

Swarthmore College

Works

Religion Faculty Works

Religion

5-1-2007

Review Of "Conjure In African American Society" By J.E. Anderson

Yvonne Patricia Chireau

Swarthmore College, ychirea1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Yvonne Patricia Chireau. (2007). "Review Of "Conjure In African American Society" By J.E. Anderson". *Journal Of Southern History*. Volume 73, Issue 2. 453-454. DOI: 10.2307/27649425
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/10>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

historians, but Harris adds much new detail. In particular, he portrays the frustrated efforts of mostly middle-class black reformers who hoped that education and moral perfection would dissolve white hostility and discrimination. Harris highlights the retreat of black reformers from cross-racial political activism after white abolitionists, frightened by the terrible race riots of 1834 up and down the East Coast, abandoned the hope of improving conditions for free blacks in the North.

The rise of militancy within the black working class—to halt kidnapping, regain the vote, and find remedies for chronic unemployment or underemployment—was the work of the 1840s and 1850s. Leaders such as Henry Highland Garnet, James W. C. Pennington, and Frederick Douglass, disillusioned with the efficacy of moral reform and education to secure black rights, made black labor a central issue. However, Harris delivers less than he promises in his introduction about the agency of the black masses themselves.

Harris's last two chapters highlight how, in the nation's largest city, the hopes of free African Americans for lives of equality and respectability were all but dashed. His story is a familiar one: how the Irish immigrants crowded free blacks out of artisanal work and displaced them at the lowest echelons of labor. Political misfortune accompanied economic crisis, carried forward by the segregation of transit facilities and adverse court decisions. It is possible that New York City was the worst place for free black Americans by the eve of the Civil War. Out of frustration and a will to survive, African Americans began quitting the city. Amid spiraling growth of the white population, black New Yorkers declined from over sixteen thousand in 1840 to less than twelve thousand in 1855. The ghastly draft riots of 1863 put a final touch on what must be regarded as the most vicious and inhumane chapter of Gotham City's history.

University of California, Los Angeles

GARY B. NASH

Conjure in African American Society. By Jeffrey E. Anderson. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi, 230. \$39.95, ISBN 0-8071-3092-3.)

Conjure in African American Society brings attention to the world of black American magic, a topic that Jeffrey E. Anderson argues has been neglected by historians and other academics. Drawing largely from secondary sources, Anderson examines the significance of the African American supernatural practices that are known variously as hoodoo, voodoo, mojo, and tricking in order to rectify scholarly neglect and to “return hoodoo to most Americans’ conception of black society” (p. 23). Marginalized by intellectuals and elites, conjure is unfamiliar to many white Americans despite its persistence as a powerful force in black life and culture.

According to Anderson, conjure falls somewhere between religion and folk belief. It is not a religion, strictly speaking, for it lacks the developed theology of most syncretic faiths, focusing instead on practical objectives. These objectives—including physical healing and empowerment, sexual coercion, aggression, and self-defense—cast conjure as a medium of social relations for African American practitioners from its earliest appearance in colonial

America to the present day, when it has profited from contact with such disparate forces as New Age spirituality and religious commercialism. Although it later became ubiquitous in scope, Anderson notes that conjure practices originated in two quite distinctive cultural zones in the South: areas settled by Anglo-Europeans along the Atlantic coast and the Latin cultural areas of the French and Spanish colonial settlements. Ethnic factors, demographic variations, and religious influences helped to shape conjure and to provide the distinctive flavors by which African-based magic became known. Although conjure's foundation stands firmly upon indigenous African sources, the building blocks of the tradition are both European and Native American.

Although acknowledging some earlier works, Anderson fails to offer much original information in this study. The book, which contains a lengthy literature review, illustrations, and an appended note on sources and methodology, bears the signs of a hastily revised dissertation. Anderson offers no sustained historicizing of conjure on the ground, as it were, so as to delve deeper into his fine ethnographic sources or to situate the traditions in a narrative of local change and social transformation. The author's unfortunate conflation of New Orleans's voodoo and black American hoodoo does not do justice to the important divergences that occurred in the independent development of these traditions. Also missing is a theoretical analysis of conjure in any given moment. Anderson suggests that conjure is more than just magic, for over the course of its sojourn in America, it has served multiple purposes. Whether it has been viewed as ideology, pathology, folklore, commodity, or racial trope, there is good reason to believe that conjure's persistence and vitality can be attributed to its effacement of the unstable boundaries between religion, intellectual orientation, and popular belief. Without proper attention to questions of meaning and historical context, however, *Conjure in African American Society* does not make these traditions truly familiar to unfamiliar readers and thereby falls short of its stated goal.

Swarthmore College

YVONNE P. CHIREAU

The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans. By Ina Johanna Fandrich. Studies in African American History and Culture. (New York and London: Routledge, c. 2005. Pp. xiv, 329. \$90.00, ISBN 0-415-97250-7.)

Despite the obvious appeal of the powerful and enigmatic figure of Marie Laveaux, scholars have generally shied away from the subject. They have done so in part because until recently voodoo was not viewed as legitimate religion and subject for serious study and, in part, because of a lack of hard evidence on which to base such a study. Beginning in the 1940s with Robert Tallant's controversial book (*Voodoo in New Orleans* [New York, 1946]), novelists have claimed Laveaux as their own. The result is that Laveaux has emerged as a fictionalized or sensationalized figure who probably bears little or no resemblance to the original. Now two books by recognized scholars have appeared in quick succession, the first by University of New Orleans anthropologist Martha Ward (*Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie*