, it's always been the center of my life. It's been the center of what I find beautiful. I think my entire political idea is about decolonization, and the easiest way to be decolonized is to center Blackness. And the way we do that is by saying, I'm not thinking about white folks, but the minute you say I'm

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<sup>245</sup> Toya Smith, In discussion with author via Zoom, May 25, 2021.

not thinking about white folks, you've centered whiteness. It just shouldn't be a part of the conversation. If we're talking about Black people, we're talking about Black people. If we're focusing on Black people, we're focusing on Black people. And so, you know, I am very Black. My child is very Black. Our religions are very Black. When I look in the face of God, the face is my face, and there's no way not to have your political ideas affected by that. It would be cognitive dissonance for me to say everything about my personal life is Black. But then, when I start thinking community level and globally, I'm focusing on something else, no. Everything, everything about me, is Black. Everything I think about is about Blackness. It's my worldview. *My worldview is Blackness.*<sup>246</sup>

Like Christian leaders such as Martin Delany, who coupled the separatist move to Africa with theological rhetoric of Black redemption, and similar to Islamic groups' separatist entrepreneurial economic structures couched in beliefs of the white devil and Black divinity, Toya embraces Black separatism and its theological reasoning, but through a Hoodoo orientation. I asked her to elaborate on the importance of Blackness for The Witches Brew and Hoodoo, especially when employing social media as a community space. She responded,

It's important because right now, we are in a wave of Black recognition, and social media has really helped. Social media can be hurtful, but in many ways, it is helping us share our ancient traditions in new ways. We're reaching each other in ways that we wouldn't have been able to before. You know, there is, there's no other kind of way that I could teach somebody who lives in Dubai about the ancestor veneration I learned in Baltimore. And because of that, we need it to be an all-Black space. Why? Because we need to feel that we can be completely ourselves, that we can share our knowledge with one another without the fear of others' eyes. And because we all know that anything that is Black, not just our spiritual traditions, anything that is Black is stolen and commodified and watered down by other people. And that has happened in Hoodoo to the point where Black people themselves don't know that Hoodoo isn't just candles that you got from a Botanica. That we aren't just putting blood in spaghetti. They believe what they've heard in popular culture about Hoodoo. It can be hard to find Black-owned businesses to buy supplies and hard to find Black teachers.

And Hoodoo at its base is ancestor veneration. *All our work is powered by our ancestral connection. And so, if you have no ancestral connection, then I don't know what you're doing, but whatever you're doing is not Hoodoo.* It makes no sense to me that High John the Conqueror would ever work on behalf of a white

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

person. That does not make any sense. It doesn't make sense that my enslaved ancestors would rise and do work on behalf of a white person. They had to do [that] in the body. And now that they are free from their bodies, do you think they would choose that? Of course, they wouldn't. So, it doesn't matter to me that white people claim that they're practicing Hoodoo because I know it's not true. Folks get very up in arms and want to defend Hoodoo, and I don't feel the need to defend it. I don't have to defend my ancestors. I know that there is power in the blood, and if you don't share the blood, you don't have that power. And that is not to say that white people don't have their own ancestral magic. They do. It just isn't Hoodoo. And so, you know, for me, that's really what it's about. If I call myself a Hoodoo practitioner, then I must practice in the way my African forbearers did, and I have to do it with other Black people. There's no other way to do Hoodoo. There are many ways to be magical, but if you're going to do Hoodoo, then it gotta be Black, that's it.<sup>247</sup>

Myesha, owner of the Hoodoo supply shop, Cognac & Conjure, affirmed Toya's analysis of Hoodoo being an exclusively Black religion on her blog.

[White people] do not have the dead to capably work anything resembling conjure. They didn't inherit our pre-existing pacts with specific plants, Cymbee, the Conjuresses of Old, nor are they descendants of any Maroon populations that did much of the preservation work in this tradition. They can buy a million and one High John the Conqueror roots, they can haphazardly slap together cloth sacks and call it mojo or *gris gris*, they can chew and spit *galanagal* and say a psalm, but it will never move the same or with an equivalent efficacy if it moves at all. *The target of the work cannot also teach the work.*<sup>248</sup>

When Myesha says, 'The target of the work cannot also teach the work,' she refers to a long history of enslaved Africans using spiritual tools to aid in opposition to white supremacist oppression. Iterations of resistance include documented accounts of enslaved Africans employing herbs to poison slave masters, rituals to aid in slave revolts such as the Nat Turner

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> "Roots, Hoodoo and Conjuraton: The First African American Religion," Cognac & Conjure, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://www.cognacxconjure.com/myeshxa/2019/7/30/roots-hoodoo-and-conjuraton-the-first-african-american-religion>.

rebellion or the Denmark Vesey conspiracy in South Carolina, and post-emancipation ritual work to keep police from entering Black homes.<sup>249</sup>

Myesha also addresses the Africana philosophical foundations of Hoodoo. Even though practitioners and scholars widely accept that Hoodoo has European pagan, Indigenous American, and Christian elements such as the Psalms, the Bible, and plants used in indigenous American pharmacology, most contemporary practitioners understand the religion to still be Black.<sup>250</sup>

Womanist theologian Stephanie Mitchem speaks to a reinterpretation of religion in her analysis of African American folk healing, claiming, “African American folk healing in the twenty-first century is not lifting past practices of folk healing whole cloth... It is the fine strands, the spirit rather than the letter, that are transferred to contemporary practices. These practices may utilize contemporary knowledge, but practitioners still self-identify themselves and their work as Black.”<sup>251</sup> Because Hoodoo is socially and historically understood as an ancestral religion, predicated on African-descended ancestors, and grounded in African philosophical belief systems, many deem it impossible for non-Black practitioners to properly harness Hoodoo’s power. Furthermore, Toya and Myesha both underscore that their separatist leanings are in part a response to a history of white capitalist exploitation that undermined the Hoodoo tradition.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Blacks sought to escape the white Southern violence that ensued during and following reconstruction, especially racist Jim Crow laws and persistent lynchings. From 1916 to 1970 – in what has come to be known as The Great Migration – around six million

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<sup>249</sup> Hoodoo employed in resistance is discussed in more detail in Chapter One but also see Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). 51-89., Zora Hurston, “Hoodoo in America,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 44, no. 174 (1931): 317–417, <https://doi.org/10.2307/535394>.

<sup>250</sup> See Ibid, Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin’: The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

<sup>251</sup> Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007). 87.

African Americans traveled north in search of better employment and physical and psychological safety for themselves and their families. Migrating African Americans brought with them their religious traditions but no longer had access to the rich pharmacopeia of the South in the highly industrialized North.

In the South, most Blacks lived in rural conditions with a close connection to the land and its resources; therefore, the practitioners gathered Hoodoo supplies, such as herbs and animal remains, making most of them expert herbalists. When African Americans arrived in northern cities, they were desperate for materials to supplement their practice.

After reconstruction and until World War II, white Ashkenazi Jews—outsiders to the tradition—became the primary suppliers of Hoodoo items. They mass-produced Hoodoo products like mojo bags, divination tools, and harvested herbs in bulk. During these 70 years, charlatans advertised in magazines claiming they could foresee the future and sold spiritual objects that, once consecrated by a trained rootworker, turned out to lack any spiritual efficacy. Katrina Hazzard-Donald identifies the period of commercialized Hoodoo as the tradition's second era, which she differentiates from the regional, or Black Belt Hoodoo, prominent during slavery and immediately following emancipation.<sup>252</sup> By the time Zora Neale Hurston and Harry Middleton Hyatt extensively documented Hoodoo in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, capitalism and commercialization altered Hoodoo's reputation. Fake rootworkers fostered a general distrust of the practice in African American Northern communities leading to its subsequent decline.<sup>253</sup> Today, as leaders like Toya and Myesha work to resurrect some of the practices and philosophies established before commercialization, they embrace traditions of Black separatism.

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<sup>252</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 84-115.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

In hopes of avoiding traps of commercialized spirituality and white supremacy, Hoodoo leaders are meticulous about how they spread knowledge, specifically in their decision to mentor only Black practitioners and champion the religion's African connection.

### **Black Space and Multi-Religiosity**

While most Black witches are Hoodoo devotees, numerous individuals practice other African-heritage religions such as Ifá, Vodou, or Lucumí. Many Black witches, like Toya, follow multiple traditions, with the most common among my interviewees being Hoodoo and Ifá. In the Witches Brew, for example, founder Daizy October Latifah shared that although the group focuses on Hoodoo because that is her tradition, there are practitioners of different faiths. "We're getting practitioners of all different African spiritual traditions, which I always wanted, you know? It's a pan-African community with all different genders and sexual orientations, but all with the commitment of developing our connection with the divine."<sup>254</sup> Daizy also posted a group poll in which members were asked to note their religious tradition. Most claimed Hoodoo, the second largest group was Yoruba-heritage traditions, and third was Vodou. But in the 105 comments below the poll, most people responded saying that they practice multiple traditions.

There are two crucial reasons that multi-religiosity is a significant occurrence among Black witches. First, multi-religiosity diverges from traditional, or Isese, practices of Ifá, shifting from an 'authentic' or essentialist notion of religion influenced by a single cultural lineage into one that is diasporically Black and yet suited to the particular needs of African American practitioners. Second, it draws from some Black religious nationalists' religiopolitical impulse to employ a variety of modalities to positively impact individual and community improvement.

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<sup>254</sup> Daizy October Latifah, In discussion with author via Zoom, October 1, 2021.



Similar to the Black separatism of Christian and Islamic Black religious nationalist groups, many practitioners understand multi-religiosity as a theological commitment required of them by their ancestors. Yet simultaneously, it is a political agenda that accounts for African Americans' social location in slavery's afterlife where practitioners must use available resources, including their collective imagination, for a life beyond survival.

Still – as some of my interviewees note – numerous practitioners of African-heritage religions are not pleased with a multi-religious or blended approach to religion. They see it as not authentically true to the traditions of early Africans and, as such, missing some associated power. Exclusive religious practice is a belief particularly held by Ifá practitioners of the Ise tradition, which is a lineage that aims to practice their religion as close to the Yoruba version as possible versus, say, diasporic iterations such as Lucumí or Candomblé. Members frequently make trips to Nigeria to learn from priests and priestesses, are exclusively initiated on the continent, dress in West African garb, and learn the Yoruba language as a part of their religious obligations. In one Ise ile, for example, members shared that a commitment to more than one religion, in their opinion, “waters down” the power of Ifá. When presented with a flyer for a Hoodoo ritual in a group chat, one initiated Babalawo expressed a religiously exclusive position. “We are Ifá practitioners, and many of us are very serious about Ifá, to the degree that we don't have anything else. Christianity and Islam or even Lucumí and Palo are not options for us... Too many people mix traditions while not fully gaining the *ase* from one or the other. I caution all my clients from cross-referencing Ifá with other aspects of spirituality.” Leading members of the ile, of which he is a part, echoed the belief that traditional Ifá practitioners should not practice more than one tradition as it diminishes its power or *ase*. As noted in the following interview excerpts,

it is evident that faithful adherence to one tradition is a prevalent conviction among broader Isese Ifá communities.<sup>255</sup>

In my interview with Toya, she shared that because she is a member of an ile that honors every aspect of her ancestral lineage, she does not have to choose between traditions.

The Orisha have been pulling at me for years. Since I was a little girl, I've been fascinated with them, yet my Hoodoo spirits, my Congo spirits, those ancestors have always been very loud, very greedy. They're always like, "us first." And so, no matter how much I was enamored with the Orisha, it was as if they would not allow me to join an ile or to go in that direction. I had to give them my time and attention, and it wasn't until, very recently, maybe five years ago, that I came upon my now godmother, my Iya, who was running her own ile under New Afrikan Vodun. And one of the wonderful things about New Afrikan Vodun is that we believe we must reclaim all of our ancestral spiritual practices. So, there was no having to choose one or the other. If I was going to be a part of that ile, I knew that my Congo spirits ain't going anywhere, that they are to be served and propitiated first, and that it was with their allowance that I could join an ile, to begin with. That's the beautiful part of New Afrikan Vodun that everybody in the ile also practices another form of African religion. Most of us are Hoodoo folks, but some serve the Lwa.<sup>256</sup>

In fact, when I first went to the river and got my *elekes* I was told how to do an altar in Isese tradition. I came home to reconfigure my altar because I was going to do it according to the rules, and my spirit said, no, ma'am. No, you may not. We like it just like it is. And I was a little confused and called my Iya and was like, "so the ancestors said that they don't want me to put my altar the way you said," and she said, "well then you don't put your altar the way I said. You do what your ancestors said, don't ever, don't ever do what I say over what your ancestors say." *They come first in all ways. That's what African traditional religion is about.* We always bow at the feet of our ancestors. You do whatever they tell you to do. So, yeah, it's never been in conflict, and I'm very thankful. Cause I know some other folks have had a conflict with trying to choose what is

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<sup>255</sup> Anonymous, In discussion with author. In person., March 4, 2021.

<sup>256</sup> New Afrikan Vodun emerged from the New Afrikan People's conference in Detroit, MI, in 1968. They sought to develop a religion unique to African diasporic people by combining Vodun, Kongo, and Ifa/Orisa traditions. Baba Medahochi K. O. Zannu is one of its founders. See "From the manuscript New Afrikan Vodun by Medahochi K. O. Zannu," accessed May 1, 2023, <https://vodunsi.tripod.com/forstate.html>; "Our Work," United Nation of Ifa-Orisa-Vodun, accessed May 1, 2023, <https://uniov.org/media>.

most important, having to choose one line of worship. And thankfully, I haven't had to do that.<sup>257</sup>

For Toya, it's not just Black separatism that feels necessary, but practicing two traditions is a theological commitment as the orisa have "been pulling at [her] for years," and her Congo spirits also demanded her attention. Her ancestors come first and dictate how she engages with deities from other lineages. Toya is also speaking to a widely held belief among Africana religious practitioners in the US: one must engage one's ancestors first before invoking any deities. Even in most orisa traditions, practitioners are required to consult with an initiated priest or priestess who can perform divination to connect one to a particular orisa.

More recently, in the late 20th century, a significant number of Black Americans interested in African-heritage religions began their journey by connecting with deities as opposed to their ancestors. Spiritual leaders who have published widely circulated books have introduced orisa traditions to a broader African American audience and encouraged non-initiated practitioners to connect with deities through personal rituals. Among the most popular are Luisah Teish's *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*, Monique Joiner Siedlak's *Seven African Powers: The Orishas*, and Tobe Melora Correal's *Finding Soul on the Path of Orisa: A West African Spiritual Tradition*. Teish, Siedlak, and Correal exposed a new generation to orisa traditions, a groundbreaking act as initiated practitioners have historically kept orisa traditions inaccessible to the broader public due to fear of persecution, misrepresentation, and exploitation. Since African-heritage religious traditions have become popularized, novice practitioners are first turning to the orisa for guidance and support instead of calling upon their ancestors or their intuitive guide, known in Ifá as the Ori. Many Hoodoo and Ifá practitioners will advise seekers to first connect with their Ori or

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<sup>257</sup> Toya Smith, In discussion with author via Zoom, May 25, 2021.

ancestors, who are believed to be more invested in their descendant's success and, therefore, more likely to assist in providing desired outcomes.<sup>258</sup>

As Toya noted, she also belongs to an ile, influenced by New Afrikan Vodun which supports the practice of multiple traditions. New Afrikan Vodun also calls itself Ifá-Orisa-Vodun and seeks “To promote, teach and maintain the traditions of our Ancestors. To heal, unify and facilitate sustainability for our families, individuals, and groups around our communities. To become self-sufficient economically and to shape the minds of our community so that we become uplifters and bring the houses of Ifá-Orisa-Vodun together.”<sup>259</sup> Ifá-Orisa-Vodun's expressed desire for economically self-sufficient communities in their mission statement suggests a Black nationalist agenda. Their website notes the organization's founding on March 28, 1968, as an outgrowth of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika (RNA).<sup>260</sup> The RNA was a Black nationalist organization that claimed Southern territory as rightfully belonging to African American peoples, demanded reparations and ordered that African descended people be given a choice as to American citizenship. Malcolm X and Queen Mother Audley Moore were considered the mother and father of the organization, and Oyotunji Village founder Oba Efuntola Adefumi I was a respected member.

Leaders of Ifá-Orisa-Vodun are fully aware that their approach to religion is unacceptable to many traditional practitioners of Ifá and note the tension in the following passage on their website.

Most new movements always come under some form of criticism. The United Nation of Ifá-Orisa-Vodun is no exception. *Are they authentic or legitimate?* On the larger scale, We see this with the very practice of Ifá, where Priests are initiated by Our own people in the Western Hemisphere. It did not matter that We have been doing Our own ritual and initiatory work throughout Our collective

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<sup>258</sup> Observations based on ethnographic research.

