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Patrick Li , '23

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**It's What Our Grandmas Did:**  
**Decoding Black Wellness, Joy, and Liberation in Contemporary Digital Hoodoo Practice**  
**Through a Cooperative Healing Literacies Framework**

Patrick Li

(李贝力)

Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Departments of Black Studies and Educational Studies

Advised by Professor James P. Padilioni Jr. and Professor Diane Downer Anderson

Swarthmore College

April 28, 2023

“I know that nothing is destructible; things merely change forms. When the consciousness we know as life ceases, I know that I shall still be part and parcel of the world. I was a part before the sun rolled into shape and burst forth in the glory of change. I was, when the earth was hurled out from its fiery rim. I shall return with the earth to Father Sun, and still exist in substance when the sun has lost its fire, and disintegrated into infinity to perhaps become a part of the whirling rubble of space. Why fear? The stuff of my being is matter, ever changing, ever moving, but never lost; so what need of denominations and creeds to deny myself the comfort of all my fellow men? The wide belt of the universe has no need for finger-rings. I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance.”

— Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

*To Mrs. Loukissas, my sixth grade reading teacher, who saw a spark in a boy who struggled to read or write and fanned it into a great flame: an undying desire to learn and dance and play.*

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## **Abstract**

Hoodoo, Conjure, and Rootwork refer to the constellation of African American traditions of spiritual and physical healing, ancestral devotion, retaliation, and protection created in response to chattel slavery. The current study investigates the multimodal potentials of Hoodoo for holistic healing in the contemporary digital age. Expanding on Erika Gault's definition of digital Black religion studies as "the study of Black folks' digital pathways to healing and wholeness (freedom) and their religious contribution to the development of digital technology," I triangulate a framework of Hoodoo Healing Literacies (HHLs) using practices of Rootwork, Conjure, and CyberHoodoo. These practices correlate to bio-psycho, psycho-spiritual, and psycho-social wellness and healing, respectively. By analyzing Hoodoo subreddit discourse and other forms of media, I explore the ways in which Hoodoo affords healing through magic and folk medicine, ancestral veneration, and cooperative economics as technologies of Black joy and liberation.



## **Introduction: In the Gardens of Our Ancestors**

Amidst the continued violence against Black folx, America’s reckoning with its racist and colonialist past is unfinished. In the wake of the murders of Eric Garner (age 43), Michael Brown (18), Michelle Cusseaux (50), Tamir Rice (12), Stephon Clark (22), Botham Jean (26), Atatiana Jefferson (28), Manuel Ellis (33), Breonna Taylor (26), Daniel Prude (41), George Floyd (46), Rayshard Brooks (27), Andre Hill (47), Daunte Wright (20) and so many others, the threat of physical affliction toward the Black body remains ever-present (Chughtai & Mafigiri, 2020). American slavery has been abolished<sup>1</sup>, but the fight to free the souls/spirits/bodies of Black folx continues. Questions of bodily autonomy and what it means to be truly free reverberate as marches for Black lives stir the cultural milieu of a nascent post Roe v. Wade era. In the interim between the “now” and policy reform, we must consider additional modes of freedom-seeking. In conjunction with systemic change, spiritual healing and ritual are sources of agentic empowerment (Mitchem, 2008). When even the safety of one’s home fails to provide refuge, spiritual avenues of action are particularly appropriate. Hoodoo offers the possibility of such liberatory sanctuary.

Past scholarship has already investigated “principles of social justice, equality, liberation and a moral code informed by Ifá [and readings] of the Ifá corpus [as] open, progressive and honouring of the humanity of all people” (Castor, 2022, p. 19). It is only fair that the same logic be applied to Hoodoo—the constellation of African American traditions of spiritual and physical healing, ancestral devotion, retaliation, and protection created in response to American slavery (Chireau, 2003; Chireau, 2022; Hurston, 1931). Emerging from the struggle of southern Black enslaved populations in the early 19th century, “Hoodoo was a means by which African American

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<sup>1</sup> I stipulate American slavery because slavery continues elsewhere (ILO, 2017).

slaves and their descendants sought to manipulate invisible forces so as to influence the human condition for purposes of empowerment and protection, as well as to commit acts of aggression and self-defense”<sup>2</sup> (Chireau, 2008, p. 4).

As social tensions rose in the summer of 2020, protests were fueled by an undercurrent of spirituality, “whether through West African Ifa rituals during marches or talk of ancestors or the orishas guiding the movement[. The] language of freedom was apparent in Black religious protest associated with #BlackLivesMatter” (Gault, 2022). Hoodoo also took to the streets. Juju Bae, a prominent Black femme, millennial podcast host, artist, and Hoodoo practitioner based in Baltimore, Maryland, provided protestors with High John roots for protection and performed a ring shout at a community altar honoring the “Black, women, femmes, and girls whose lives were lost to state sanctioned violence” (Chireau, 2021; Juju Bae, 2020). She defines the ring shout as the “practice of song and shuffling in a counter clockwise [sic] form to worship and praise spirit...practiced largely in the Southern United States by our African ancestors to call on spirits for preservation, joy, resistance, and power” (Juju Bae, 2020). Juju Bae’s association of Hoodoo ring shouts (and Hoodoo more broadly) with “preservation, joy, resistance, and power” suggests an implicit joy in resisting oppression. To push this notion further, I foreground Hoodoo as a practice of wellness and healing (Faithful, 2017). Finding joy in resistance is not meant to glorify oppression, but to orient us toward the vital hope that Hoodoo provided in assuaging the psyche of the enslaved person. “For many African Americans, Hoodoo traditions were utilized, not only because they provided viable alternatives for coping with and resisting domination in situations of

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<sup>2</sup> In spite of regional differences, the Africanisms of Hoodoo were preserved with particular faithfulness in the Gullah/Geechee South Carolina Sea Islands and Lowcountry due to geographic and social isolation. Three qualities made this community especially resistant to outside influence: (1) An overwhelmingly Black population. South Carolina had a high proportion of slaves, and the Sea Islands had the highest concentration of slaves within the state. (2) Island isolation, only accessible by boat until the 1930s. Consequently, slaves had limited interaction with white people. (3) Most enslaved people in the region were brought directly from Africa because of legislation placing lower duties on direct imports (F. Mitchell, 1999).

limited options, but also because they were validated by enslaved black folx as legitimate sources of power and authority”<sup>3</sup> (Chireau, 2008, p. 4). Contrasting the clandestine nature of the invisible institution—a term coined by the late religion historian Albert Raboteau referring to the subterranean, sacred life of African American people—millennials and Gen Zers yearn for public ways to destabilize oppressive institutions (Chireau, 2021; Frey, 2020; Legraien, 2017). Recall that the original positionality of Hoodoo was a culture and community of survival and resistance against racial domination, passed down in families through oral tradition. Arising as a means of freedom-seeking in response to collective struggle, Hoodoo was a testament to the “staying power of [African] culture under the harshest conditions and the ability of an oppressed and economically exploited people to sustain their cultural identity and uniqueness” despite all odds (Hazard-Donald, 2012, p. 16).

Building on orientations of preservation, joy, and resistance of older Hoodoo practice, the current study of Hoodoo investigates the multimodal potentials of Hoodoo for holistic healing in the contemporary digital age. Expanding on Erika Gault’s definition of digital Black religion studies as “the study of Black folks’ digital pathways to healing and wholeness (freedom) and their religious contribution to the development of digital technology,” I triangulate a Hoodoo centric model for biopsychosocial-spiritual healing and wellbeing through a cooperative literacies lens (Gault, 2022). By establishing a framework of expansive Hoodoo Healing Literacies (HHLs), I

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<sup>3</sup> So essential was the practice of Hoodoo that it could not be hindered by laws preventing enslaved Africans from practicing medicine. The 1749 law passed by the South Carolina General Assembly prohibited slaves “under threat of death, from employment by physicians or apothecaries, expressly so that slaves could not concoct poisons or administer medicines of any kind...[even to another slave] except under the supervision of a white person...Physicians frequently used the diagnosis of poisoning to cover their ignorance of the real cause of illness. It was evident, then, that the 1749 act was a product of ignorance compounded with fear and suspicion. Doubtless, however, certain blacks, given the opportunity, did poison their masters... These attempts at suppression notwithstanding, black knowledge and use of natural medicines continued unabated until modern times” (Mitchell, 1999, pp. 27-28).

demonstrate the bio-psycho, psycho-spiritual, and psycho-social healing capacities of Hoodoo through practices of Rootwork, Conjure, and CyberHoodoo, respectively.

Rootworking refers specifically to the use of natural forces (herbs, plants, elements) in healing and harming (e.g. cursing and poisoning) and other magical enactments such as divination (Chireau, 2022). Because it is the most closely tied to folk medicine, I situate Rootwork as the primary practice for physical healing but that which also extends to biological and psychological wellness (Hurston, 1931). “Home remedies were passed down in extended families from an earlier time, thus assuring that the postemancipation African American community would inherit a well-developed and long-standing folk medicine tradition rich in regional variation” (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p.135). Conjure<sup>4,5</sup> refers to interactions with the supernatural—angels, saints, ancestors, the dead, God—across a range of functions, from protection spells to the binding of evil spirits (Chireau, 2022). CyberHoodoo, my own terminology, describes the contemporary “cyber” Hoodoo and Hoodoo-adjacent practices of Black diaspora on social media (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok), discussion forums (e.g. Reddit), podcasts, and online stores (Li, 2023). More specifically, CyberHoodoo concerns the resistance, healing, and liberatory grounding of Hoodoo in today's social movements and the reclamation of Hoodoo as cultural heritage as a form of healing intergenerational trauma.

In addition to three healing modalities of HHLs (i.e. Rootwork, Conjure, and CyberHoodoo), I lay out three models of literacies (ritual literacy, ancestral literacy, and artifactual sourcing literacy) and three models of cooperation (cooperative roots, ancestral cooperativity, and

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<sup>4</sup> The practice of Conjure occasionally extends beyond the United States as in the case of Bahamian Conjure, called Obeah which is its West African name (Z. Hurston, 1931).

<sup>5</sup> Because Hoodoo fully encompasses the modalities of Rootwork and Conjure, the terminology is often used interchangeably. All Hoodoo relies on the function of roots for curing and spell casting. The Conjuror almost always made use of roots. Not all rootworkers, however, were Hoodoos. Some solely relied on the power of the root to heal. It was not until the 20th century that Hoodoo was commonly used as an umbrella term for the multiplicities and syncreties of Black American folk magic.

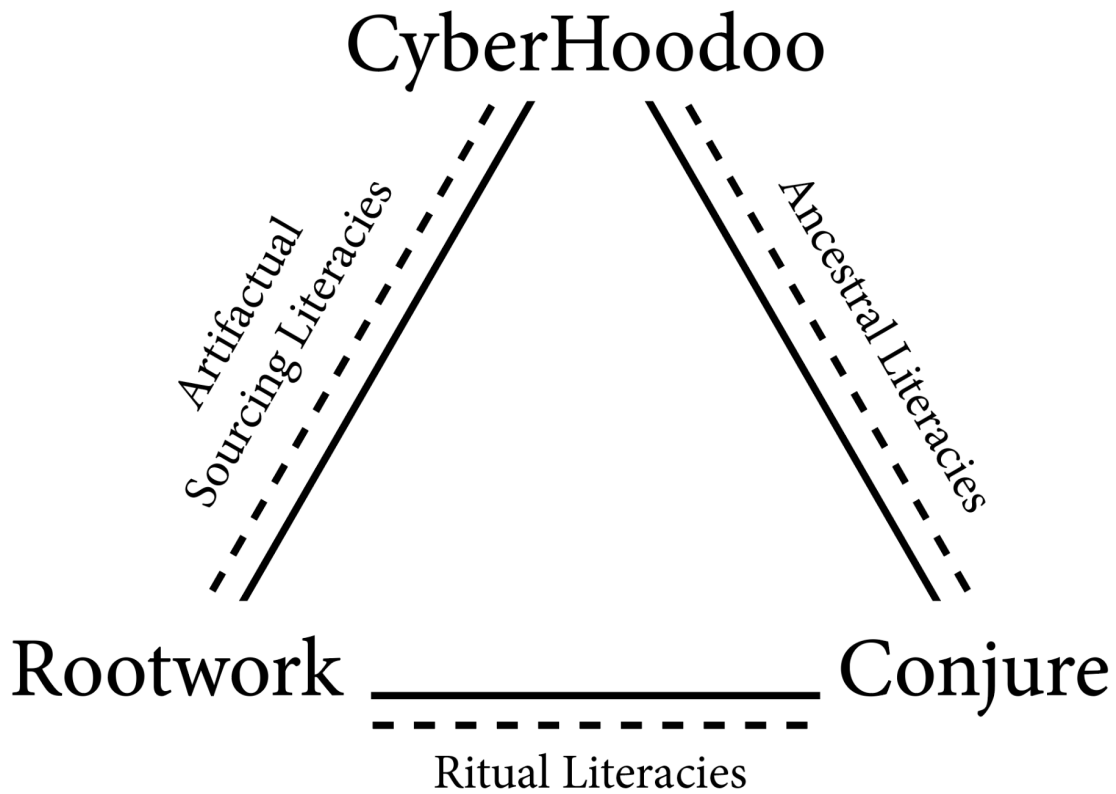
cooperative economics). These modes and models are heuristic and intended to offer didactic clarity in decoding the complex cybernetics of HHLs. They are not meant to be restrictive, given the well-established literature on the interconnected nature of biological, psycho-social, and spiritual health and wellbeing (Cooper, 2019; Galbadage et al., 2020; Saad et al., 2017). Stress from microaggressions, tenuous relationships with romantic partners, and the quality of one's spiritual life can all affect physical and mental health and vice versa (APA, 2013, 2018; Božek et al., 2020; Reed, n.d.).

The three literacy models I set forth connect the bio-psycho, psycho-spiritual, and psycho-social capacities of Rootwork, Conjure, and CyberHoodoo, substantiating the interdependent relationships of these healing modalities. Ritual (healing) literacies, for example, connect and relate to Conjure and Rootwork, for which the knowledge and practice of magical/metaphysical ritual is fundamental. Ritual literacies may also be applied to CyberHoodoo in the context of micro-rituals—the reflexive behaviors implicit in the passive consumption of social media e.g. checking one's phone and auto scrolling through TikTok or YouTube feeds. Ancestral literacies refer primarily to Conjure and CyberHoodoo for which establishing healthy relationships with ancestors is necessary for effective magic and intergenerational socio-spiritual healing.

Artifactual sourcing literacy relates to all three modes of healing in the sense that Rootwork, Conjure, and CyberHoodoo all possess their respective material and sacred objects, that is, “artifacts.” I use artifactual sourcing literacy to connect CyberHoodoo and Rootwork inasmuch as the primary agents of Conjure are metaphysical (i.e. ancestors, God, saints). For this particular literacy model, I am borrowing from Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell's theory of artifactual literacies. Pahl and Roswell define artifacts as objects having distinct physical features (texture, color, smell, sound); the ability to be “created, found, carried, put on display, hidden, evoked in

language, or worn;” embodying “people, stories, thoughts, communities, identities, and experiences;” and holding context specific value (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). By this logic, roots and herbs are imbued with stories, power, and metaphysical significance through the process of sedimentation—the infusing of texts with identity. There is a sort of reciprocity here. Just as artifacts can hold stories which extend beyond their material significance, so too can stories be passed down as artifacts. By this process, storytelling transmogrifies (quite magically!) metaphysical experiences into tangible objects which can be shared, told, and retold. Stories about objects invoke the senses and tactile qualities. The High John de Conquer root (the roots of *Ipomoea purga*) is thus an artifact, embodying the spirit of John the Conqueror, enabling anyone to call upon him for courage and protection if in possession of the root. “Only possess that root, and he can be summoned at any time” (Hurstun, 1943, p. 7). If we apply the notion of spiritual and artifactual literacies to roots, roots can be understood as sacred texts, requiring specific knowledge and literacy to discern.

To further support my theoretical HHLs framework, I conduct a thematic analysis of Conjure subreddits threads and select social media platforms. While my study of Hoodoo Reddit discourse is by no means exhaustive, the curated selection of Reddit posts is meant to help demonstrate the intricacies of HHLs as a theoretical model for understanding the holistic healing potential of Black digital religions.



*Figure 1. Diagram of Hoodoo Healing Literacies (HHLs) triangulation. Ritual, ancestral, and artifactual sourcing literacies connect bio-psycho (Rootwork), psycho-spiritual (Conjure), and psycho-social (CyberHoodoo) wellness practices.*

## Defining a Framework of Expansive Hoodoo Healing Literacies

Traditional medical models have defined health as the absence of disease. Such models are not only limiting but at odds with more holistic approaches to health. While awareness of social determinants of health—education, income, housing, access to healthcare, job stability, etc.—has improved in recent years due to grassroots and institutional<sup>6</sup> efforts, these factors continue to have real consequences on the lives of the American<sup>7</sup> populous. The failure of the United States to provide effective universal health care has resulted in greater morbidity for Black Americans as well as BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ individuals (Mitchem & Townes, 2008; Roberts et al., 2021). Black Americans receive fewer procedures than white patients despite higher rates of illness. The chronic undertreatment of Black folx has, rather ironically, resulted in the reciprocal overtreatment of white people and led to the current opioid crisis (Brody, 2021). Thus, the consequences of hierarchy are not isolated. Just as pollutants are not confined to the air around a factory, the inequity of the American caste system spares no one (Wilkerson, 2020). America’s negligence toward building a comprehensive health crisis system is reflective of its utter disregard for the health of Black Americans, the consequences of which are not “seen” until white lives are directly affected. Even then, the insidiousness of caste may persist as seen in the disaffected cries of working-class white Americans, which former President of the United States, Donald Trump, rallied and promptly betrayed. Wilkerson offers such an anecdote:

*In his book Dying of Whiteness, [physician Jonathan M.] Metzl told of the case of a forty-one-year-old white taxi driver who was suffering from an inflamed liver that threatened the man’s life. Because the Tennessee legislature had*

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<sup>6</sup> I had the pleasure of working with the Yale School of Medicine Equity Research and Innovation Center (ERIC) in the summer of 2022 with funding from Swarthmore’s Lang Center for Civic and Social Engagement.

<sup>7</sup> I am referring to “America” as a geographic location, not a matter of citizenship, immigrant, or legal status.



*neither taken up the Affordable Care Act nor expanded Medicaid coverage, the man was not able to get the expensive lifesaving treatment that would have been available to him had he lived just across the border in Kentucky. As he approached death, he stood by the conviction that he did not want the government involved.*

*“No way I want my tax dollars paying for Mexicans or welfare queens,” the man told Metzl. “Ain’t no way I would ever support Obamacare or sign up for it. I would rather die.”*

*And sadly, so he would. (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 189)*

To build an expansive framework of health, wellbeing, and healing literacies, one must first define foundational terminology. *Healing* describes the ways in which we restore wellbeing through rebalancing biological and metaphysical forces (Faithful, 2017). It is the primary concern of this paper. *Self-care* is the maintenance of wellbeing through management of surface-level symptoms (e.g. taking pain medication for chronic pain) (Faithful, 2017). While useful, its focus is temporally narrower than healing, addressing one’s most immediate needs. To me, self-care is simply surviving, and we can do better. *Wellness* is the “the act of practicing healthy habits on a daily basis to attain better physical and mental health outcomes, so that instead of just surviving, you’re thriving” (Pappadopoulos, n.d.). It is the active seeking of wellbeing. While healing is concerned with the identification of the root cause of dis-ease<sup>8</sup>, it is different from curing. The latter signifies “the banishment of physical illness, but [healing can] mean not just a physical cure, but a repairing and strengthening of the mind and spirit to improve the quality of life even when no physical cure [is] possible” (DeYoung, 2017; Howatch, 1996). By virtue of healing already

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<sup>8</sup> That is, the state of being not at ease, being unwell.

encompassing the most expansive approach to wellbeing, my argument centers around healing and not self-care or curing. This is not to say that self-care and curing are useless. Sometimes self-care is all we can manage. And curing, in the case of liberation and social resistance, can be likened to systemic change. While systemic solutions are a necessary and effective way to hasten liberation, the process of policy reform is often marred by bureaucracy. In the spirit of Hoodoo magic, HHLs proactively meet the present needs of Black folx without relying on institutions. It is the practice of self-liberation.

To the extent that healing can be metaphysical, the notion of healing can also be applied to social relationships. Charles H. Long cites Townes and Mitchem who define health as rooted in “social networks, biology, and environment. It is embedded in our social realities and is the integration of the spiritual, the mental, and biological aspects of our lives” (Long, 2008, p. 35). In addition to curing the illnesses and afflictions of the physical body, Hoodoo is about healing the social fabric.

*A common, shared orientation of African people...says that harmony, or harmonious existence between living beings, is the optimal state. Harmonious existence between living [and non-living] beings is the optimal state for all of us...disruption of harmony is seen as failure to maintain some aspect of relationship between the human and the divine...The notion of community for African people...encompasses human beings, divine beings, God Almighty, and most importantly, those who have passed away, but who remain loved and respected beyond the earthly realm—these are the ancestors. (Chireau, 2022)*

Chireau reminds us that “Hoodoo medicine encompassed both the physiological and spiritual dimensions of sickness, shunning Western scientific definitions that divided organic causes from

those that were metaphysical...born of damaged relationships, emotional injury, and most significantly, an unseen, malign force that causes physical suffering” (Chireau, 2008, p. 7). Because the focus of this paper is on ways of healing, I will not elaborate much on magical “malign forces” which have already been well documented by Chireau (Chireau, 2008; Chireau, 2003). I will, however, briefly review Faith Mitchell’s tripartite model of Hoodoo healing, not so much to challenge it, but to locate it as adjacent to (and sometimes overlapping with) my HHLs framework.