<sup>259</sup> “About,” United Nation of Ifá-Orisa-Vodun, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://uniov.org/bio>. Emphasis mine.

<sup>260</sup> See “Media,” United Nation of Ifá-Orisa-Vodun, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://uniov.org/media>

enslavement to the present. There are groupings of Nigerians (ethnically Yoruba) who maintain that their *Ase*/power and authority is absolute and anything We do is secondary. There are groupings of Cubans who have a similar, yet different, edict. In the West, they claim primacy. In fact, some boast that they have more Babalowo in Cuba than there are in Nigeria. What is troubling about all of this is that it disrespects Our contributions to the study and practice of traditional Afrikan religions and what We have done in the absence of their participation in Our creations and practice. Moreover, there is no analysis of the fact that these communities are, as is the world, oppressed and exploited by white supremacy/imperialism. We all share a common enemy. We all have valuable knowledge and experiences to share to ensure victory in Our restoration movement to create a better world.<sup>261</sup>

The United Nation of Ifá-Orisa-Vodun are not alone with regard to the question of multiple religious belonging. Sam, also known as Juju Bae, who runs the international broadcast “A Little Juju Podcast,” shared a similar understanding of multi-religiosity.

Similar to Toya, Sam is a member of an ile that supports people who practice multiple traditions. She acknowledges that a non-traditional approach is taboo among some Isese practitioners. So, I inquired why she, a practitioner of both Hoodoo and Ifá, adheres to two traditions.

... I think they do different things. They are different technologies that can arrive at similar results. Like I can get money or healing or protection from both, but they go about it in different ways, and some ways feel good sometimes, and other ways feel good other times. I just think I want options on how I want to deal with certain situations. And by practicing both, I know that I can pick and choose.<sup>262</sup>

Returning to the point that some Iles are uncomfortable with members engaging in multiple traditions, I asked Sam about her ile, the Obafemi Institute for the Divine Study of Ifá (OIDS).

The premise of the Obafemi Institute is to do what works. We call ourselves Isese, but we are traditional non-traditionalists. We do certain things that align with Isese practices, but sometimes we give warriors, for example, a Lucumí, not an Isese practice. This is because a lot of us are African American folks who are not

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Sam aka Juju Bae, In discussion with author via Zoom, May 10, 2021.

going to do everything the way that Isese does it and because it was created by a particular people in a country with certain ideals and customs that we don't have. We were stripped from that due to the transatlantic slave trade. So, if Ifá is not able to change with the times, is it still relevant? As mostly African American people, we have a different experience. Our practices are a bit different, but none of the core tenants of what makes Ifá, Ifá have changed, just how we go about some of our rituals. I think people aren't happy about this conversation about our ile and iles in general. They don't like that. It creates a lot of interesting conversations and dynamics within the community, but it works. If people are flourishing and living good lives, then what's the issue?<sup>263</sup>

The Obafemi Institute's non-traditional, traditional approach to employing the available spiritual resource to assist in one's life is not new for African Americans. Although a blended or multi-religious approach to religion is evident in Hoodoo's development, as discussed in Chapter One, blending was also employed by Black religious nationalists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the purpose of community uplift. Many Islamic groups institutionalized a Black religious tradition that was Muslim in its devotion to Allah and the use of the Koran but re-imaginative in how they interpreted symbols and origin stories. For example, Prophet Nobel Drew Ali, who founded the Moorish Science Temple, created a version of Islam influenced by various sources, including Freemasonry and Spiritualism. The sacred text of the Moorish Science Temple, *The Circle Seven Koran*, is not found in the Koran but was appropriated from Levi Dowling's *The Antiquarian Gospel* (1907) and *Unto Thee I Grant*. The underlying message of these texts is that there is no distinction between man and God.<sup>264</sup> The *Circle Seven Koran* teaches, "When man sees Allah as one with him, as Father Allah he needs no middleman, no priest, to intercede . . . He goes straight up to Him and says: 'My father God, Allah!' And then he lays his hands in

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010). 219-227.

Allah's own hand, and all is well."<sup>265</sup> Noble Drew Ali combined multiple religious traditions to instill cultural dignity and motivation to achieve economic stability within his Black followers.

In the 1960s, another Black Islamic group, The Five Percenters, merged concepts from the Nation of Islam with the leader Clarence 13X's teachings. Clarence 13X taught that each Black man is a God in his own right, borrowing from The Nation of Islam's student enrollment lesson that claimed, "... The Original Man is the Asiatic Black Man, the Maker, the Owner, the Cream of the Planet Earth, the Father of Civilization, and God of the Universe."<sup>266</sup> Going against the teachings of the Nation of Islam, Clarence 13X argued that there is no set of orthodox rules that a man must follow to actualize his Godliness; each God has his own path and, therefore, life guidelines. Clarence 13X took the lesson literally and taught young Black men in New York that they need to realize their innate divinity to live to their potential. A gospel of inherent divinity was transformative for young Black men on the streets of Harlem who endured police and gang violence and lack of access to adequate food, housing, and education. As a result, many young Black men turned their attention away from confronting white harassment to preaching the divine power of Blackness to their community.<sup>267</sup>

Black religious movements centered on women's leadership also adopted spiritual practices to address social justice concerns. In the 1920s and 1930s, Mother Clara James Hyde played an essential role in the proliferation of Spiritualism, opening thirty-eight Spiritualist churches in Louisiana, Alabama, Texas, Arkansas, Illinois, and New York. Mother Hyde was particularly distinguished for her ability to heal church members through energy work. Hundreds

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>266</sup> Grey, Biko M. "Show and Prove Five Percenters and the Study of African American Esotericism." In *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*, edited by Steven C Finely, Margarita S Guillory, and Hugh R Page, 171–197. Leiden: Brill, 2015. 173.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 171–181.

of people came to receive her healing services on Sunday, Monday, and Wednesday evenings. Those church members experiencing “trouble” in their lives came up to the pulpit where Mother Hyde rubbed them with oil on the affected area and read the scripture while calling on the ancestors’ support. The client needed to have complete faith in the process for healing to take effect.<sup>268</sup> Anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston describes Mother Hyde’s method in an ethnographic account, writing, “Mother Hyde... burns candles as do the Catholics, sells the spirit oil, but gives a ‘cake’ to be used with the oil. This bit of cake, saturated with spirit oil, is enclosed in a salve box with ‘God be with us’ written on top.”<sup>269</sup> Margarita Guillory analyzes Hurston’s accounts as follows,

On the one hand, the employment of candles denotes Catholicism, while the invocation of God, a spirit being, represented the Spiritualist faith. The presence of cake and a salve box, on the other hand, were objects that were commonly associated with the practice of hoodoo in New Orleans. The spirit oil served a dual function in that it was used as an anointing oil in churches and as an invoking agent in Spiritualist churches and hoodoo rituals.<sup>270</sup>

Guillory concludes that Catholicism, Spiritualism, and Hoodoo were complementary religious systems. Mother Hyde and other Spiritualist leaders moved easily between Christianity and conjure because the purpose of healing rituals was efficacy. Healers used what tools they had available to support their clientele. Guillory emphasizes that healing is a social justice initiative. “When the individual performs the prescribed ritual with a confidence of certainty in the spirit’s power, the individual resists the condition or affliction. Then, the act becomes a form of resistance... With the help of their guiding spirits, the individual was empowered to operate as though they controlled their daily existence.”<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Guillory, Margarita Simon. *Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches: More than Conjurers*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. 79-82.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.



Toya's affiliation with Ifá-Orisa-Vodun and Sam's work with OIDS I speak to the expansion and reimagining of historical notions of Black religious nationalism and theological approaches to politics. Sam and Toya's connections to Black religious nationalist groups places them – and, their Black feminist Africana religious orientation - within a long tradition of religious movements, using blended or multi-religious approaches and aspects creatively to enhance Black livelihood and wellbeing. Their approach, when undertaken by Black witches who are also the descendants of and informed by generations of Black feminists, creates a new theological agenda: one replete with feminine power.

### **A Black Feminist Discourse**

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the witch is a category typically assigned to women, particularly older women, to keep them subservient to patriarchal rule and to demonize their magical practices. Therefore, it is logical that contemporary Black witches would interpret the current movement as being oppositional to patriarchy not merely through a feminist lens but an intersectional Black feminist analysis that accounts for race and gender. Black feminism, alongside her sister analytic frameworks like Womanism, are tools to help Black women understand and better themselves and their worlds. And like the Combahee River Collective professed, when the Black woman is free, everyone is free.<sup>272</sup> In other words, Black feminism is a framework that doesn't just allow us to comprehend the experiences of Black women but the various interlocking systems that affect all people operating under white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.<sup>273</sup> Black witches' Black feminist Africana religious orientation is a theological,

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<sup>272</sup> See the Combahee River Collective Statement in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2017).

<sup>273</sup> bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, 1. (New York London Toronto Sydney: Washington Square Press, 2005).

spiritual iteration of Black feminism because, as a practice of mostly Black women and femmes, it is profoundly concerned with their healing, self-awareness, and economic and social betterment. Like the Black religious nationalism discussed in this chapter, it sacralizes the process of economic and social justice but, in effect, also sacralizes Black women and femmes, something that earlier masculinist movements have only done in word but not in practice.<sup>274</sup>

Respected leader Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde extensively discussed a Black feminist approach to Africana religions, emphasizing that Black women and femmes are sacred and can use their craft to protect themselves and their communities from interlocking forms of oppression.

Iyalosa Osunyemi is initiated to the Yoruba deity Osun, practices Hoodoo, and has influenced practitioners through her YouTube channel on Black witchcraft for over a decade. Similar to Toya and Sam, Iyalosa Osunyemi descends from a religious nationalist lineage through training under the late Baba Medahochi Zannu, a renowned Afrikan nationalist who was initiated into many African traditions, including Palo, Vodun, and Ifá. Like members of OIDS, Baba Medahochi was an advocate for employing African spiritual traditions toward a revolutionary agenda. His teachings inspired the Black religious nationalist group Ifá-Orisa-Vodun and he studied under Oba Osejiman Adefunmi, the founder of Oyotunji Village. His approach to African religions is profoundly political – toward the end of Afrikan people’s “political, cultural and social sovereignty” - and he believes “that religion is the deification of someone’s nationalism and religion is only relevant if it deifies your nationalism.”<sup>275</sup> That Medahochi informed Iyalosa Osunyemi’s religiopolitical thought demonstrates the profound influence of Black religious nationalism on Black witches’ Black feminist Africana religious

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<sup>274</sup> It is common to hear Black women referred to as ‘queens’ or ‘empresses’ among Black religious nationalists while still perpetuating forms of patriarchy that keep women in subservient roles. Due to homophobia and a strict gender binary, non-binary femmes are not likely celebrated or recognized.

<sup>275</sup> <https://www.babamedahochi.com/biography.html>

orientation. Even if Osunyemi's followers are not explicitly aware of Medahochi's teachings, they learn his philosophy through Osunyemi's extensive online presence. As evident in the following passages, however, Black witches like Osunyemi are expanding the revolutionary scope of earlier Black religious nationalist teachings by emphasizing power and protection for Black women and femmes.

I asked Iyalosa Osunyemi why she claims that "all witchcraft is Black," to which she spoke about the sacrality of the Black woman.

What we consider to be witchcraft in the modern world is European witchcraft. Even the term is a Celtic term that means wise woman. When we're thinking of a witch, we often think of the definition of a white woman, generally an elderly white woman. But if you study the craft, the things that we consider to be witchcraft are what came out of Britain before the Romans colonized it. The original people who brought that way of life were the indigenous people of Britain, and those people were brown. And so, the mother that they were worshipping was the Black mother, the great Black mother. We can look at the Venus of Willendorf or other prehistoric mothers that we see carved in every place on earth; all those are Black women.

They all have the Black woman's figure. That's my mother's body. It's my mother's hairstyle. When we think about witchcraft, the mother they praised and worshiped was the Black woman. So, all witchcraft is Black because the matriarchies that they were praising were all Black women. And it makes sense because biologically and scientifically, we were the original mothers, right? We were the original human beings. It makes sense that ancient human beings would say, okay, this is God. Because that was the source. We were the being that was giving birth to humankind. So, first there's that, that all witchcraft is Black.

Second, as a Black woman, living life has always required witchcraft. Magic is the only reality. Let's go to our ancestors in Western Central Africa, where you know most of our ancestors are from. You look at the women there; then you have the mothers, you have the Iyami, the source of life. They are called the architects of existence. And you cannot achieve anything without paying homage to them. There is no Orisha on earth like mother, which they will tell you in Nigeria. You are not accomplishing anything without, mother. Mother is what brings everyone here. In Western Central Africa, we were always understood as the physical vessel of those great mothers and that we are responsible for the magic that keeps existence going. So, we arrive in the West through enslavement, and we never stopped doing that magic. We never let go of that magic. *That magic became our*

*way of life. It is what we consider to be Black culture. And it's what is considered to be part of Black womanhood. Meet no Black person that hasn't seen one of their ancestors. You won't meet a Black person that hasn't had a dream about something that happened, right? It is the norm for us. And so, as Black women, we are the keepers of that. We've always been the keepers of that tradition.*<sup>276</sup>

Iyalosa Osunyemi takes a historical and theological approach to explain an African origin for all witchcraft. Although indigenous Britons had darker skin than their modern predecessors and did indeed descend from Africa, whether or not the Venus of Willendorf or other goddesses worshiped by early Britons were what we might today call 'Black' is beyond the scope of this study.<sup>277</sup> Iyalosa Osunyemi's response, however, reflects the kind of sacralizing of Blackness that characterizes previously discussed Black religious nationalist groups where the Black man is God, Jesus is Black, and all the orisa worshipped by Ifá practitioners are Black. As an alternative to the kind of masculinist sexism in many Black religious nationalist movements, Iyalosa Osunyemi positions sacrality in the Black woman. One attribute of the woman's power that she emphasizes is the ability to give birth which she identifies as a defining characteristic in both European and African precolonial societies. In Iyalosa Osunyemi's view, God is a woman because the womb is where life comes from, and if the original worshiped goddess was Black, then witchcraft is by extension an honoring of Black women.

By naming the Iyami the architects of existence, Iyalosa Osunyemi refers to the divine energy of *aje* in the Yoruba orisa ensemble. According to the Yoruba, *aje* is a power held by all women but more powerful in older women and is thought to be able to create or destroy depending on their wishes. It is often discussed as a bird that lives within, and one must be

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<sup>276</sup> Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde, Interview by author, Zoom, July 30, 2021.

<sup>277</sup> Hannah Devlin and Hannah Devlin Science correspondent, "First Modern Britons Had 'dark to Black' Skin, Cheddar Man DNA Analysis Reveals," *The Guardian*, February 7, 2018, sec. Science, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/feb/07/first-modern-britons-dark-Black-skin-cheddar-man-dna-analysis-reveals>.

careful not to upset the bird, or chaos ensues. Although creation can look like childbirth, within the Yoruba origin stories of the feminine, orisa also create the earth through their power of *aje*.<sup>278</sup> In Yoruba cosmology, there are 401 Orisha who are thought to protect and aid human development, including the Egungun/ancestors, one's Ori, or innate orisa of intuition, and *ire* or good fortune. There are also 201 malevolent energies called the Ajogun, of which there are eight categories such as *iku* (death), *arun* (sickness), and *ofo* (loss). The power of *aje* lives somewhere between malevolent and benevolent categories, thus granting them the power of both creation and destruction. Although the Ajogun cause harm and the orisa assist the living, they do not represent sharp distinctions between good and evil, rather, they aim to keep balance in our world, a primary philosophical tenet of the Yoruba belief system.<sup>279</sup> Iyalosa Osunyemi spoke to the power of *aje*, explaining, "By Black witchcraft, I am talking about the craft of the Black wise woman, the Black witch, but I'm also talking about, things that we have to do that may be considered dangerous, to protect ourselves. I'm talking about painful magic. I'm talking about the magic that our grandmothers used to make sure that they didn't shoot us all in the streets."<sup>280</sup> As a force of protection, *aje* is the spiritual power of Black feminism. Religious scholar Montre Aza Missouri argues, "True *aje*... are preoccupied with checking those in power and bringing equality in all facets of social and spiritual life...."<sup>281</sup> It is a feminine power of transformation that cannot be relegated to Christian categories of good and evil but, as Albert Raboteau asserts,

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<sup>278</sup> Lilith Dorsey, *Orishas, Goddesses, and Voodoo Queens: The Divine Feminine in the African Religious Traditions* (Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books, 2020). 33-34.