Mitchell divides Hoodoo sickness into three categories: natural illness, occult illness, and spiritual illness. *Natural illnesses* are the result of bad weather or cold air<sup>9</sup>. They are curable through roots, herbs, and other home remedies. *Occult illnesses* are the result of supernatural forces, brought upon by the use of Hoodoo. If afflicted, one is considered to have been crossed or hexed, requiring the use of Hoodoo (and sometimes knowledge specific to the hexer) to be reversed (Snow, 1993). Manifestations of hexing extend beyond physical symptoms and may affect social relations, desires, behaviors or present itself as general bad luck. The incursion of animals in the body—worms, lizards, tadpoles, salamanders, snakes, or frogs—is clear evidence that one has been hexed or Hoodooed. These reptiles and “unclean” animals are metaphORIZATIONS of illness which inform the health literacies of Rootwork and Conjure (Chireau, 2012). Preemptive caution against hexing can be taken through the use of amulets, mojo bags, or gris-gris which require ritual preparation. *Spiritual illness* due to sin or the devil’s work manifests in both misfortune and physical illness, similar to occult illness. It requires, however, the healing of God, whether through the laying of hands or uttered blessings, to be cured. This can be done by a preacher or other religious authority. Because the symptoms of all three types of illnesses may overlap, their distinction relies on the identification of the original cause of illness.

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<sup>9</sup> Similar to the idea of 寒气 (hán qì), pathogenic cold, in traditional Chinese medicine. 寒气 can be “caught” through exposed limbs in cold weather or the consumption of cold foods.

The curing of such a wide variety of illnesses naturally necessitates a plural approach, hence my HHLs framework. For cases in which the treating of physical symptoms fails to address the cause of dis-ease, the spiritual and social healing capacities of Hoodoo Conjure can be exhibited. For example, the Gullah/Geechee tradition of talking to the dead mediates space, time, and the invisible, manifesting “the liminal space between the living and the dead and the past and the present” (Manigault-Bryant, 2014, p. 19). By engaging with the dead in this way, Gullah/Geechee women are able to manifest a living memory and practice communal remembering. Storytelling not only allows these women to connect directly with their ancestors (read: ancestral literacy and spiritual healing), but also reflects their spiritual fortitude as Christians and devout practitioners. Through iterative storytelling, folktales become permanent fixtures/artifacts of one's personal identity, connecting Gullah/Geechee women to their “roots from childhood all the way back to slavery” (Manigault-Bryant, 2014, p. 113). Talking to the dead mends the social fabric of ancestral lineages which would have otherwise been lost. It elevates the dead, honoring enslaved foremothers and forefathers, strengthening historical memory to recover traditions and roots of African diaspora.

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Notions of healing and affliction for the Black body have long been constrained by the imperial gaze. During slavery, Hoodoo was the cornerstone to the sacred practices of African American people, hidden from the white gaze in the haven of Black churches. The air of secrecy around the invisible institution was crucial in the underground resistance of Hoodoo, providing healing, medicine, and self-protection to enslaved Africans. It was the essential institution of wellness and resistance. The need for Hoodoo and folk healing knowledge was expedited by the denial of access to white medical services for free and enslaved Black peoples. Moreover, when

white doctors did treat black patients, it was often with contempt. Notably, however, the efficacy of Hoodoo medicine was just as good or even better than the invasive practices of 19th century medicine which had a tendency to do more harm than good. Recipients of Antebellum Anglo medicine “could have counted themselves fortunate if the remedies did not retard recovery or hasten death” (Mitchell, 1999, p. 29). For Black folx under these circumstances, self-treatment (self-liberation!) was the most logical course of action. There was no need for the help of white medical institutions given that the herbology of local healers was an agreeable, low cost alternative to specialized healthcare (Chireau, 2008). For many, the root doctor was all they needed.

Today, the applications of folk healing and HHLs remain relevant. Black Americans are continually denied the same level of care as white patients. According to a 2019 CDC report, Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native women are two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy related complications than white women. “In the life-and-death world of medicine, African Americans and other marginalized people are granted fewer procedures and poorer-quality care than whites across every therapeutic intervention” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 188). Thus, who has and does not have access to modern biomedicine in addition to more sociological concerns around housing, redlining, and food apartheid<sup>10</sup> remain central issues in health equity research. Hoodoo, therefore, remains essential for scaffolding the health and well-being of Black communities through its sacred folk medicine, its power to inspire social resistance, and its ability to heal ancestral and social relationships.

For the plantation Conjuror or Rootworker, defending enslaved people from embodied harm and racial domination, whether through protective charms, herbal medicine, or active

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<sup>10</sup> Alternative name for food deserts which recognizes that “food deserts” are not naturally occurring, but deliberately constructed. Also consider the function of “food mirages” in which the available food options are too expensive for a given neighborhood and food swamps in which the accessible food is of low nutritional quality (Regeneration, n.d.; Sevilla, 2021).