<sup>279</sup> See Gary Edwards and John Mason, *Black Gods--Òriṣà Studies in the New World*, Rev. 4th ed ([Brooklyn, N.Y: Yorùbá Theological Archministry, 1998); Teresa N. Washington, *The Architects of Existence: Àjé in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature*, Revised edition (Orifín, Ilé Àjé: Oya's Tornado, 2018).

<sup>280</sup> Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde, Interview by author, Zoom, July 30, 2021.

<sup>281</sup> Montre Aza. Missouri, *Black Magic Woman, and Narrative Film: Race, Sex, and Afro-Religiosity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 52.

are instead “categories of security and danger.”<sup>282</sup> One crucial facet of an Africana Black feminist orientation is protecting Black women and femmes from the dangers of patriarchy. Sometimes, that act is not necessarily considered morally or ethically ‘good’ from a white Christian perspective. Iyalosa Osunyemi is fully aware that it is Black feminism that contributes to how she views and shapes Africana religion, particularly in how she understands violence and safety in religious communities.

When I first got into the religion, when I first got into Isese, it was just as horribly misogynistic and predatory and terrible. It was not a safe place for Black women and children. I’m not saying that’s how it is now because it’s getting better. But if we do not blatantly come out and say, this shit is killing us, you hating us like this is killing us, then we’re continuing to create unsafe spaces within our religious traditions. I had to embrace Black feminism to make sure that when I spoke, everyone knew that I was fighting misogyny in our religious communities and that my aim is to uplift Black women in abusive situations.

As a scholar, and general wise woman, Iyalosa Osunyemi’s understanding of violence toward Black women and femmes was influenced by authors such as Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks. Because Iyalosa Osunyemi commands such a broad audience and is regarded as a respected leader, whether novice practitioners have read Black feminist canonical thinkers or not, they are still being informed by these and other Black feminists’ analysis. Iyalosa Osunyemi’s framework, however, morphs into a theological understanding of Black feminism, such as *aje* and Black women’s sacrality. The merging of the two, Black feminism and an Africana framework, produces what is now a quickly spreading orientation.

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<sup>282</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, Updated ed (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 287.

## A Queer Standpoint

As an extension of a Black feminist framework, the emerging Black witch movement and the spaces created from it are Black *and* profoundly queer. Black witches conceptualize a queer framework similar to how they conceive multi-religiosity and Black separatism—as a religiopolitical commitment. They adopt a theological belief system where queer is woven into the fabric of Africana religiosity. There are two significant ways a queer lens appears within a Black feminist Africana religious orientation. First, many Black witches and leaders in Black witch spaces possess queer sexual orientations. Second, because Black witches choose to practice African-heritage religions, select the nomenclature ‘Black witch,’ and integrate a Black feminist analysis into their orientation, they embody a queer (or othered) subjectivity that counters white Western Christian notions of normative identity. Some queer leaders include Sam, aka Juju Bae, Hess Love, Angel (who takes the stage name Hoodoo Hussy), Laurita Marie, and Erin, also known as LaReina. It is not circumstantial that these women and femmes claim multiple identities as queer, witches, *and* practitioners of African-heritage religious traditions because—at least in theology and cosmology—Vodou, Ifá, and Lucumí have long celebrated non-binary, trans, and sexually variant deities such as the gender-bending, rainbow loving, skirt-wearing orisa Oshunmare.<sup>283</sup>

I spoke with Hess Love, a queer, non-binary femme and leader in the Facebook group The Witches Brew: Indigenous Rootwork and Conjure. They are also the co-founder of the Chesapeake Conjure Society in Baltimore, Maryland, which organizes social-justice-oriented

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<sup>283</sup> Randy P. Conner and David Hatfield Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004).

Hoodoo events like ceremonies to elevate ancestors lost through police violence.<sup>284</sup> I asked Hess Love why they think the emerging Black witch and Hoodoo movement is so queer. They offered the following response.

I'm a queer person, and when I think about the history of Hoodoo, I think about how there is no place or space where queer people don't exist. Our ancestors who were enslaved may not have always had the ability to be out, or even if they had the ability, the things they did for pleasure were not always recorded. But we were always there, especially in Hoodoo. In the Blues, for example, we see this intersection of sexuality and religion. Many songs are open about being queer, and many songs are also about Hoodoo. And the religion is very much about how we utilize Hoodoo in a communal sense. *It's about not leaving other people behind.* So, for me, it's a very natural iteration of loving Black people, not leaving each other behind, utilizing what we can to manifest magic, love, money, or anything that you need. Whether you're queer or straight or whatever, *you have access to this power.* There's nothing about Hoodoo rituals that say this can only belong to X, Y, and Z. Whatever restraints we see are things humans have put on stuff, not the divine entities. The medicine, the plants, and the methodologies are not predicated on gender or sexuality. I don't feel like Hoodoo is a place where queer people must fight for a space for ourselves. We just exist within it. *It's just living.*<sup>285</sup>

Hess Love's response posits Blackness and queerness simultaneously through a Hoodoo theology and ethic, noting that a communal sense of Hoodoo refuses to leave anyone behind; it embraces all regardless of gender and sexuality. In Hess Love's analysis, the divine meets the political, reflecting a theory similar to E. Patrick Johnson's notion of a racialized sexuality. Johnson refutes the white supremacy embedded in common queer theory discourse by proposing the examination of racialized sexualities through culture, *and* gender, and class. He maintains that "Quare," as opposed to queer studies, "not only speaks across identities, it articulates

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<sup>284</sup> "Chesapeake Conjure Society," Hoodoo Society, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://hoodoosociety.com/community>.

<sup>285</sup> Hess Love, In discussion with author via Zoom, April 23, 2021.



identities as well. “‘Quare’ offers a way to critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges.”<sup>286</sup>

If quare studies locates the queer person of color through their social and cultural orientations, then Hess Love’s analysis of Hoodoo locates the Black queer subject within the cultural space of Blackness, as well as the religious space of Hoodoo. A Black/queer/Hoodoo locale forms a political standpoint or a Black witch relationship to, and understanding of, gender and sexuality. Johnson continues that quare studies “...foregrounds the ways in which lesbians, bisexuals, gays, and transgender people of color come to sexual and racial knowledge. Moreover, quare studies acknowledges the different ‘standpoints’ found among lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender people of color—differences that are also conditioned by class and gender.”<sup>287</sup>

Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley similarly theorizes Black genders and sexualities through the religion of Vodou.

Like Johnson’s framing of gender and sexuality through a cultural lens featuring group standpoints, Tinsley looks to engagement with the divine in Haitian Vodou to interpret how Black people understand their genders and sexualities. Her book examines “Ezili-songs, stories, spirit possessions, dream interpretations, prayer, flags, paintings, speculative fiction, films, dance poetry, [and] novels” to theorize Black Atlantic genders and sexualities.<sup>288</sup> Tinsley’s subjects understand their gender through attributes such as the performative femininity of Ezili Freda, or rage, and lesbian masculinity in Ezili Dantor. Similar to interpretive categories through which Christian and Muslim Black religious nationalists understand race and racial destiny, religion has

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<sup>286</sup> Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21 (January 1, 2001): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930128119>. 3.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili’s Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). 5.

the capacity to serve as the framework through which one understands the intersectional subjectivity of race, gender, and sexuality. Hess Love and many other Black witches interviewed in my study hold queerness and queer bodies as inseparable from Hoodoo, which they view as a queer Black feminist politic and practice based on a profound love for Blackness and *all* Black people. Their queer political framework also highlights the Black witches' destabilization of the nation-state's investments in heteronormativity, respectability politics surrounding aesthetic presentation, and monotheistic Christian beliefs and values, especially as related to women's subservience to men and supposed biblical damnation of same-sex coupling. In her study of communities of color living in Europe, Fatima El-Tayeb expands current mainstream understandings of queer beyond the term's confinement to variant sexual identities. For El-Tayeb, queer "references processes of constructing normative and nonnormative behaviors and populations."<sup>289</sup> El-Tayeb's definition of queer helps us recognize that by identifying as Black witches and constructing religiopolitical discourse—which celebrates variant genders and sexualities, resists respectability politics, and openly practices religious traditions demonized by the Christian church—Black women and femmes are choosing to live outside of the nation-state's normative criteria and, in doing so, healing a variety of collective traumas inflicted by anti-Blackness.

In New Orleans, I sat down in a Black-owned coffee shop with Kailyn, a young queer Black astrologer and clairvoyant witch with a smooth shaved head and shimmering orange eyeshadow. After recognizing her ability to connect with the ancestral realm and after coming out in a homophobic household, Kailyn left the church where she was raised. I asked Kailyn if

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<sup>289</sup> Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), Xxxv.

she found any overlap between the identities of queer and Black witch, to which she affirmed that the two are very much about living outside socialized norms.

I don't wake up saying, "I want to break the status quo" in the sense of like, "I want to wear this thing and be queer." I wake up and say, "How can I be my most authentic self to spirit?" And "Spirit protect me, protect my authenticity. Provide me with prosperity and opportunities to make it through my day." I'm someone who deals with depression and anxiety, which most people who are open and tapped in have to deal with because of a society that is trying to normalize ... being obedient by just working and sleeping, working and sleeping. When you're tapped in, you realize that's actually not the path, and you start realizing how odd you are to those other people.

For instance, on the first day at one of my restaurant jobs, I peeped somebody who wasn't trustworthy with whom I worked an event with years ago. Turns out he was stealing tips from people at my new job. I told my homie, and he was like, "Kailyn, I always knew something was wrong with him." After that, I committed to intuitively reading people's astrology charts because I should [be able to make a career from, and] get paid for this ability.<sup>290</sup>

For Kailyn, being authentic means the cohabitation of queer and witch in her very being. Kailyn's interlocking identity alienated her from the Christian church (which is typically opposed to queer sexuality) and separated her from normative work environments where she was exposed to intuitive messages outside her control. Experiences at church and at work were overwhelming for Kailyn and led her to find employment in a position where she is financially compensated for her abilities. As an astrologer, she is harnessing her divine power to create alternative economic systems outside of industry-related jobs that usually perpetuate the structure of the nation-state. Magic workers like Kailyn are feeding themselves and their Black families through an alternative economic network predicated on the beliefs and investments of the Black witch.

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<sup>290</sup> Kailyn Davillier, In discussion with author. In person- New Orleans., June 25, 2021.

## Conclusion

Religion has historically provided avenues for change (with outcomes such as community centers like the praise house, the Black church, or the Yoruba *Ile*) and internal affirmations of Blackness through a belief in its sacrality. As Black religious nationalists have taught us, the political and the spiritual are inseparable. For many Black religious nationalists, Black separatism was the divine word from God to establish new homes as far as the continent of Africa or as close as South Carolina. However, rearticulations of divine revelations did not always include love or acceptance for all Black people.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Black witches are reclaiming a full Black community, as it is the queers, the feminists, and the othered who are shaping a Black feminist Africana religious orientation. Informed by the Black feminist revolution of the 1980s and 1990s, with the guide of ancestors like bell hooks, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Audre Lorde, Black witches are shaping a new framework for Black religiopolitical thought—a Black feminist Africana religious orientation. As Iyalosa Osunyemi, Sam, Toya, Hess Love, Kailyn, and Daizy note: Black women and femmes are sacred, separate Black spaces are integral to their wellbeing, multi-religiosity is often something called upon by the ancestors, and queer practitioners have always been and will always be here. Black witch discourse not only shapes intercommunal thought but has the capacity to change popular American spiritual narratives, including those pertaining to manifestation<sup>291</sup> and the prosperity gospel, as explored in the next chapter.

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<sup>291</sup> Manifestation is a term popularized in American mainstream spiritual discourse that refers to engagement with one's thoughts or a divine force to materialize one's desired outcomes.

**Chapter Four:  
Manifesting Change:  
Spiritual Co-Creation and Religiopolitical Thought**

In 2006, author Rhonda Byrne released the self-help book *The Secret*. Selling 30 million copies, Byrne had clearly written a best seller that was also translated into 50 languages. That same year director Drew Heriot released the documentary, *The Secret*, which grossed over \$65.6 million in box office sales. Its messaging was uplifting, teaching audiences the art of *manifestation*—as in, the manifestation of one’s material, physical, or socially-bound desires. Byrne and Heriot purported that if one thinks good thoughts, imagines the best scenario and maintains a positive disposition, one’s thoughts will become a reality. *The Secret* was one of many books in a lineage of prosperity gospel, New Thought, and New Age rhetorics, which all similarly claim that an external force, such as a Christian God, The Universe, or even one’s thoughts, shapes one’s physical and social reality, including their access to financial resources, career success, health, and romantic partnerships. Manifestation discourse, however, is often entangled with toxic social ideologies. The prosperity gospel and New Thought, for example, often foster capitalist individualism, a characteristic of American colonial and imperial expansion, disregarding and significantly impairing communal and social power and relationships while prioritizing private wealth and individual gain above all else.<sup>292</sup>

This chapter examines how Black witches counter harmful ideologies embedded in manifestation discourse. I argue that by merging an Africana religious orientation with a Black

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<sup>292</sup> Bryan S. Turner, “Individualism, Capitalism and the Dominant Culture: A Note on the Debate,” *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 1988): 47–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/144078338802400103>.

feminist critique, Black witches construct a notion of spiritual-co-creation that critiques popular cultural and spiritual approaches to manifestation. Spiritual co-creation is indeed an interpretation of material manifestation discourse that challenges prosperity gospel, and aspirational New Age thought, which are frequently entangled with exploitative capitalism or individualism. It also challenges the false promise that one can shift all economic or social circumstances with only a positive mindset. Instead, Black witch spiritual co-creation is inseparable from a contemporary Black feminist anti-capitalist critique invested in an equal distribution of resources while also remaining rooted in a legacy of African-descended people using the available spiritual tools—such as herbs employed in magical remedies—to survive, thrive, and heal from oppressive conditions. Based on a Black feminist and Africana religious orientation, four core components shape spiritual co-creation: an emphasis on healing, a critique of capitalism, a commitment to mutual aid, and a sense of deservedness. Spiritual co-creation is neither a religion nor a ritualistic tool (like tarot) but a set of beliefs that shape practitioners' engagement with their spiritual practice and subsequently their communities. In this co-creation process, combining a spiritual petition with tangible strategic actions is essential for Black witches to develop an internalized faith that inspires the belief that their spiritual practice can literally provide (or manifest) the resources necessary to meet their material, emotional, and social needs. As a result, spiritual co-creation transforms internalized notions of inferiority (derived from repeated denial of basic needs such as housing, financial security, or family and marriage stability) into long-term self-belief and worth.

### **The Prosperity Gospel and Capitalist Individualism**

The prosperity gospel emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century after Americans distanced themselves from the abstaining piety of an early Puritan Protestant Christian theology and instead took an interest in metaphysical approaches to spirituality. Later examples of prosperity gospel pedagogues include right-wing preachers such as Kenneth Copeland, Joyce Meyer and Paula White, as well as African American religious leaders such as TD Jakes and his mostly Black, tenth largest megachurch, The Potter's House (in Dallas Texas).<sup>293</sup> There is also a plethora of teachers and leaders who appeal more to people who identify as “spiritual but not religious.” New Age leaders include Bob Proctor, Deepak Chopra, Louise Hay, and Wayne Dyer. Practitioners of varying prosperity-based spiritual and religious traditions espouse similar messages of optimism, positive thoughts, commitments to virtuosity, and beliefs that the more one gives, the more blessings God will bestow. Kate Bowler argues that the prosperity gospel is so enmeshed in the American conscious that it lives right alongside a Christian civil religion and fits seamlessly into the American dream.<sup>294</sup>

Still, a growing concern associated with prosperity gospel messaging—whether vaguely spiritual or entirely Christian—is that the messaging disregards structural inequality and systemic forms of oppression. In *The Secret*, for example, Heriot and Bryne fail to address how interpersonal, institutional, and internalized forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism impede access to an abundant life for people of marginalized identities. When prosperity gospel and New Age thought leaders purport that thoughts or godly worship are the only factors influencing one's circumstances, audiences can blame themselves and their lack of

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<sup>293</sup> See Shayne Lee, “Prosperity Theology: T.D. Jakes and the Gospel of the Almighty Dollar,” *CrossCurrents* 57, no. 2 (2007): 227–236.

<sup>294</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

religious/spiritual commitment for unfulfilled desires instead of considering external, systemic impositions. Many versions of the prosperity gospel propose that the path toward upward mobility actually lies *within* the individual, or within their ability to – through spiritual and/or religious practice and commitments – transcend their circumstance, further obscuring the need for social and government support like Medicaid and Medicare or subsidized public housing and education. Additionally, prosperity gospel adds to American fears of communism and socialism by bolstering an individualism historically espoused in nationalist rhetoric during moments like the Vietnam and Cold War. Church leaders isolate and harm low-income congregations when they insist members can only cultivate religious belonging by demonstrating faith-based commitment and consistent financial contributions to churches that deplete their meager incomes. Prosperity gospel churches are most often led by preachers living much more lavish lifestyles than their congregations. The disparity between preachers and congregations is obfuscated by the embraced belief that the more congregants give, the more God will bless them, and the more visible blessings they have, the more proof that they are chosen and approved by God for living a virtuous life.

“Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings,” chided Pastor Walton of Victorious Faith Center. In sharing Malachi 3:8, Walton aimed to imply that he was being robbed by his congregation who was not giving enough in the form of tithes and offerings and would thus experience a curse on their material world as a result.<sup>295</sup> Across congregations, through its *spiritual focus* on the *material world*, prosperity gospel has the potential to encourage a perspective where *capitalist hyper-consumerism is divine*. Within a prosperity gospel rhetorical context, the preacher’s luxury cars, vacation homes, and

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 235-236.



diamond-studded jewelry are seen as the result of a virtuous life that congregations can emulate through hard work and religious devotion. More communal forms of prosperity and care become devalued in place of individualist capitalism, which sets aside the needs of the group in order to contribute to the opulent personal gain of one leader.<sup>296</sup>

Because prosperity gospel messaging saturates America's mainstream media, it is unsurprising that it has also informed African-heritage religious practitioners' beliefs about divine intervention. The rhetoric typically seeps into Black witch discourse by way of two avenues. First, some Black witches grew up in Black churches like TD Jakes's The Potter's House, where prosperity gospel messaging has remained a prominent discourse since its founding in 1996.<sup>297</sup> Even after leaving Black churches for African-heritage religions some Black witches—intentionally or unintentionally—internalize most of the learned ideology. Alternatively, Black witches (including this author) learned prosperity gospel thinking through New Age popular media such as the book *Creative Visualization* by Shakti Gawain which instructs readers to visualize one's desired result. Still, it is important to note that internalization is not the only way that Black witches are impacted by prosperity gospel rhetoric. Black witch communities are impacted by prosperity gospel messaging when clients exhibit a sense of entitlement when engaging Black witches as spiritual service providers.

As a new wave of interest in Africana religious traditions expands, Black Americans are increasingly seeking African-heritage spiritual services from expert practitioners. However, New Age and religious prosperity gospel teachings promoting capitalist 'get-rich-quick' frameworks are so ingrained in the American consciousness that novice seekers frequently exhibit

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> See Shayne Lee, "Prosperity Theology: T.D. Jakes and the Gospel of the Almighty Dollar," *CrossCurrents* 57, no. 2 (2007): 227–236.

characteristics of toxic manifestation discourse. For instance, clients seeking spiritual services demand that expert Black witches produce supernatural results with unreasonable expectations and entitlement. For example, Hess Love (co-founder of the Chesapeake Conjure Society) spoke with me about how harmful manifestation discourse has affected Hoodoo and Black witch communities.

I think right now, the biggest threat is how we've assimilated. Millennial and gen Z folks are the most assimilated generations because of racial integration, and so there are ways that we have absorbed whiteness. Even if there is still de-facto segregation, we're able to receive so many more messages through the Internet that can be fundamentally white and violent or anti-Black.

Many people underestimate how insidious whiteness is and how it can live in your spirit in certain ways, such as through the microwave mentality where everybody wants something quick. It's a form of entitlement and hyper-consumerism. Some people think you must give them something, and they go about getting it in ways that can be very violent. Maybe they do have a right to it, but they don't understand that this person can't offer it. So, they manipulate the situation or try to force it instead of looking around.

I am also thinking of people making a business out of Hoodoo. We're starting to learn that spiritual occupations deserve to be compensated and have a reciprocal relationship [with clients]. In so many African and African diasporic traditions, the marketplace is an entity of thought where an equal exchange is valued. Exchange is the natural part of our societies and our spiritual structure.

As opposed to other diasporic faiths, Hoodoo is often the trinket you sell out front. It's becoming reduced to merely the mojo bag or candle you sell to make money. But other philosophies are important to Hoodoo that are not reflected. It's like, "I'm going to devalue this specific thing because I want to make money, and I see the entertainment and aesthetic value in it." This is not uncommon for Black folks in the U.S. It happens to so many parts of our culture, food, and our music. It's a way that whiteness lives inside of us.<sup>298</sup>

According to Hess Love, clients' internalized whiteness and capitalist preoccupations shape interactions with spiritual service providers - a considerable problem within Black witch networks. Many of my respondents discussed client's reluctance to pay for spell work, calling

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<sup>298</sup> Hess Love, in discussion with author, April 23, 2021.

late at night when in crisis for divination requests, or after applying minimal effort in the material realm, blaming the witch when their desire fails to actualize. Entitled engagement is especially targeted at Hoodoo experts and non-religious spiritual witches because of a lack of understanding, appreciation, and institutionalization of their tradition and practices. Although still marginalized, African traditional religions enjoy at least the category of religion, formalized spaces of worship, and hierarchal structures of leadership. That Ifá, for example, comes from continental Africa, with established lineages and diasporic counterparts that have been established for hundreds of years—for example, Lucumí in Cuba— affords the tradition greater respect.

Hoodoo, on the other hand, is diffuse, non-hierarchal, and often exploited for financial gain. Because it is a tradition that was intentionally created to meet the needs of Black people surviving chattel slavery and later Jim Crow segregation (as discussed in Chapter One), there are countless rituals aimed at ensuring financial prosperity, safety, security in romantic relationships, and health. It has also been essential that ritual protocol and material supplies be readily accessible and known to practitioners. And accessibility is precisely what puts Hoodoo at risk for exploitive practices that separate it from its philosophical beliefs and cosmological orientations effectively (as Hess Love notes), reducing the tradition to mere ‘trinkets’ that can be sold only to meet a desired result. Moreover, because most Hoodoo spiritual service providers are women and femmes, their work – like other mostly femme and domestic labor such as childcare or housework – is undervalued in a patriarchal and capitalist society.<sup>299</sup>

Within manifestation discourse, prosperity gospel rhetoric appears much more insidiously through what, in the 1980s, John Welwood termed “spiritual bypassing.” Welwood defines

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<sup>299</sup> Based on ethnographic research.

spiritual bypassing as the tendency to “use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks.”<sup>300</sup> He originally conceived the concept based on his involvement in American Buddhist communities where practitioners were refusing to examine unresolved emotional issues. The term has evolved to include unrealistic idealism—a commitment to always remaining positive—and a belief that there are divine reasons for misfortune.<sup>301</sup> In the following excerpt of an interview with Mary Byrd, we see elements of ‘spiritual bypassing.’ Mary is a practitioner of Egyptian witchcraft, which is more prevalent among white witches who are often culturally adjacent to New Age rhetoric. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, whites interested in the occult have been fascinated with Egyptian beliefs and practices that they deemed exotic and otherworldly. Because of white appropriation of Egyptian ‘witchcraft,’ the practice has become susceptible to Western beliefs, such as John Welwood’s observed American phenomenon of spiritual bypassing.<sup>302</sup> For instance, when I inquired about spiritual co-creation, Mary Byrd echoed some of messaging evident in both white witch communities and New Age thought.

There are four tenants of witchcraft: to know, to will, to dare, to keep silent.<sup>303</sup>

- 1) You must know yourself and know that whatever you desire will come true. You have to believe it.
- 2) You must will it into existence or put work behind it.
- 3) You dare to do a working behind it, such as writing down a petition for \$5,000 and burning the paper.

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<sup>300</sup> John Wellwood, *Human Nature, Buddha Nature: On Spiritual Bypassing, Relationship, and the Dharma*, accessed March 2, 2022, [https://www.johnwelwood.com/articles/TRIC\\_interview\\_uncut.pdf](https://www.johnwelwood.com/articles/TRIC_interview_uncut.pdf).

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>302</sup> See Helen S. Farley, “Out of Africa: Tarot’s Fascination with Egypt.” *Literature & Aesthetics* 21, no. 1 (June 2011). Accessed April 15, 2018.

<sup>303</sup> A concept of ‘knowing willing and daring’ is popular in Wiccan communities and was popularized by the book *Luciferian Order*. See Lucian Black, *Luciferian Order: To Know, Dare, Will and Keep Silent* (Independently published, n.d.).

- 4) And then you keep silent. You let it go and don't tell anybody about it because you want your magic to work. You don't want other people going, "that's not going to work," because then they can start to poke holes in your confidence.

For example, if you are trying to co-create a new car, your will is to have the money to pay for a car. Maybe you need to get a job to make the money to get the car that you want. You have to do those mundane things to work towards that goal, but the universe will conspire to help you out. Like maybe you get an unexpected check for something that you forgot all about. Your daring is to actually ask for the car from the spirit realm. And the daring is also to do any herbs, oils, or spells around getting it. Once you do that work, you say, "so mote it be" and let it go. You let the universe then conspire to bring that to you. *It's the mundane and then the magic.*

We need to see ourselves as co-creators with the universe. The universe is basically waiting on us. *People say, "well, why is this happening to me?" But you need to see the opportunity, the lesson in it. Not necessarily to pity yourself for it.* It's waiting around to see what you want to do, and you're like, "why did this happen?" and the universe is like, "I don't know, why did it happen? What did you do? Did you do something stupid? What happened?" This thinking breaks us out of that box, and it lets us know that each of us is divine. We are all gods and goddesses. *Our thoughts become things.* So, the more we teach that, there's no limit to what we can do as witches.<sup>304</sup>

Although Mary Byrd affirms self-determination, she also encourages practitioners to see the lessons in misfortune and emphasizes the need to avoid self-pity. When contextualized by spiritual bypassing, Mary's statements can be read as disregarding and sidestepping crucial feelings of grief and lament necessary for healing. Mary also places responsibility on the individual for an inability to manifest one's desires when she mentions the universe asking, "... you're like, why did this happen?" and the universe is like, "I don't know, why did it happen? What did you do? Did you do something stupid? ...". And through the framing of "our thoughts become things," she echoes undercurrents of New Thought messaging. New Thought philosophy emerged in the late 19th century among contributors such as Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, who

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<sup>304</sup> Mary Byrd, In discussion with author, April 16, 2021.

invented theories of “mind cure,” Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, and the New Thought theologian Emma Curtis Hopkins. Each contributor emphasized that one’s thoughts, coupled with prayer and meditation, could transform one’s physical and emotional health as well as social and financial circumstances.<sup>305</sup> New Thought, a prominent philosophy in the New Age book, *The Secret*, has significantly influenced the spiritual discourse of millions of spiritual seekers in the United States, including Mary Byrd, through its widespread presence in popular media.

As evident in Mary Byrd’s response, it is easy to locate traces of toxic prosperity gospel rhetoric within Black witch thought. The difficulty lies in parsing it out from more holistic messaging such as co-creation which encourages Black women and femmes to both take action in their earthly lives *and* petition for support. In the religions of West and West-Central Africa, particular orientations shape how practitioners understand divine intervention, such as beliefs in ancestor support and animated efficacious objects that produce desired results. Most Black witches I interviewed interpreted spiritual co-creation through this Africana framework.

### **Africana Religious Co-Creation**

When Black witches enter African-heritage religions, they also adopt African-originated beliefs and practices pertaining to divine intervention. Like other shared religious orientations, as noted within the African Religious Complex, such as a belief in ancestor veneration or reincarnation, an Africana approach to divine intervention shares similar West and West-Central African characteristics.<sup>306</sup> Therefore, as Black witches adopt disparate African religions—

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<sup>305</sup> See John S. Haller, *The History of New Thought: From Mind Cure to Positive Thinking and the Prosperity Gospel*, Swedenborg Studies 21 (West Chester, Pa: Swedenborg Foundation Press, 2012).

<sup>306</sup> The African Religious Complex is discussed at length in Chapter One.

whether to the extent of initiation or merely through superficial familiarity— they still assume a similar orientation, regardless of religion of choice. Two prominent regions affecting Black witches' understanding of divine intervention are the pre-colonial kingdom of the Kongo, which heavily influenced Hoodoo's development, and Nigeria, which is the birthplace of Yoruba orisa traditions, which Black witches mostly adopted through Black religious nationalism.

Many of the enslaved Africans arriving in the Americas came from what was previously the pre-colonial kingdom of the Kongo and brought with them their religious traditions. In the South Carolina Low Country alone—a region rich in Hoodoo—between 1700 and 1740, sixty-five percent of imported Africans of known origin were from the Kongo-Angola area. This number remained at around fifty percent until the prohibition of the importation of enslaved Africans in 1808.<sup>307</sup> Despite influences from Africans of other regions, what emerged in the Americas was a Hoodoo tradition that became anchored in cosmological orientations from the Kongo and ambient West-Central African cultures.

In the pre-colonial kingdom of the Kongo—or what is now the Republic of the Congo, northern Angola, and the western portion of the Democratic Republic of Congo—divine intervention could be explained best through the Kongo cosmogram or *Dikenga*. The Kongo cosmogram represents the interconnection between the worlds of the living and the dead while also serving as a symbol for a Kongo cultural worldview. It reflects the Kongo people's beliefs in the presence of their ancestors, the importance of maintaining balance and harmony, and the relationship between the human and divine realms. As depicted in Figure 1, the Kongo cosmogram is represented by a cross with four distinct points and expresses rotation in a counterclockwise motion. The space above the horizontal line, the Kalunga line, represents the

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<sup>307</sup> Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 33.

world of the living, and the space below encompasses the world of the dead. Each point signifies a period in a person's life and death cycle. *Kala* is the term used for birth, and as one grows, one reaches *tukula* or maturity, and then as one grows into old age, one reaches *luvemba* or death. After passing through the three stages of life, one descends through similar stages in the spiritual realm. There one achieves a form of maturity, *musoni*, before reincarnating in the world of the living.<sup>308</sup>

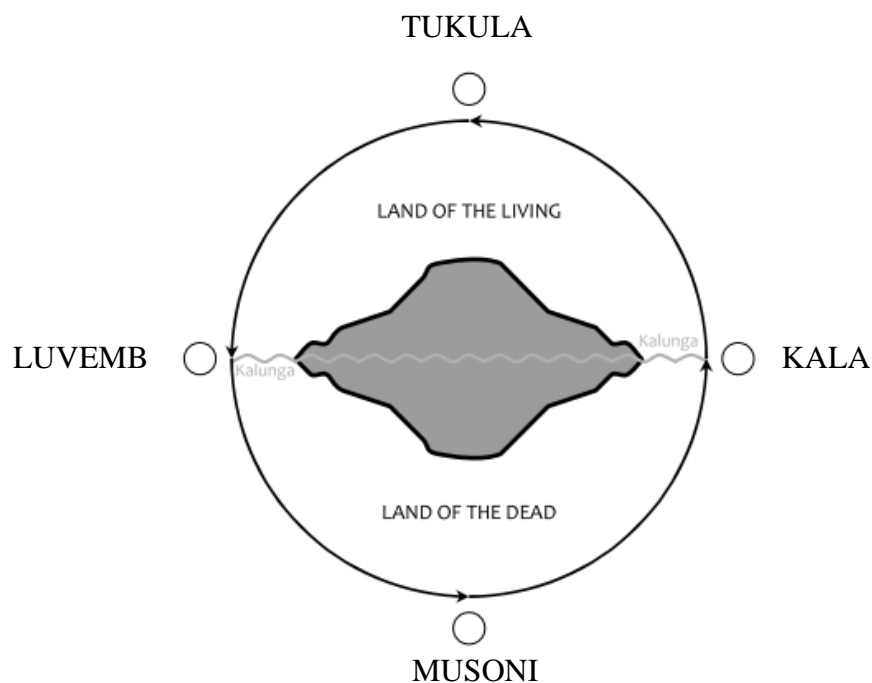


Figure 2: Kongo Cosmogram  
Adapted from Ras Michael Brown's  
*African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*<sup>309</sup>

Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau claims that according to Kongo belief, "A human being's life is a continuous process of transformation, a going around and around... The human being is *kala-zima-kala*, a living-dying-living-being. A being of continuous motion through four

<sup>308</sup> Fu-Kiau Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki. *Tying the Spiritual Knot: African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo: Principles of Life & Living* (Brooklyn, NY: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2000), 17-43.