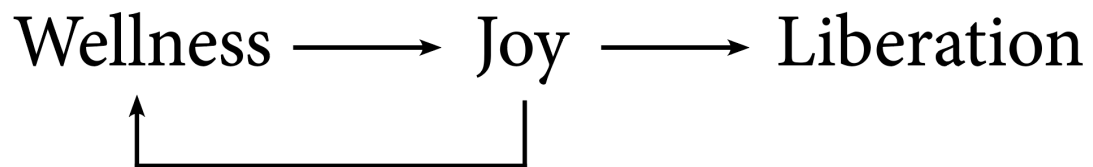
retaliation, was their most important function. No longer constrained by the institution of slavery, the focus of Hoodoo can broaden past a hyperfixation on immediate safety. As Juju Bae related preservation, joy, and resistance in her ring shout ritual, I too will group wellness, joy, and liberation as related concepts that can be arranged on a spectrum of freedom-seeking practices (Blaedel, 2020; Browdy, 2014; Mitchell, 2020; Smith, 2020). Alice Walker famously said, “Resistance is the secret of [Black] joy.” As such, I consider the joyous practice of Hoodoo as a iteration of digital counterpublics which Marc Lamont Hill defines as “any virtual, online, or otherwise digitally networked community in which members actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities”<sup>11</sup> (Hill, 2018, p. 287). Mia McKenzie extends the metaphor of joy as resistance in their definition of queer joy saying, “Resistance comes in many, many forms. It comes in the throwing of bricks, but not only in the throwing of bricks. It comes, most often, in quieter, less media-worthy ways... We all knew that loving each other as hard as we could was how we survived in a world that wanted to kill us, and that made our love an act of defiance” (Blaedel, 2020). By combining McKenzie’s theory of queer joy with bell hooks’ theory of love as the practice of freedom, I center love as resistance and the underlying mechanism of wellbeing, joy, and liberation (hooks, 2006). Love empowers resistance and is what makes a cooperative, holistic wellness conceptualization of HHLs possible.

The cultural capital of Hoodoo offers a holistic biopsychospiritual healing which makes space for joy and grief in Black communities through the attenuation of death by means of ancestral altars and veneration (Love, 2020; McCormack, 2022; Ziyad, 2021). Through Hoodoo as the

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<sup>11</sup> This is not too dissimilar to bell hooks’ reconstructing of queerness “as not being about who you’re having sex with...but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live” (hooks et al., 2014).

practice of love, practitioners destabilize the dominating forces of imperialism, sexism, racism, and classism (hooks, 2006). In the following sections, I elaborate the cooperative healing literacies of Rootwork, Conjure, and CyberHoodoo and their significance as practices of Black love and liberation.



*Figure 2. Cybernetics of love and resistance. Joy sustains wellness through a positive feedback loop.*

## **Rootwork, Bio-Psycho Healing, Cooperative Roots**

The conditions under which Hoodoo developed varied according to each geographic location's floral and cultural ecologies. Before the availability of 20th century mail-order roots, herbs and barks necessary for Hoodoo were acquired locally. It was therefore possible that the treatment of the same condition would require a different recipe of plants according to the respective Hoodoo practices of a given locality. In addition to the regional specificity of certain plants, the diversity of Hoodoo idiosyncrasies was also the result of the ethnic distributions of enslaved people. Southwestern Hoodoo regions including the Gulf Coast, New Orleans, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and western Florida were influenced by the Bambara people of Senegambia—particularly in the making of protective amulets—and drew inspiration from Yoruba and Fon ethnic groups. A later influx of Haitians and Cubans would bring about the Catholic sensibilities that define New Orleans Voodoo. Southeast regions including the Gullah/Geechee Sea Islands and coastal Georgia and Florida saw influence from the Igbo people and people from parts of Sierra Leone and the Kongo-Angola region. The Kongo cosmogram, for example, laid the groundwork for the counterclockwise movements of the ring shout. Akan, Gold Coast, and the Bight of Biafra influenced the Northeastern Hoodoo of Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 37-38). W.E.B. Du Bois described the eccentric birth(s) of Hoodoo on the plantation as “a terrific social revolution,” the coming together of diverse ethnic groups under the singular categorization of Black or African and the nascent formation of the religio-magical invisible institution (Du Bois, 2007, p. 133):

*The plantation organization replaced the clan and tribe, and the white master replaced the chief with far greater and more despotic powers. Forced and long-continued toil became the rule of life, the old ties of blood relationship and*



*kinship disappeared... It was a terrific social revolution, and yet some traces were retained of the former group life, and the chief remaining institution was the Priest or Medicine-man<sup>12</sup>. [S]he<sup>13,14</sup> early appeared on the plantation and found [their] function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people. Thus, as bard, physician, judge, and priest, within the narrow limits allowed by the slave system, rose the Negro preacher, and under [them] the first Afro-American institution, the Negro church. This church was not at first by any means Christian nor definitely organized; rather it was an adaptation and mingling of heathen rites among the members of each plantation, and roughly designated as Voodooism<sup>15</sup>. (Du Bois, 2007, p. 133)*

This is to say that the Rootworker possessed a diverse array of botanical literacies, informed by African traditional religions, Christianity, Islam, and American Indian botanical knowledge. In organic reciprocity, each Rootworker's ritual and artifactual sourcing literacies reflected their

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<sup>12</sup> Called Hoodoo doctors, two-heads, trick doctors, Conjure women, spirit workers, Rootworkers, Hoodoos, mojo workers, witch doctors, gopher men, and Conjure doctors, the root doctor healed physical ailments, retrieved lost objects, and bound threatening forces (Chireau, 2022)

<sup>13</sup> "The African American midwife in some instances was also a competent treater of ailments and possessed skill in aspects of conjure related to love, marriage, and family. As an essential part of a *cooperative* [my emphasis] Hoodoo network that included conjurers, root doctors, apothecary workers, hospital workers, gravediggers, morticians, and other midwives, she frequently had contact with conjurers and other types of root doctors" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 138). "The title 'midwife' imparted... a degree of legal protection under which a conjure woman could safely operate" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 139).