<sup>309</sup> Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 2014). 96.



stages of balance between a vertical force and a horizontal force.”<sup>310</sup> The spirit not only repeatedly ‘lives’ and ‘dies’ in the physical realm but also in the realm of the dead. Like how one reaches a state of maturity in the living realm at *tukula*, the spirit also reaches a form of maturity represented by *musoni* in the world of the dead. When a spirit enters the land of the dead, they become a *Simbi*, which is an entity that can assist the living and is often housed in natural elements such as rocks, caves, or fields of grass. The attributed origins for the simbi vary. Some spirits are said to have been ‘born’ in the land of the dead, while others are understood to have once lived on the earthly plane and, through a process of reincarnation, became simbi. Because spirits reincarnate many times in the land of the dead, the simbi are often ancient energies living and dying in the world below.<sup>311</sup> Through a process of veneration, those on the earthly plane co-create with the Simbi to affect daily life. In his detailed study of the simbi in the Kongo and the South Carolina Lowcountry, Ras Michael Brown contends, “In the most fundamental sense of its meaning, the word simbi evokes a conceptualization of the energy or power that supports the existence and development of all life. ...their role in protecting, preserving, and supporting people who honor them, elevated them to the ultimate guardians of the land and people.... ‘The Simbi are found wherever people dwell. Their duty is to assist man.’”<sup>312</sup>

In Kongo, there are also ritual objects that assist the living. The spiritual world, the simbi, and any entities below the Kalunga line help animate and infuse ritual objects with their efficacious power. Practitioners refer to animated objects as *nkisi* (plural *minkisi* or *bakisi*) which

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 113-114.

are comprised of metaphoric and metonymic items to achieve the desired result. Nsemi Isaki defines *nkisi* as,

...the name of the thing we use to help a person when that person is sick and from which we obtain health; the name refers to leaves and medicines combined together... It is...called *nkisi* because there is one to protect the human soul and guard it against illness for whoever is sick and wishes to be healed. Thus, a *nkisi* is also something which hunts down illness and chases it away from the body.<sup>313</sup>

For the people of the Kongo, a *nkisi* represents the cosmogram in miniature. It speaks to the world of the dead by invoking its powers through spiritual invocation and by employing metaphoric and metonymic items.

Robert Farris Thompson describes a *nkisi* that contains rocks and feathers, which symbolize the two upper and lower spheres of the Kongo cosmogram.

Feathers in Kongo connote ceaseless growth as well as plentitude. So, if the earth within the charm affirms the presence of a spirit from the dead – from the underworld - feathers capping the charm suggest a connection with the upper half of the Kongo cosmogram which represents the world of the living and the empyrean habitat of God.<sup>314</sup>

Thompson examines another *nkisi*-inspired charm, or *prenda*, in Cuba that represents the four moments of the sun or the four points in the Kongo cosmogram. Before adding material items to a *prenda*, practitioners insist that “first one draws a cross, in chalk or white ashes, at the bottom of the kettle...” Then the *nganga* proceeds to place symbolic items at the four corners, such as “a piece of sugarcane filled with seawater, sand, and mercury, stopped with wax so that the *nkisi* will always have life, like the flow of quicksilver, so that it will be swift and moving, like the waters of the ocean, so that the spirit of the charm can merge with the sea and travel far away.”<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Quoted in Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 117.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>315</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 122.

Because the *nkisi* can create change in someone's life, it is believed to be alive. The *nkisi* has life; if it had not, how could it heal and help people? But the life of a *nkisi* is different from the life in people. It is such that one can damage its flesh (*koma mbizi*), burn it, break it, or throw it away, but it will not bleed or cry out... *nkisi* has an inextinguishable life coming from a source.<sup>316</sup>

The principle of aliveness is fundamental in the formation of the *nkisi*. According to anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffy, the term *nkisi* is linked "...etymologically to Central African words often translated as 'spirit.' Such a translation captures an important feature of *minkisi*, that they are local habitations and embodiments of personalities from the land of the dead, through which the powers of such spirits are made available to the living." In other words, there is a spiritual entity within the *nkisi* that enables it to support the living.

As noted in Chapter One, the *mojo* or *gris-gris* bags used in Hoodoo derives from *nkisi* traditions in West-Central Africa and other similar traditions in other parts of West Africa.<sup>317</sup> Like the *nkisi*, which is believed to possess a spirit that must be fed and venerated to achieve the desired result, the *mojo* bag requires the same attention. *Mojo* bags also incorporate elements that affect desired results through metaphoric or metonymic significance. The Hoodoo practitioner will gather plants with particular metaphysical properties, such as rose to bring in love or chamomile for luck, 'personal concerns' like hair, nail clippings, or dead skin cells to signal to whom the action is directed, and occasionally rocks or roots that carry significance. Personal concerns can even include a departed ancestor's human remains meant to connect the charm to the spiritual realm. The combined elements are placed in a containable object such as a

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<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>317</sup> See Chireau, Yvonne Patricia. *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006; Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), Theophus Harold Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Suzanne Blier argues that some practices thought to derive from the Kongo can also be traced to other West African religious cultures, including Dahomean and Ewe traditions. See Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

clay pot, ceramic jar, or, most frequently, cloth. Charms are sometimes bound with rope to signify attachment or entanglement, such as keeping a lover faithful.<sup>318</sup>

In Harry Middleton Hyatt's massive five-volume collection of over 1600 interviews of Blacks in the American Southeast, one finds mojo bag instructions intended for all sorts of concerns such as preventing law enforcement from entering a person's home, gambling luck, or keeping a spouse loyal. For instance, one interviewee in Hyatt's collection shares a prescription to attract a romantic lover. They instruct mixing: one-part Goofer Dust, one part dried rose petals, and one part grounded John the Conqueror root and to "Place the articles in a small bag with a string on each end of the bag to meet around the waist or carry in one's pocket."<sup>319</sup> Another love mojo instructs the practitioner to carry a red conjure bag filled with gentian root chips, two herbs associated with love such as rosebud, queen Elizabeth root, or lavender, the desired lover's name, and a piece of their hair.<sup>320</sup>

Conjure bags were also employed throughout the South by enslaved African Americans to protect them from the violent climate and conditions of chattel slavery. They helped people escape bondage, kept families together, and prevented enslavers from inflicting forms of brutal punishment like whippings. Louis Hughes, a bondman, living on plantations in Mississippi and Tennessee, describes the importance of conjure bags for protection.

It was custom in those days for slaves to carry voo-doo bags. It was handed from generation to generation, and though it was one of the superstitions of a barbarous ancestry, it was still generally tenaciously held by all classes. I carried a little bag which I got from an old slaver who claimed it had the power to prevent anyone who carried it from being whipped. It was made of leather and contained roots,

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<sup>318</sup> Chireau, Yvonne Patricia. *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). 44-52.

<sup>319</sup> Marcelitte L. Failla, "Sorcerer of Knowledge -Spell Book." Marcelitte Failla. Accessed March 31, 2021. <https://www.marcelittethird.com/spell-book>.

<sup>320</sup> Catherine Yronwode, *Hoodoo Herb and Root Magic: A Materia Magica of African American Conjure* (Forestville, CA: Lucky Mojo Curio, 2002), 102.

nuts, pines, and some other things... Many of the servants were thorough believers in it... and carried these bags all the time.<sup>321</sup>

After slavery's abolition, African Americans migrating North continued to use the mojo bag's power to create positive change in their lives. Blacks were no longer someone's property within the institution of slavery but instead were now forced to navigate systems like Jim Crow segregation and sharecropping in the South and economic and racial discrimination in the North. A primary concern for the newly freed population was creating a dignified livelihood with securities like adequate employment and homes in safe neighborhood. Hoodoo was an enduring resource in achieving those ends.<sup>322</sup>

Anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston's extensive research on Hoodoo in the American South illustrates some of the concerns Black people addressed when invoking powers in the spiritual realm. One of the most frequent spells she came across was for gambling luck. Hurston's research covered the 1930s and 40s, right in the middle of the American Great Depression and World War II, when securing work for African Americans was almost impossible, or when possible, yielded meager wages. People turned to gambling as an internal structure of resource distribution within Black communities.<sup>323</sup> Due to his financial need, one of Hurston's respondents expressed a desire for gambling luck in a prayer request.

*Supplicant:* Great Goddess of Chance, I would ask your favor. ...when I set me down among the selectmen and play with them the game of cards, you do not put

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<sup>321</sup> Quoted in Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin: The Old African American Hoodoo System* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 66.

<sup>322</sup> Many respondents in Harry Middleton Hyatt's collection claim Hoodoo was effective in helping them acquire economic resources. For example, in Chapter One of this dissertation, a man referred to as 'the Prophet' notes how Hoodoo/Witchcraft helped his client receive employment. Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo - Conjuraton - Witchcraft - Rootwork, Beliefs Accepted By Many Negroes and White Persons These Being Orally Recorded Among Blacks and Whites*, vol. 5, 5 vols., Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation (New York, N.Y.) (Washington, DC: Hannibal, Mo., 1970). 4679.

<sup>323</sup> Ivan Light, "Numbers Gambling Among Blacks: A Financial Institution." *American Sociological Review* 42, no. 6 (1977): 892. doi:10.2307/2094575.

into my hand the card which will undo my opponents. Tell me, O great Goddess of Chance, what can I do to appease your anger and win your approving smile?

*The God:* My son, you have asked a great favor of me, but you have not burned any incense at my altar and have not made any offering to my spirit. For I look only on those who are my steadfast worshippers. For those who come for a day, I know them not, neither do I smile on them. But for those who worship, I smile on them; for those of good spirit, I love them.

So, if you wish to carry my favor, you will put into a small bag made of the skin of chamois the following holy articles: the Grains of Paradise, the powder of the root called John the Conqueror, the powder of the Magnetic Stone, the Eye of the Eagle, the tooth of a shark. These you will close together tightly so that they cannot break out, and on the day you care to win, you will put on this bag the extract Hasnohannal and keep it in your left-hand pocket and let no one touch it except the money you will wager on the games so that it will multiply and grow.<sup>324</sup>

‘The God’ - or possibly the root-worker - instructs the supplicant to assemble a mojo bag to bring luck in gambling.<sup>325</sup> The ingredients include: Grain of Paradise, a common Hoodoo plant for luck and gambling, High John the Conqueror, which is a root that—according to African American folklore—encompasses High John’s power—High John being an African prince sold into American slavery who resisted bondage and vowed to protect African descendants—and Magnetic Sand, which is used alongside the Lodestone to attract the desired result. Practitioners would then combine the items with the eye of the eagle and a shark’s tooth (which could be literal or metaphorical versions). When placed in the goat or antelope chamois’ skin, it will bring the client luck, as each element has metaphoric and metonymic significance symbolizing power, luck, attraction, protection, and strength.

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<sup>324</sup> Zora Hurston, “Hoodoo in America.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 44, no. 174 (1931): 317. doi:10.2307/535394, 328-329.

<sup>325</sup> It is unclear who ‘God’ is in this conversation. The person responding to the supplicant instructing them on how to compile a mojo bag is most likely the rootworker the client went to see, but also named is the ‘Great Goddess of Chance’ who was initially petitioned. Mojo bags possess life energy after being invoked by a spiritual leader and must be fed and appeased. The Goddess of Chance could be a spiritual force within the mojo bag, could refer to the Christian God, as many Hoodoo practitioners were also Christian, or the supplicant could be speaking to the ancestors who were frequently petitioned with requests.

The previously quoted passage also illustrates a critical theological principle in Hoodoo—reciprocity. Manifesting desirable results is not possible without consistent reverence for the divine realm. Divine veneration takes different forms, including food offerings, prayers, or a simple inclination toward gratitude. In Hurston’s passage, the supplicant petitioned the Great Goddess of Chance but did not give anything in return or show consistent devotion. The God concludes with a stern warning to the supplicant to continue faith after the favor is complete. The God asserts, “For the day you cease to worship me will be your loss. And the day you cease to love me will be your doom, for all things I have given I will take away. I am a true mistress and shower my favors on them, and for those who love me for a while and forsake me, I am a hard mistress and cause them deep sorrow and dissolution.”<sup>326</sup> In Hoodoo, practitioners must remain humble, loyal, and give offerings to spiritual entities such as the ancestors or the mojo bag. An Africana religious principle of reciprocity is an important tenet that shapes how Black witches co-create with the spiritual realm, especially how they engage with their ancestors.

In Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn, Angel, who goes by the stage name Hoodoo Hussy in her burlesque work, sat with me in a community garden she helps cultivate to discuss the power in Hoodoo. I asked Angel how working with the spiritual realm has bettered her life.

Using herbs, oils, and roots in my petitions, prayers, and manifestation work is incredible. I genuinely don’t think I could be in such a good place without those spiritual resources.

Since I’ve gotten more tuned in, so much of what I’ve wanted has manifested right in front of my eyes, such as a career change. I was like, “I really want to do this, but where am I gonna get the resources? And I found the money or more like the money found me. I take a step, and then my ancestors would push me two steps forward. My road has been so open. Sure, you can get things done yourself, but why, when you have all of this natural power. It’s also a reciprocal relationship. Go into the forest, talk to your ancestors, give them fresh water,

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 329.

liquor, tobacco, food, or whatever they're asking for. It's a symbiotic relationship.<sup>327</sup>

Angel references items used in mojo bags such as petitions, roots, and oils and speaks to the importance of the co-creative process in Hoodoo. She expresses a belief that – through a practice of consistent communing – the ancestors meet the practitioner's tangible action with divine spiritual assistance. While many might empathize or identify with Angel's lack of passion for her previous job, not all would as easily switch careers to focus on building a business centering spirituality, nutrition, and food history. While some might associate the shift with a kind of fearlessness, it is important to note that Angel specifically associates the shift with a consistent petitioning of, co-creation with, and faith in her ancestors and spiritual tools as a Black witch. Like Mary Byrd, Angel describes spiritual co-creation, but instead of Mary's European adjacent witchcraft, Angel does so within a West and West-Central African religious framework.<sup>328</sup> Moreover—similar to Zora Neale Hurston's interviewee, who noted that if one has not “made any offering,” then it is unlikely that blessings will occur—Angel emphasizes reciprocity in Hoodoo. For Angel, it is a reciprocal relationship in which a practitioner must give offerings to one's divine spirit guides as a process of exchange.

Although Angel's theology is anchored in Hoodoo/Kongo spirituality, due to shared religious characteristics across West and West-Central Africa, devotional practices like providing offerings in exchange for divine blessings are also prominent within Ifá/Orisa traditions. Ifá /Orisa practitioners offer plant-based food, the blood or *ase* of an animal, and many hours of time and resources dedicated to orchestrating a ceremony as expressions of gratitude for ancestors' and deities' blessings. For the Yoruba, the ancestors are directly

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<sup>327</sup> Angel HoodooHussy, in discussion with author, May 14, 2021.

<sup>328</sup> Angel's reference to going into the forest to talk to one's ancestors also reflects some of the pre-colonial Kongo devotional practices related to the Simbi, which dwell in the natural world.



interested in the outcome of their descendants' lives because they are invested in the family line continuing in a positive direction. When the dead's descendants are healthy, happy, and living plentiful lives, their state of abundance positively impacts the family line, fostering prosperity in future generations. *Oriki*, or praise poems, venerate ancestral heritage, illustrate the importance of familial lineage, describe family members, and highlight accomplishments. Older women often recite the *oriki* to younger generations to instill family pride and to call upon ancestors to support the living. Yet this tradition, too, encompasses a reciprocal dynamic. It is up to the descendants to make good choices and enact deeds positively representing the ancestral lineage.