<sup>14</sup> "Like their plantation predecessors, most post-Reconstruction midwives harvested their own herbs rather than purchase[d] them [as they were] skilled herbalists, knowledgeable in both the identification of and use of plants and other natural substances such as natural clay dirt and insect nests" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 137). She was the primary purveyor of cauls, umbilical cords, and placentas to other Conjure doctors and midwife-Conjurers.

<sup>15</sup> Despite the negative connotations of Voodoo, by the 20th century "Voodoo" had become a synecdoche for Hoodoo, conjure, and all things related to African American magic. I give leniency to the use of Voodoo in this context as well as when referring to New Orleans Voodoo.

unique environment as enslaved Africans would adapt their herbal medical knowledge to the new plants endemic to the United States. In this way, Hoodoo is African and diasporic, combining multitudes of knowledge from West Africa, reconstituted in a new environment<sup>16</sup>.

Building off the positionality of roots as artifacts, I consider the power dynamics of Hoodoo ritual. What is the authority of the root? Unlike Christianity and Catholicism which establish clear sacred hierarchies, Hoodoo takes a more collaborative approach (Chireau, 2021, personal communication, November 18, 2022). If a client seeks healing from a root doctor, the doctor may utilize a leaf or root, but in conducting the ritual, neither is subordinate. The doctor does not tell the root what to do, nor does the root dictate the doctor's actions. Rather, the two work in tandem to achieve the greatest efficacy. Inasmuch as certain roots hold long histories of ancestral use, roots can be treated not only as spiritual technologies, but also spiritual teachers (Kimmerer, 2013). This cooperative roots approach to Rootwork subverts anthropocentric notions of control and domination and therefore fundamentally juxtaposes the forced possession of slavery<sup>17</sup>. Ritual literacy can also be understood as a type of cooperation. Certain roots will have certain effects. One cannot force a root by willpower alone to heal a dis-ease that it is not meant for. Neither would someone take insulin for an infection!

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<sup>16</sup> As generations passed, the ethnic distinctions of most regions became less pronounced and Hoodoo became a broadly Pan-African spiritual tradition, save for a few places in which the concentration of enslaved peoples was particularly high and ethnically homogenous. Recalcitrant to the hybridization of the Black Atlantic, the most essential components of traditional African religions remained and would form the core African influences on Hoodoo conjure. The principal of these are the circle dance or Ring Shout, spirit possession, sacrifice, ritual water immersion, divination, ancestral veneration, belief in occult and spiritual illness, and the use of roots and herbs for the purposes of healing. These eight pillars of African religions are what Hazzard-Donald terms the “African Religion Complex.” While ritual specificities would always have some level of regional specificity, the transition to the mass production of cotton would further homogenize Hoodoo as cultural leveling “would exert itself as a continual backdrop process to the developing national consciousness as well as to African American cultural formation (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 38).

<sup>17</sup> This epistemology of partnering is also seen in Haitian Vodou spirit possession. While the devotee must submit to the lwa and be ridden, they do so in active and consensual cooperation. In possession rituals, the rider (lwa) and horse (person) are in partnership.

From an etiological point of view, it is not possible to cure a sickness without knowing the (root) cause. The knowledge of left-hand work (that is, harming magic) thus becomes necessary to heal any magically inflicted harm (Chireau, 2021). In some cases, due to the diversity of Hoodoo practice, even general knowledge of left handed magic is insufficient. In Loudell Snow's *Walkin' Over Medicine*, Jacie's grandmother is "rooted by [another] woman over her own husband," resulting in an open leg sore that could not be healed by Western doctors. In consulting a root doctor, Jacie's grandmother learns that, because the root doctor that put the root on her had died, it would be difficult to undo the root, "'cause that person that workin' the root can take it *off* you, the only person can take it *off* you. 'Cause every root person don't know the different remedies from *another* root person." Instead, the root doctor who Jacie's grandmother sought out "just took a *hunch* of tellin' grandmother what to *do*, you know; what to *use*. And he gave my grandmother some kind of special *salve*...to *rub* on it, keep puttin' on it, bathin' in it. And she did it. And sho 'nuff, right before everybody's eyes a snake crawled out of it," and she was healed (Snow, 1993, p. 5).