Yoruba scholar S. O. Babayemi describes the *egungun* (ancestors) as,

...lineage-based, and the lineage is the grassroots of the Yoruba economic, social and political activities. Thus, a man depends on the lineage land for his economic activity and depends on lineage elders for sponsorship to get a spouse and the lineage support to get a recommendation for any political office. The fact that the lineage is believed to be a communion of the ancestors and their survivors on earth and that the ancestors are the watchdogs of lineage morality make it compulsory for every member of the lineage to promote the good image of the lineage.<sup>329</sup>

Like in kinship dynamics, children rely on parents for support and resources, but it is vital that to remain in good favor, one offers respect and reverence to their family in return.<sup>330</sup>

Because family lineage is so essential, the Yoruba honor their ancestors through a yearly masquerade between May and July that can last up to a month. During the festival, *egungun* priests trained in funerary rites and ancestral communication adorn themselves in elaborate cloth designed to connect to the spirit realm. Festival costumes consist of two layers. The first layer covers the priest in a white and indigo material that closely resembles the cloth used to wrap the dead. The white and indigo cloth covers the entire priest's body, including a net over his eyes so

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>330</sup> S. O. Babayemi, *Egungun Among the Oyo Yoruba*. (University of Ibadan, 1980).

that his identity is not disclosed.<sup>331</sup> The second layer is much more decorative and elaborate, representing family lineage and prestige. It consists of strips of brightly colored fabric embellished with embroidery and small mirrors to catch glimpses of the spirit realm. The ancestors then mount the priests as they dance in a spinning motion.<sup>332</sup> On the first day, sacrifices such as rams, bean pudding, roosters, and snails are prepared. On the much anticipated second day, the *egungun* parade throughout the town, arriving at different villages to receive offerings and grant blessings. Their blessings include good health, children, material success, and they also act to stop malicious intent from any community members.<sup>333</sup>

However, among the Yoruba, it is not only the ancestors that bestow blessings. An entire community of deities called the *orisa* are relied upon for daily needs such as love, fertility, a good harvest, victory in war, and other forms of material success, protection, and healing. Each *orisa* from their particular area of governance offers gifts to their devotees. Ogun, the *orisa* of war and iron, ensures safe passage on dangerous roads, grants victory over one's enemies, and helps prevent appliances from breaking down as the ruler of technology. Oya, the deity of the wind, the marketplace, and the dead, when petitioned for change, like a tornado, does not make minor incremental adjustments to one's life but uproots the very foundation, shaking all that is familiar, promising lasting transformation for Her devotees. Yemoja is the great mother of fish, the supreme and oldest deity, ruler of rivers for the Yoruba, and queen of the ocean for Her diaspora. She abounds abundance in riches and family, assists the birthing process, raises children, and heals the sick.<sup>334</sup> J.D.Y. Peel's study of the missionary-based Christian conversion

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<sup>331</sup> *Egungun* priests are most often men.

<sup>332</sup> "Egungun." – Works – Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, (Accessed March 31, 2021). <https://collections.carlos.emory.edu/objects/8346/egungun;jsessionid=E888A9D3C75BDEFD2B85F8C3C5B15368>

<sup>333</sup> S. O. Babayemi, *Egungun Among the Oyo Yoruba*. (University of Ibadan, 1980), 29-40.

<sup>334</sup> Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 115-137.

process in early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Yoruba-speaking areas of modern-day Nigeria notes that some orisa devotees believed the orisa provided in ways the newly introduced Christian god was unable. Peel conveys an account of a Christian missionary who tries to persuade a Yoruba woman to believe in Jesus. He writes, “After he [the missionary] has spoken about Jesus as the means to the Living God and happiness in the world to come, the woman replies that it is not [Jesus] that gives children, but only Obatala. She does not care for eternal life but asseverates in a loud voice “*ommo re mo o nfe* (children is what I want), repeating it so heartily as if to make her wish come true.”<sup>335</sup> For the Yoruba, the orisa are intrinsic to wellbeing in all areas of life, including one’s romantic relationships.

For cases of love, fertility and sensuality devotees turn to Osun, freely giving *ebo* (offerings), *oriki* (praise poems), and dances to call on her energy and to bring about a desired result. In Nigeria, an annual nine-day festival is held in Osogbo,<sup>336</sup> honoring the deity and asking for her blessings in the following year. On the opening day ceremony, participants light 16 candles and perform honorary dances to each orisa. A massive feast occurs on the second day, and on the remaining days, sacrifices are made and offered to the deities.<sup>337</sup> The popular story associated with the festival’s origins is that Larooye Gbadewolu, an ancient ruler, sometime in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, arrived at Osun’s home river while he and his subjects were looking for fertile land. Osun complained that they were disturbing her peace. Gbadewolu and his subjects thus decided to move a few miles away and honor Osun through an annual festival in exchange for “her promise to protect them, ward off enemies, heal the sick and bless infertile wombs.”<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 91.

<sup>336</sup> Osogbo is the capital of the Osun State in southwest Nigeria.

<sup>337</sup> Titus A Ogunwale, “Osun Festival.” *African Arts* 4, no. 4 (1971): 61-62. doi:10.2307/3345887, 61.

<sup>338</sup> Bode Omojola, “Oṣogbo: Power, Song and Performance in a Yoruba Festival.” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20, no. 1 (2011): 79-106. doi:10.1080/17411912.2011.549360, 81.

At the 2006 Osun festival in Oshogbo, one participant, Mama Omileye, attests to Osun's abundance. She proclaims,

The main significance of the festival is to thank Osun for her deeds last year: to appeal to her to guide us in our decision. The path of the river goddess is that of joy. There is no problem that Osun cannot solve, as willed by God. Osun heals all ailments, including barrenness. We are the children of Osun. When we die, we will all go back to Osun. The children that Osun gives us are good ones. My God never gives us bad children. When we thank her, she blesses us anew.<sup>339</sup>

Mama Omileye emphasizes that Osun, who governs fertility, will provide the community with children. When the community thanks Osun by orchestrating the festival and providing offerings, she continues to bless them.

Black witches who are practitioners of Ifá /Orisa traditions tend to understand spiritual co-creation through the lens of the orisa's divine intervention. For instance, when I asked burlesque performer and Ifá initiate Laurita about feminine energy, sexuality, and the ability to manifest desired results, she discussed Osun and her personal journey in co-creation.

When I think about feminine power and manifestation, I think of Osun and the power that lies in between those stars and being able to manifest things through sex. The yoni is so powerful, from being able to carry a child or even an ability to create artistically or financially. The connection that we have as women and those of us with feminine energy is powerful, which explains why the patriarchy is afraid of it.<sup>340</sup>

Laurita understands spiritual co-creation through Osun because she is a deity who bestows blessings and because her feminine energy is tied to creation. Like Iyalosa Osunyemi, mentioned in Chapter Three, *aje* is the power of both creation and destruction, and Osun, according to Yoruba origin stories, is a founding deity of this power. Laurita also mentions sex magic which might be a newer concept— possibly picked up by Laurita from various spiritual practitioners,

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<sup>339</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>340</sup> Laurita Marie, in discussion with author, June 23, 2021.

such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century occultist Paschal Beverly Randolph.<sup>341</sup> However, because she is not only a devotee but rather a leading member of the Ifá/Orisa community in New Orleans, Laurita privileges an Africana religious orientation in her views on spiritual co-creation.

An Africana religious orientation adds nuance to some of the prosperity gospel rhetoric prominent in the West. Instead of a preacher or New Age self-help leader requesting money, Black witches engage in a relationship with Black deities and ancestors who are directly interested in the practitioner's desired outcomes. Through divine engagement, Black witches cultivate and embody Africana religious principles of reciprocity, life in spiritually imbued objects, and the power of feminine energy. In this way, Black witches' Africana religious approach to spiritual co-creation circumvents some of the devaluing messages ascribed to Black women and femmes, helping them heal internalized notions of unworthiness.

### **Healing and Spiritual Co-Creation**

Emotional and psychological healing is often missing in prosperity gospel and New Age rhetoric. In popular books like Joel Austin's, *I Declare! 31 Promises to Speak Over Your Life* and Shakti Gawain's *Creative Visualization*, prosperity gospel and New Age authors only provide a superficial treatment of internal wellbeing. Instead of addressing structural or ancestral/transgenerational issues—such as alcoholism caused by excessive poverty and racism affecting future generations' mental health—their analyses merely rest on ensuring that their audiences are thinking positive thoughts. In *I Declare!*, for example, Austin asks his readers to affirm to themselves, “I have a sound mind filled with good thoughts, not thoughts of defeat...

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<sup>341</sup> Paschal Beverly Randolph, *Eulis!: The History of Love : The Wondrous Magic, Chemistry, Rules, Laws, Modes, Moods and Rationale; Being the Third Revelation of Soul and Sex. Also, Reply to “Why Is Man Immortal?” The Solution of the Darwin Problem. An Entirely New Theory* (S.l.: Kessinger Publishing, 2004).

My thoughts are guided by God's Word, every day. No obstacle can defeat me because my mind is programmed for victory."<sup>342</sup> In my field research Black witches similarly echoed the need for thinking positively. However, they also emphasized that it is nearly impossible to believe in future possibility without healing generations of past ancestral trauma. Their beliefs and critical reflections evidence that they recognize that issues such as depression, substance abuse, anxiety, or repeated toxic relationships result from generations of structural inequality and racially motivated violence. To heal consequent mental health effects, one must elevate ancestors targeted by such violence.

At the first annual Detroit Hoodoo Festival, held in Detroit, Michigan, I spent time with spiritual life coach and anti-violence facilitator Alexis Douglass. Alexis uses astrology and ancestor mediumship as a spiritual service provider to help clients heal generational trauma.

I am a personal transformation coach, and I help guide people through reprogramming their trauma so they can manifest the life they want. I work with astrology and the moon because she [the moon] governs our emotional waters, and I help clients develop language and understandings of their emotional and mental feelings and physical sensations. And then, we do work to align those so they match because physical sensation stimulates emotional responses and emotional responses stimulate thoughts. It's a loop. Or what we call being triggered. When it's intergenerational trauma, physical sensations are not your own, but when you live with them for so long, it's hard to know that they're not yours. And so, we do the work of separating your awareness from those ancestrally derived responses, and then figure out what to do with it.

For instance, I had, a client who had a deceased mother who did sex work, but not by her choosing, more because it was a colonized island and indigenous women were forced into this position. Because she did sex work on a colonized island, her baby can't connect, she can't soften to her man who loves her and she grew defensive like she had to be an independent woman. And this wasn't coming from her need for survival, but more because her mother had been violated more than one time and had to shut off a certain part of herself because it was unsafe. So, I worked with this client to unravel that, and elevate that ancestor.

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<sup>342</sup> Joel Osteen, *I Declare: 31 Promises to Speak over Your Life* (New York: FaithWords/Hachette Book Group, 2013).

Or if you have a problem with alcohol because an ancestor had problems with alcohol when you elevate your ancestor that had the alcoholism, after that is done you're no longer an alcoholic. You're not always an alcoholic just a person that don't drink. You won't have to fight the compulsive aspect of it anymore.<sup>343</sup>

I shared with Alexis that my grandmother married a man who became addicted to alcohol and it caused serious problems in our family lineage. Alexis told me,

She probably got some shame. If he had rage fits, she probably never felt valued enough or special or desired. So, in those moments, when you're feeling lonely or if somebody says something to you and you think to yourself, "why did that hurt my feelings so bad?" you would pray for her [your grandmother] to know that it's not her. Pray for her to know that that says something about them, not about her. And that she is perfect and beautiful and fine and all those things. By healing her then you only got to deal with your life after that.

When you finally let go of the trauma that is not yours, you get to have a wider range of positive experiences and create a life based on what you believe is possible.<sup>344</sup>

Ancestor elevation repeatedly came up when discussing connections between spiritual co-creation and healing. As Alexis highlights, it is nearly impossible to create the life one desires when ancestral trauma—such as co-dependency, shame, or intimacy issues—blocks actualization, making cycles of relived and recreated trauma.

Healing is also an essential component in Black witches' cultivation of feelings of deservedness. After centuries of being denied access to economic and social resources due to anti-Blackness, some African Americans find it difficult to believe they deserve a life of abundance, joy, and ease. Sam, also known as Juju Bae, addressed this issue directly when I asked her about spiritual co-creation.

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<sup>343</sup> Alexis Douglas, In discussion with author, April 18, 2021.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

The big part of manifestation work is that you really must know that you deserve something to manifest it. If you don't think that you deserve money, a nice house, comfortable clothes, how can you properly do manifestation work to bring that thing in. Particularly for Black people. I think we're behind on what we think we should have because people have told us we don't deserve sh\*t.

I remember I went on a date with this guy from Baltimore, and if you want to know about Black people not having resources, you can just look at Baltimore. I asked him, "if you could have anything that you wanted without money being a concern, what would you have?" And he said, "I don't know. There's no point in even dreaming that because I will never have it."

That was heartbreaking to me. How are we supposed to manifest if we think there's no point 'cause I'll never have it? We can't. That's what manifestation work is for me. It's building the foundation of '*you deserve baby*.' You got to know that first, then let's get to the candles or the spells.<sup>345</sup>

Within white supremacy, frameworks of deserving often encourages white people to believe that they are entitled to access what is not rightfully theirs. Entitlement shaped early settler notions of manifest destiny and the ensuing colonial invasion of Indigenous land across the Americas as well as future generations of imperialism throughout the globe. European conquest depended on the exploitation of Black and brown people to acquire global resources while repeatedly denying people of color access to fundamental human rights such as quality housing, financially well-compensated employment, or quality education.<sup>346</sup> To consistently live in a state of impoverished lack is a trauma that—as somatic trainers have taught us—exists in the subconscious and can materialize as an internalized self-doubt when not addressed.<sup>347</sup> bell hooks observes, "Despite powerful anti-racist struggle in this society, expressed in the sixties' civil rights and black power movements, internalized racism manifested by ongoing self-hate and low self-esteem has

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<sup>345</sup> Sam Juju Bae, In discussion with author, May 10, 2021.

<sup>346</sup> See Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998)., Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 2015).

<sup>347</sup> See Staci Haines, *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2019).



intensified.”<sup>348</sup> Due to internalized racism, it effectively becomes difficult for many Black people to imagine themselves deserving a high quality of life, especially when precarity and resource deprivation characterize their personal or communal day-to-day reality. As Sam highlights, it is often difficult for Black people to believe they deserve access to their everyday needs or desires. hooks concurs: “We are not raised to believe that living well is our birthright. Yet, it is. We have to claim this birthright,” she insists. “Doing so automatically creates a change in perspective that can act as an intervention on the stress in our lives.”<sup>349</sup> Here is where Black witches maintain that healing work takes place. Healing internalized anti-Blackness means repairing the self-worth eroded by centuries of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. It means cultivating an ability to dream and believe “*you deserve baby*,” to not only shift your material and social reality but to imagine a better world.

Iyalosa Osunyemi echoes Sam’s investment in deserving by discussing her theological belief in inheritance. Her framework is grounded in an Orisa/Yoruba religious orientation, emphasizing the Ori (one’s personal guiding orisa) and a faith that Olodumare (God) has predetermined an abundant life.

Before you were born, you laid out a life for yourself. *You don’t have to worry if you deserve it. You already gave it to yourself before you got here.* So, getting it is a matter of remembering that it’s yours. Not thinking, “people who look like me don’t get to have this.” The Odu says no one can bless you without the consent of your Ori. We be blocking ourselves. But when you stop, you realize there’s a life that you knew you were supposed to have.

My mother told me that when I had my first child, “it is only your prayers that will feed and house this child. Don’t let anyone make you think that it’s your husband, your job, or the money that you receive.” She said, “whenever you’re down to your last and don’t know what you’re supposed to do, then pray, and it will come to you. And truly, like magic, it will be there.”

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348 hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*, 20.

349 *Ibid.*, 73

What we owe to the universe is the fulfillment of this destiny. But to do that, our needs must be met. I got to live by the beach. I can't fulfil it nowhere else. But we're scared to say that. And once you say that, the universe is like, "You right. That was our agreement. Here you go, the house by the ocean." But too often, it's us waiting for somebody else's approval when they don't have anything to do with it.<sup>350</sup>

Iyalosa Osunyemi's appeal to Ori and acknowledgement that you "[lay] out a life for yourself before you got here," is central to the belief system of orisa devotees. According to the Yoruba, before one arrives on earth, the Ori meets with Olodumare, the supreme energy responsible for life's creation, and together they agree on the person's life purpose, including career choice and family lineage.<sup>351</sup> Iyalosa Osunyemi interprets an Ifá theological belief to affirm that Black people deserve access to a well-resourced life which has the potential to heal the internalized idea that, as Iyalosa puts it, "people who look like me don't get to have this." While structural inequality might exist, one's Ori and Olodumare have already agreed on a destiny of abundance. To access a predetermined life, one must live per one's purpose through a process of – what many Black witches refer to as – 'tapping in,' or listening to intuitive messages conveyed by spiritual guides such as one's Ori. When coupled with destiny alignment, petitioning the deities or the ancestors for one's desires, spiritual co-creation can become less an act of greed, individualism, or consumerism (like that which is prominent in American prosperity gospel) and more of a method to come closer to one's divine purpose and self-actualization.

Beliefs about alignment and healing are also apparent in Black witch discourse concerning love magic. During exchanges with Yvette Wyatt, owner of the spiritual supply shop, Motown Witch, in Detroit, Michigan, I asked her about spiritual co-creation and her most frequently sold items. She shared,

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<sup>350</sup> Iyalosa Osunyemi Akalatunde, in discussion with author, July 30, 2021.

<sup>351</sup> J. Omosade Awolalu, "Yoruba Sacrificial Practice," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 5, no. 2 (1973): 81–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1594756>. 29-40.

My biggest sellers right now are self-love baths. I made it because all these women come in here for love work. And I don't believe in trying to attract any particular person. Instead, I tell everyone to work on getting yourself together, and you will attract someone for you. Don't go chasing after whoever.

Because sometimes people are fickle. You will do the work for them, and then they don't like the guy anymore and want him to go. And I'm like, "no, you just did that spell to attract him." Or now you've got the guy, and he doesn't want to be there. He doesn't understand why he's there and can't leave you. I just think that's nuts.

Instead of trying to bind someone to you, you should first try loving yourself the right way. Don't put up with disrespectful people, having people treating you any old kind of way. Those people will fall off when you begin that self-love work because you exude this about yourself, and you will instead attract that right person.

Even with my husband now. I was determined to spend my fifties alone. I didn't want another husband. I didn't want to be bothered. I went and got me a big old Bohemian apartment for like 500 bucks a month for me and my grandkids. This is all I wanted to do. But this dude, who is 16 years younger than me, kept chasing me and finally won me over. I suppose I exuded whatever I was exuding because I was in a happy place and attracted a wonderful partner that way.<sup>352</sup>

Yvette was not the only respondent to indicate that loving oneself is the first step in attracting a partner. Many of the witches I spoke with echoed such a belief, especially those like Yvette, that work as spiritual service providers. They discussed numerous clients asking them for love spells or binding rituals to ensure a specific person would express romantic interest. Most respondents adamantly advised against coercive love work because, as Yvette notes, it often has negative repercussions. Some repercussions include an inability for the love interest to exit the relationship, the supplicant experiencing harassment from their desired spouse after being "fickle" and deciding they no longer want the relationship, or lastly, the supplicant becoming bound to a toxic relationship and effectively blocking more suitable potential partners. Instead of

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<sup>352</sup> Yvette Wyatt, In discussion with author, April 16, 2021.

love binding spells directed toward a particular person, most Black witches encouraged clients to begin with spiritual self-love work, such as Yvette's baths. Their rituals also emphasize the co-creative aspect of spiritual intervention that requires healing work on the material plane alongside the spiritual. Clients are thus advised to seek out conventional forms of healing such as therapy or medication and encouraged to improve non-romantic areas of their lives, such as finding better employment, housing, or educational opportunities. Clients are then advised to petition for a romantic partner with particular characteristics versus focusing on a specific person who might not reciprocate interest or be generally a bad fit. According to most Black witches participating in this study, self-love work and spiritual petitions develop the foundation necessary to attract a healthy romantic partner.

However, self-love rhetoric can become problematic when discussing Black women and marriage. Mainstream self-help books such as Steve Harvey's *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man*, and Iyanla Vanzant's *In the Meantime: Finding Yourself and the Love You Want* or popular media quotations such as RuPaul's famous line, "If you can't love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else?"<sup>353</sup> popularized the belief that self-love is necessary before the hunt for marriage or partnership. Like some aspects of Yvette's response to my questions about spiritual co-creation, many contemporary self-help books put the onus solely on Black women to change or 'fix' themselves to become better candidates for marriage. Sexism is the obvious problem with a self-help framing, but even more nuanced is how anti-Blackness and economic disparity impact Black women's likelihood of becoming married. Dianne Stewart argues that the prevailing impediment to Black cis heterosexual women's union with Black men is not their lack of healing or self-awareness but structural economic racism that prohibits Black communities

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<sup>353</sup> "The Most Inspiring RuPaul Quotes In Honor of the Icon's Birthday - E! Online," accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.eonline.com/news/1092988/the-most-inspiring-rupaul-quotes-in-honor-of-the-icon-s-birthday>.

from participating in the institution of marriage. Stewart highlights significant factors such as the history of separating Black families during slavery, the prison industrial complex with its high incarceration rates pertaining to Black men, and the lack of access to well-paying jobs, which can make Black men feel inadequate and ill prepared for marriage and a family. Stewart concludes her volume with an analysis of the popular television show *Being Mary Jane*, which focuses on the Black woman's quest for love and marriage.

In the final scene of *Being Mary Jane*, the main character, a dark-skinned Black woman, is at her wedding, and the voiceover expresses that all you have to do is “allow the love you want in!”<sup>354</sup> Stewart notes that the show's finale promotes a false and misleading message that fails to account for structural inequality and that only very lucky Black women seeking to marry Black men find it by simply letting love come to them. A narrative of “letting love come in” surfaces in Yvette's response to love magic when she shares her own story of not seeking a partner in her 50s and her eventual husband pursuing her. Yvette's lived experiences are entirely valid, but Stewart helps us to nuance the narrative of letting go and not getting in your own way that often appears in broader Black witch spiritual communities' approaches to love magic. A more complex approach to love magic can include political activism, such as efforts to secure mutual aid for Black communities, prison abolition, and intracommunity hiring practices. Action in the material realm can then be employed alongside spells that aid in justice, such as mojo bags for employment, roots to influence a court judge in one's favor, or protection rituals during protests. Practices to find love, such as lighting a pink candle or petitioning one's ancestors, can also be used to help find a romantic partner. Through the combined use of spells for justice and love as well as action in the material realm, African-heritage religious practitioners can support the

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<sup>354</sup> Dianne M. Stewart, *Black Women, Black Love: America's War on African American Marriage* (New York: Seal Press, 2020). 235.

material conditions conducive to all Black women to find love. As Stewart advises, structural critique and, I will add, petitioning for divine intervention does not negate the essential work of self-help. On the contrary, healing mental health, establishing firm boundaries, and, as Yvette puts it, “getting yourself together” are essential to combatting the structural inequality that makes finding partnership for most Black people (regardless of gender or sexuality) difficult. Spiritual co-creation, healing, and justice are all intertwined and interdependent, and LaReina (owner of Queenly Conjure Tea Room in New Orleans) shared with me how they merge.

LaReina led me through Psalm 51, which is employed in Hoodoo for uncrossing rituals. Many Hoodoo practitioners interpret each line of the Psalm as instructions for healing oneself, their community, and spiritually co-creating a collective world. What follows is LaReina’s interpretation.

When we’re doing uncrossing work, we usually pray with candles and Psalm 51. We follow its structure. This first line, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love,” is just honoring and thanking God. You always give thanks first when writing a Hoodoo petition. It then says, “I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.” Here you’re just taking accountability for what you’ve done in the past.

But this is my favorite part of this whole Psalm. “Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. Thou shall make me to know wisdom.” *There he asked to pull out that hidden truth.* So, then you can view it, and you can see that what you’re holding on to is not true. *That’s the thing that’s blocking you from manifesting your desires.* Once you can identify it, you’re able to do the actual work.

For example, in our physical bodies, if we’re having trouble with healing, say we’ve got a cut, and it’s infected, it’s likely because there’s something in there that needs to be pulled out so that the body can heal itself. It’s the same thing on the spiritual plane. Cause anything that’s physical is also of the spiritual. Say we’re having trouble connecting with others or finding that we are having trouble with money or our love life. There’s a truth that we have determined is true. It’s not the truth of our lives, but we’ve deemed it true.

You begin finding out that this idea is not the truth because it’s harming other areas of your life. For example, when clients come to me requesting help in their

romantic relationships, I tell them I want you to do a spiritual cleanse and get a notebook. I want you to start looking at the relationships you saw as a child. I want you to start looking at how your parents were with each other. What does that love look like? And then, you can see your founding beliefs about what love is supposed to be. My parents, for example, split up when I was very young, and I had never seen my biological dad and mom be kind to each other, not once. There was always an argument. And then, in the relationships that they had outside of each other, it was always a new person coming around. So, I learned not to trust your own people. I also learned that people will always leave, so you shouldn't stay connected with them. That influenced the relationships that I built as an adult.

So, if you're having trouble with your love life, go into the past and see what was true and what was not true. Now you can move forward toward the next part of that Psalm. Then the line "purge me with hyssop." After I find that truth, I can now work with hyssop medicine which is one of the oldest herbs we work with for cleansing and removal in Hoodoo.

Then after that medicine and cleansing, you're asking to be poured into and for forgiveness. Now you can move forward into your next step. It's like creating a new heart of God, and you can actually do some work. You can change a habit, such as if you have a history of addictions like alcohol. Or you start going where the money is or start taking positive steps in your relationship by communicating your needs more. *Now you can start doing that cause you know what you're missing.* For instance, you can tell your ancestors I would like to have these elements in my next relationship. And once you've poured back into your cup, manifesting the things you desire, now you can start sharing that cup with others. Because of my ancestors, because of the work, the Orisas, and the Loa, now I can share that love with other folks too.

Then it goes, "For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering" All of these back in the day people just give away riches. If you give a bunch of riches and you're already rich, it's not really a sacrifice. First, you got to find what would benefit your community the best. Becoming humble. Then, you can start the work of making things beautiful because then it's not about you in particular, but it's about you as a whole and how you can be healing for everybody's world.

*After people pour into your cup when you're in need, you can start giving that same energy or resources back to others. In a forest, each tree helps the other to grow. It's healing a whole—an ecosystem. We are an ecosystem too.*<sup>355</sup>

Here, LaReina articulates an individual and communal wellbeing trajectory.

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<sup>355</sup> LaReina, In discussion with author, June 28, 2021.

According to LaReina's interpretation of the Psalm, a first step is to remove what some psychologists might refer to as a core belief, or an untrue narrative, such as Sam's example of her date not believing he deserved access to an abundant life.<sup>356</sup> She then expands on Alexis's discussion of ancestral trauma and notions of subconscious influence by adding that sometimes one's early environment impacts experiences in adulthood— such as LaReina's ideas about what love can and should look like based on her parent's unhealthy behaviors. Once false subconscious narratives are swapped for something more life-affirming, like Iyalosa Osunyemi's belief in divine inheritance, then the co-creative work on the material plane can gain momentum. Small habits like drinking less if suffering from alcoholism or becoming more financially stable can begin, in conjunction with ongoing internal self-work. For LaReina, internal work also means naming one's needs in, say, a relationship or within a career. Once those needs are identified, they can be communicated to the realm of the dead or one's guiding deities for support. As Yvette maintains, supplicants should identify their needs and the qualities they are seeking in a partner versus petitioning for a specific person. Lastly, LaReina underscores that justice, community accountability, and mutual aid are also essential. Once one's cup is filled through the support and love of the living community and spirits of the dead, it is time to give others the same resources because, as she says, "we are an ecosystem."

Black witches' commitment to a wellness trajectory is still a very radical notion within an American rationalist and patriarchal society that is only beginning to properly recognize mental health conditions and their collateral consequences. America is still a country where capitalism consumes, exhaustion, depression, and anxiety get suppressed under addiction, and productivity

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<sup>356</sup> Cognitive behavioral therapists will often identify core beliefs as deeply rooted negative ideas about oneself that alter their perception of their environmental circumstances. See Judith S. Beck, *Cognitive Behavior Therapy: Basics and Beyond*, 2nd ed (New York: Guilford Press, 2011).



is the marker for success and wellbeing.<sup>357</sup> Black witches like LaReina, Yvette, and Osunyemi are developing a community-wide value system that prioritizes health and healing through their extensive platforms, which support Black women and femmes' return inward. They encourage seeking Black witches to ask, "What do *I* need right now?" "How does this job/lover/friend support my highest potential?" or simply, "Am I happy?" For Black women and femmes, these questions are transformative because when the answer is no, "I am not happy," work needs to be done and does occur in the physical and spiritual realms. Black witches use divination tools like the Psalms, tarot, and bones to communicate with their Ori and ancestors to receive the guidance necessary to act. Healing as action is a power independent of and often oppositional to the American nation-state. When Black witches nurture a sense of worthiness, heal generations of ancestral trauma, or break cycles of addiction, they ignite desires for something greater. When the Black witch wants something more for herself and her community she must imagine a better world and employ the necessary spiritual and physical tools to for co-creation.

### **Community Reach**

Although community aid is typical of most Black religious organizations, Black witches approach it through a unique Black feminist Africana religious orientation.<sup>358</sup> Because most of my interviewees identify as Black feminists—having been exposed to Black feminist thought through formal schooling, social media, or quotidian rhetoric—they aim to combat white supremacist entitlement and choose to adopt approaches to spiritual co-creation that account for interlocking systems of oppression. Their Black feminist framework demands a revolutionary

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<sup>357</sup> Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto*, First edition (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2022).

<sup>358</sup> See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent the Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1994).

approach to social change predicated on dismantling oppressive systems of power like capitalism. bell hooks argues in *Feminist Theory* that a “feminist movement to end sexist oppression can be successful only if we are committed to revolution, to the establishment of a new social order.”<sup>359</sup> The Black women writers and activist group, the Combahee River Collective (most active in the late 1980s) wrote in their collective statement saying “We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. ...Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources.”<sup>360</sup> As the Combahee River Collective illuminated how the Black woman experienced multiple forms of oppression in the 1970s and 80s, about a decade later, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins popularized and solidified an analysis of interlocking oppression through the framework of intersectionality, which allowed for an even broader critical scope.<sup>361</sup>

Collins defines intersectionality as “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world in people and in human experiences. ...When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.”<sup>362</sup> Intersectionality is a framework that encourages an understanding of social inequality based on interactions among various categories where “power relations of racism and

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<sup>359</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed, South End Press Classics, v. 5 (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000). 161.

<sup>360</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2017); 15-27.

<sup>361</sup> 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 (1989); Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*, Key Concepts Series (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016).

<sup>362</sup> Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*, Key Concepts Series (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016). 2.

sexism gain meaning in relation to one another. This relational analysis rejects either/or thinking and instead embraces a both/and frame that is better understood as a relationship rather than a static entity.”<sup>363</sup> When coupled with African religious orientations, Black feminist both/and relational framing helps complicate Black witches’ understanding of systems of domination such as capitalism.

Sam (Juju Bae), shared how her Africana spiritual practice informed her Black feminist analysis concerning money.

The more I immerse myself in spiritual work with my ile, godparents, and Hoodoo; my politics have changed. I feel like when we’re in movement, and we don’t have that spiritual component, it gets muddy and murky, and we’re constantly comparing things to whiteness even though we don’t want to, but we don’t have another example of what it [social change] could look like. But I find other examples in Hoodoo or with the orisa. Like, I have stories. I have reference points.

For example, in conversations around money, although I’m still anti-capitalist, there was a disconnect on how I saw money as just being completely evil and that it just needed to be eradicated. And now I don’t particularly feel that same way because I see that there are literally people who walk with spirits of money. It’s the way that we use money, and money is really just energy like anything else that we can decide to use for whatever. We give money the importance when we speak over it what it should do.

Some people also have it in their destiny to have money. So how do I say money’s supposed to be eradicated, but I can look at someone in a divinatory reading and be like, “Baby, you’re supposed to be rich.” Like I can’t take away that destiny. Instead, can we rethink what we mean when we say anti-capitalism? How can we use money in a way that’s not rooted in capitalism or in people having to die or not getting paid for their labor, but also recognizing that money isn’t quite the issue?<sup>364</sup>

Sam reinterprets her Black feminist anti-capitalist consciousness through spiritual experiences, therefore not replicating an exclusively religious or political approach to social

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>364</sup> Sam Juju Bae, In discussion with author, May 10, 2021.

change but a new spiritual epistemology where the religious and the political are inextricably linked. Her Black witch thought holds two crucial, typically opposing desires to be true— a wish to have abundant resources and one to live in a world without exploiting Black and brown people to acquire those resources. Sam’s framing counters prosperity gospel thinking that remains divorced from structural critique. Alternatively, her comments are firmly rooted in Black feminism’s commitments to an equal distribution of resources and serve as a reminder that African-heritage religions have practical application in Black people’s acquisition of systemically denied financial and economic wealth. Sam’s method of communicating with the dead and Africana deities, which she interprets through her Black feminist consciousness, produces an alternative to purely secular ways of knowing. Her analysis is informed by a spiritual epistemology that can benefit scholars and activists combating anti-Blackness, hyper-consumerism, and oppressive capitalism. Combining an Africana religious orientation with a Black feminist framework also produces a new method of community-wide care that many Black witches are implementing.

Maintaining an intersectional analysis of power means adopting approaches to spiritual co-creation where resources are distributed equally among those historically denied access based on structural inequality. Black witches have actualized a Black feminist method through systems of collaborative care like mutual-aid programs—an approach to resource distribution that aims to dismantle systems of oppression while meeting people’s immediate needs. Daizy October Latifah (founder of the Witches Brew Facebook group and the term *Blitch*) is implementing methods of care through The Blitch Fund, a mutual aid program that gives money to mostly low-income Black women. “I grew up pretty poor in South Central, Los Angeles,” she explains.

One thing about California is that you cross a freeway, and you can see where all the money is going, such as Hollywood. You cross that freeway going the other

way, and there are people who literally can't eat. You have to go to the liquor store to eat for the day. I grew up in that environment. Once I got older, I saw that need was always around. A need was always there, and getting needs met was rare. So, I always thought to myself that once I can help people meet their needs, I want to. I know I've had many situations in my life where I'm like, "I wish an angel would pop out of the sky and be able to handle this bill for me or to get me this thing that I really gotta get or pay for my plane ticket up to college or else I'm not gonna be able to go to school." Things like that. That kind of appearance where you don't have to beg or work for it. *It's just something you deserve that comes to you.* So as soon as I had the opportunity to set something up like that, I did.

The Blitch Fund is a permanent community mutual aid fund where contributions are collected from anybody who wants to contribute and are given to people in need. And the only qualifiers are that the person must be Black and a practitioner of African spiritual traditions. It's been a beautiful experience being able to provide that. We've probably given about \$60,000 to people here in the U.S., the Caribbean, and Africa. It still lightens, warms, and energizes my heart to know that so many people are willing to give. You don't have to apply. You don't need merit. All you must do is send a message. And only the ancestors decide who gets it. Names are chosen through divination because, to me, that feels fair. The ancestors have the bird's eye view about what's necessary, who needs it, and their intentions. So, I leave it up to them to decide. Once it's decided, the person receives their portion of the pot for that month, no questions asked.<sup>365</sup>

The Blitch Fund is an admirable example of how some Black witches distribute financial resources. There are no lengthy dehumanizing applications characteristic of government institutions, nor examples of exceptionalism or merit typical within higher education. Moral guidelines or required devotion to a leader are non-existent, unlike the devotional regulations organizing Black philanthropic religious communities like Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement, whose members were required to take an oath of celibacy.<sup>366</sup> Daizy structures the Blitch fund based on her lived experiences and her broader Black feminist praxis. She omits application requirements because she recognizes that structural inequality impedes access to basic needs for Black people in the United States and the larger African Diaspora. In the

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<sup>365</sup> Daizy Latifah, in discussion with author, October 1, 2021.

<sup>366</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 26-28.

description of the Blitch Fund on Daizy's website, she notes that most of the recipients for the fund are Black women (particularly those that are heads of their households), and emphasizes how an equal distribution of resources is crucial in Hoodoo.

If your Hoodoo doesn't serve the Black community financially, we don't want it.... In the tradition of authentic Conjure (Hoodoo, Rootwork), the success of the community and the cultivation of its shared children is of paramount importance. We know that we cannot actualize the empowered future our Ancestors fought for if we as descendants are perpetually in states of imposed displacement, poverty, and lack.<sup>367</sup>

For Daizy and many Black witches like her, Black people acquiring abundance is a social justice issue. Although they stress an abundance beyond fundamental needs like food or shelter, most Black witches are also cautious about subscribing to hyper-consumerism that only replicates the status quo. It is easy, especially in the era of social media, for some spiritual advisors/Black witches to advertise their products (like money attraction oils) through examples of lavish lifestyles committed to consumerism. If one's engagement with the spiritual realm is not in service of other Black people, it often works in line with, or replaces, the capitalist greed that has infiltrated numerous Black churches.

The Blitch Fund and similar initiatives are not typical philanthropy where established class divisions are reinforced— such as the wealthy giving minimal support to people with low income after extensive application processes and tax write-offs. Alternatively, it is a mutual aid system that aims to dismantle systems of inequality while providing resources according to need. Scholar and activist Dean Spade identifies a few differences between charity work and mutual aid. According to Spade, characteristics of charity and governmental social service organizations are that “1) They offer “help” to “underprivileged” absent of a context of injustice or strategy for

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<sup>367</sup> Daizy Latifah, “The #BLITCHFUND,” *The AfroMystic*, accessed January 27, 2022, <http://www.theafromystic.com/the-blitchfund>.

transforming the conditions and are often paternalistic with rescue fantasies and elements of saviorism, ...2) they follow government regulations about how the work needs to happen (usually requiring more money, causing reliance on grants, paid staff with professional degrees), [and] 3) they impose eligibility criteria for services that divide people into “deserving” and “undeserving.”<sup>368</sup> Alternatively, mutual aid groups are political in nature with “1) Efforts to support people facing the most dire conditions, 2) Use people power to resist any efforts by the government to regulate or shut down activities, and 3) they value self-determination for people impacted or targeted by harmful social conditions.”<sup>369</sup> Effectively charity organizations are bureaucratic, depoliticized, and often reinforce institutions of hierarchy and oppression while mutual aid groups are diffuse, established according to need, and committed to dismantling the systems that cause inequality.<sup>370</sup>

Another Black witch creating mutual aid programs is LaReina (the burlesque dancer and owner of Queenly Conjure Tea Room in New Orleans). During Hurricane Ida, which hit New Orleans in August 2021, causing massive flooding and leaving almost a million people without power, LaReina offered about 30 free rice bowls complete with grilled chicken, alligator, or blackened salmon to anyone in need. Although she too was without power, she was able to grill meat outside and biked food over to those who sent her a message on social media. Below is the picture she posted the day of the offering and her thoughts on the process.

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<sup>368</sup> Dean Spade, “Mutual Aid Chart,” accessed March 10, 2022, <http://www.deanspade.net/2019/12/04/mutual-aid-chart/>.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Dean Spade also notes that categories distinguishing charity organizations from mutual aid programs are fluid, and many organizations blur the lines while still centering a revolutionary approach to organizing.



*Figure 3: LaReina, Owner of Queenly Conjure*

*Truly Living in Ancestral Power.* Just a PSA of what #cottagecore [the tearoom she is currently opening] could truly accomplish in a world in desperate need of change.

This picture is of me today- not done up, not staged, it's not the "pretty" side of it, but it's functional. Spent all morning in the heat of the kitchen cooking for the community. Biked and packed up care packages for delivery. Packed away food for the rest of the week without power and prepped my space to start making dough and pastries for delivery during the weekend. Cleaned the house and put away the extra blankets for sharing. It felt like all day I was in a house busy with my Ancestors, guiding me, teaching me, gifting their strength and wisdom. So, when I look at this picture I see my great grandmother's, aunties, and cousins staring back at me with a "job well done." I'm ready to start rebuilding community. Reeducating our children how to grow and feed ourselves, how to work with earth to heal both our environments and our bodies. So keep an eye out for the Tea House. Let's get to work.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> LaReina, "Queenly Conjure," Queenly Conjure, accessed September 30, 2021, <https://www.queenlyconjure.store/>.



Like Dean Spade's definition of mutual aid and Black feminist analyses of intersectionality and approaches to resource distribution, LaReina emphasizes a political approach.

She speaks to reeducation, healing, and the capacity to build alternative worlds. Her offering is not institutionalized, does not require bureaucratic application processes, and is a responsive tactic to troubling circumstances. And, still, the mutual aid that Spade defines and LaReina enacts is not new to African Americans living under a white supremacist state where Black people cannot consistently rely upon government aid for support or crisis response. LaReina channels the spirit of her feminine ancestors when, in an apron characteristic of female domesticity, she stands strong with her hands on her hips—a pose of spiritual and physical power thought to derive from Kongo martial arts.<sup>372</sup> LaReina, Daizy, and Black witches like them mirror lineages of the quiet resistance undertaken by women and femmes who know that a revolution cannot occur if the people are starved, parched, or too depressed to get out of bed. Wellbeing is intrinsic to their Black, feminist, and witch vision of world change.

## Conclusion

Black witches' Black feminist Africana religious orientation facilitates the space for a new interpretation of manifestation work. It directs practitioners out of the prosperity gospel that, without structural analysis, has consciously or unconsciously blamed believers for their lack of material access. Spiritual co-creation alternatively leads practitioners into an empowered state, shaped by African-originated beliefs in alignment, reciprocity, and the faith that one's ancestors and deities will provide divine intervention. After years of their own healing work, Black witches

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<sup>372</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

stress the importance of healthy boundaries, therapy, and self-worth. Their holistic healing work cultivates a belief in deserving an abundant life and encourages the tangible action necessary to spiritually co-create one's desired world. However, as LaReina and Daizy have shown, an individual's material success means very little without community uplift. For many Black witches, spiritual co-creation is political, and centers commitments to redistributing resources through mutual aid programs and deconstructing the capitalist individualism that can seep into spiritual beliefs. Their religiopolitical spiritual co-creation is just one example of what merging the political and spiritual can do. It can potentially shift entire conceptions of – not only one's self-worth, but – what is possible for the future of our world. The dreaming, the visualization, and the belief in possibility—coupled and indistinguishable from a critique of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy—allow for the design of a better world and generate the self-determination necessary to take the incremental steps to get there.

## **Conclusion: Charting a New Discourse**

Like the opening description of a staring Mawiyah in her Black vinyl catsuit, “Black Witch Thought” paints a picture of an empowered woman—an empowered woman calling on the terms witch and witchcraft in ways descended from her African American ancestors—constructing an ontological identity of nonnormative and defiant power. She filters through Black religious nationalism sifting out ideas central to her religiopolitical identity, discarding the rest, and assembling a narrative around material manifestation capable of changing American religious discourse. We can see the Black witch self as a multitude, composed and empowered by the ancestors of Black feminisms—Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, June Jordan; the ancestors of Black religious nationalism—Edward Wilmot Blyden, James Cone, Elijah Muhammad and Efuntola Osejeman Adelabu Adefunmi; and all of those that kept African descended traditions alive in the confines of white Christian supremacy—Zora Neal Hurston, Dr. Buzzard, Baba Medahochi, and Marie Laveau. With identity being complex and ever-shifting, sometimes the Black witch in all of her power is merely an ideal that practitioners strive for each day. Sometimes she is a manifested desire to live more authentically, to deeply listen to one’s Ori, intuition, or ancestors, to not get consumed by capitalism’s individualism or Black essentialism. She is a testament to remaining in a faith where power lies within oneself *and* amongst a collective.

As an academic study, this dissertation addresses questions concerning the means and methods by which marginalized communities subvert oppressive forms of the nation-state and reshape power at individual and collective levels. Although power is typically defined under patriarchal terms equating force and militarization with control, subaltern communities have

sought power within more accessible quotidian feminized spaces. Scholars across the humanities—like Jafari Allen, Saba Mahmood, and Cristina Sharpe—have searched quotidian spaces for glimpses of power.<sup>373</sup> Within Africana religious studies, questions of power outside the nation-state are addressed in the context of the divine. Religious studies scholars have explored semi-autonomous religious communities like the Black Baptist Church, Yoruba/Orisa-based temples, Spiritualist Churches, and Islamic mosques. At the interpersonal level, scholars have analyzed African American folk healing modalities outside Western medicine, Hoodoo/conjure practices that subvert institutional white supremacist authority, as well as feminized practices - like cooking - that keep religion alive.<sup>374</sup> By examining an emerging African American spiritual movement and identity that is intentionally unorthodox, without established institutions, *and* primarily practiced by women and femmes, “Black Witch Thought” expands on what academics know about cultivating community-based notions of power for African Americans within the 21<sup>st</sup> century *through* Black religion and spirituality.

Moreover, by identifying the discourse of Black witches, this dissertation contributes to scholarship charting the evolution of contemporary Black radical and religious thought. As discussed in Chapter Three, scholars like Gayraud Wilmore and C. Eric Lincoln documented African Americans’ departure from the Black church to join, instead, what Judith Weisenfeld

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<sup>373</sup> Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Jafari S. Allen, *Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba*, Perverse Modernities (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>374</sup> See Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions*, North American Religions (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, Updated ed (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Margarita Simon Guillory, *Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches: More than Conjurers*, Routledge Studies in Religion 63 (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018); Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*, Religions of the Americas Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014).

calls religio-racial groups like the Moorish Science Temple, or what Tracey Hucks identifies as Black religious nationalist groups such as Yoruba-inspired communities who purported that they were practicing a tradition more ‘authentically’ African.<sup>375</sup> Still, historically, Black religious nationalist groups often maintained many of the conventional ideologies of the Christian church, employing European metrics for establishing legitimacy. They constructed status through Biblical lineage (such as identifying as Hebrews), claimed ties to centralized societies in Egypt, emphasized the heterosexual family unit, and reimagined an African American past by choosing identities such as Moor, Kemetian, or Washitaw (an American Indigenous identity). Black witches are departing from racial identities not likely connected to their ancestry and are instead moving toward a West and West-Central African orientation. By doing so, they are reconnecting to a transatlantic past evident in their practice of Hoodoo and reimaginings of Ifá in ways that reflect and benefit an African American cultural experience. Their investment in personal power and a Black feminist critique also reflects a 21<sup>st</sup>-century moment during which the American cultural landscape, particularly the younger generations, are more invested in deconstructing systems of oppression around gender, sexuality, and whiteness.

An expanded treatment of these motifs will allow me to further document how Black witches’ Black feminist Africana religious orientation dismantles the contemporary concerns associated with previously insufficient imaginings of Black religious nationalist ideologies. Some current Black religious nationalist beliefs include homophobia and transphobia, dangerous

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<sup>375</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); C. Eric Lincoln and Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America /The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken books, 1974); Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*, Religions of the Americas Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014).

rhetoric around healthcare practices such as COVID-19 vaccine skepticism, and sovereignty movements where members believe they are outside US law. As a case study, I will attend the ile of which some Black witches are a part. The ile, located in Baltimore, Maryland, is connected to Oyotunji Village founder Oba Efuntola Adefunmi I, a Black religious nationalist whose patriarchal convictions resulted in questionable polygamy practices as well as religious initiation of women without the provision of equitable training. The Black witch ile members I initially spoke with were not abandoning the political nature of founders like Adefumi but, rather, integrating their Black feminist critique into community praxis. They were not only shifting discourse, but creating a spiritual space where *all* Black members, *including* women, and queer, and trans people, are respected and celebrated. There are more cases like this emerging daily.

In a moment in academia where Afropessimist scholars such as Achille Mbembe, Christina Sharpe, and Frank Wilderson remind us that “the weather is the total climate; and the total climate is antiblack,”<sup>376</sup> a Black feminist Africana religious orientation offers a new spiritual epistemology for combatting anti-blackness. As scholars continue to identify the subtle and overt iterations of anti-Blackness, it is equally important to name tangible forms of resistance. Into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century - out of a distaste for Abrahamic supremacy - many scholars and activists abandoned religion as a social justice tool. But as Black witches now turn to Africana spiritual communities and traditions that are generally less institutionalized, hierarchal, and patriarchal, they are reimagining the use of religion for social change.

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<sup>376</sup> Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 104. Also see Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>; Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, First edition (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W.W. Norton and Company, 2020).

They are co-creating a spiritual epistemology that takes shape as a collective analysis, in internalized notions of self, and material outcomes. A spiritual epistemology appears in Sam's (Juju Bae) belief that money does not need to be eradicated based on her findings through divination, and Toya's commitment to Black separatism based on her theological belief that the ancestors will only work for someone of African descent. In these examples, Toya and Sam offer a spiritually African-informed analysis of anti-capitalism and anti-Blackness.

Referencing a specific material intervention, when Iyalosa Osunyemi's message of divine inheritance reached hundreds of Black women across the country, listeners began making tangible improvements in their daily lives. Her message has led Black women to leave abusive relationships, quit uninspiring low-paying jobs to pursue their creative interests, and build a solid intergenerational, mutually supportive community known as the Sweet Water Collective.

Finally, Black witches' spiritual epistemology encourages a self-actualized internal self, such as when Soraya Jean-Louis speaks about her ability to feel people's energy through physical touch or in Rebeca Spirit's discussion of her capacity to speak to the dead. Their insistence on connecting to inherent powers versus discarding them as something of their imagination demonstrates an understanding of self that is powerful—a sense of self that informs and dictates one's life to be lived in a more authentic and actualized manner.

In many ways, "Black Witch Thought" serves as a document of empowerment in and of itself. It is not a debate, but a Black feminist dialogue between Black women and femmes. The focus on stories, the lengthy excerpts of interlocutors' responses, and the emphasis on hope, power, and the future are intentional. When research excerpts have been presented at conferences, in articles, and within dialogue, audiences and interlocutors have reflected that they left feeling glimpses of the power Black witches embody. I hope this dissertation and its future

iterations continue to convey the sense of power and love encapsulating the Black witch's strength, even when it is an ideal or a shimmer of transcendence. It is a prayer that we all find a bit of spiritual power. Whether the ancestors of the Black diaspora populate your cultural past, or there are other cultural representatives residing in your corner, the wish remains that the reader might listen a bit more intuitively and intently to a spiritual way of knowing for - as a Black feminist Africana religious orientation teaches us - sometimes spiritual epistemologies lead not only toward an internal sense of power but also a greater collective sense as well. Thus, I close this study in unison with America's 21<sup>st</sup>-century Black witches, affirming all power, in all forms, to all the people willing and working to wield it.



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