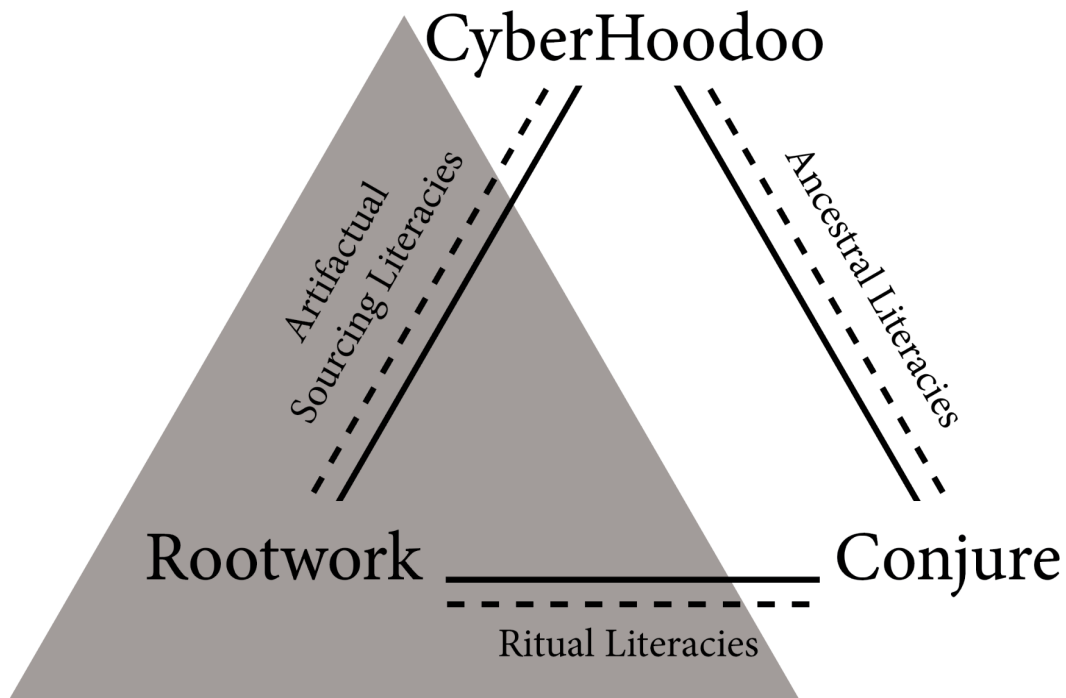
Powerful as it may be, Western understandings of health have often found the practice of Hoodoo healing disagreeable. The potential for collaboration between traditional and allopathic medicine—the modern Western medical system of "medical doctors and other healthcare professionals (such as nurses, pharmacists, and therapists) [that] treat symptoms and diseases using drugs, radiation, or surgery"—has and continues to be a topic of contention (Berick Center, n.d.; MedicalNewsToday, 2021; van Rooyen et al., 2015). Even in the case of the plantation midwife, practitioners in the emerging fields of obstetrics and gynecology fought to dominate the practice and usurp the authority of (Black) midwives (Hill, 2021):

*Understandings of childbirth as a biological and spiritual undertaking ran counter to prevailing medical theories, and proponents of Western medical epistemologies aimed to discredit bondwomen's midwifery techniques and the women who practiced them. Relegated to the realm of superstition, the association between elderly enslaved women and herbalism was so pronounced that members of the emergent field of professionalized medicine frequently decried medicinal folk knowledge with references to "old women's" remedies and "hoodoo stuff." Medical doctors' scathing indictments of midwives and the types of medicinal knowledge they represented emanated not only from racist and sexist understandings of Black female competency but also from a desire to usurp the midwives' esteemed place in obstetrical and gynecological matters. (Wells-Oghoghomeh, 2021, p. 139)*

The practice of midwifery was also a spiritual encounter. Enslaved parents were fully aware of the predicament of childbirth in slavery: that for enslaved children, the date of their birth was also the immediate moment of their captivity. Through ritual "re/membering [of] the rites of their ancestors, bondwomen imbued childbirth and death with meaning that eclipsed those of their captors and, in the process, expressed powerful ideas about their existence and mortality" (Wells-Oghoghomeh, 2021, p. 133). From life until death, Hoodoo was the glimmer of hope that sustained the souls of Black folk.

In addition to ritual knowledge of the root, practitioners needed to know where to source them. It was necessary to hold a mental compendium of roots and herbs and what they looked like as all ritual plants were foraged and acquired locally prior to the rise of mail-order roots (Hazard-Donald, 2012; Mitchell, 1999). With the proliferation of online shopping, the dynamics of sourcing

Hoodoo paraphernalia have again changed. Acquisition of roots became more streamlined and accessible. As with mail-order roots, practitioners are no longer restricted to using roots native to their geographic area. While I do not have quantitative data on where/how practitioners today source their roots, in the next section I provide examples from Reddit threads discussing where to acquire roots and other Hoodoo artifacts. I also provide two examples of how Hoodoo medicine<sup>18</sup> might cooperate with allopathic medicine. My analysis then extends to how ritual and artifactual sourcing literacies show up in podcasts, YouTube, and online web based stores.



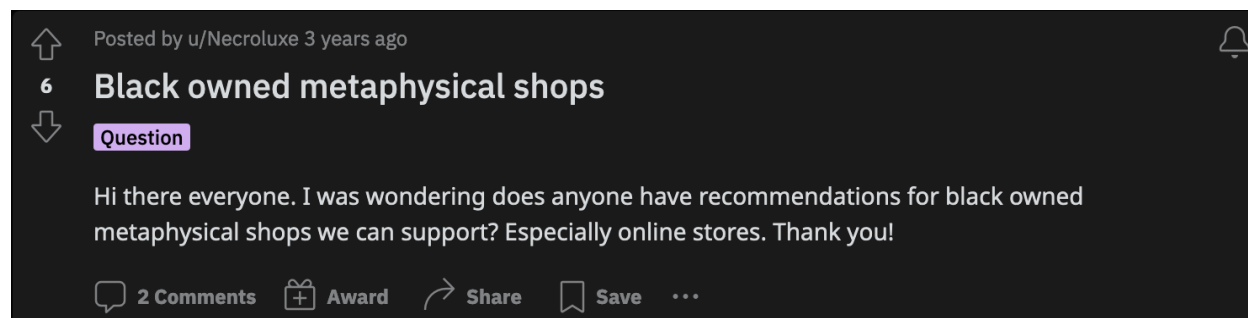
*Figure 3. Theoretical overlap of Rootwork in HHLs. Rootwork is connected to Conjure and CyberHoodoo by ritual and artifactual sourcing literacies, respectively.*

<sup>18</sup> Not necessarily Rootwork specific as the taxonomy of rituals is not precise and Rootwork and Conjure are not mutually exclusive.

## Ritual and Artifactual Sourcing Literacies

### *Reddit*

A preliminary Google search of Reddit posts discussing Black owned hoodoo stores yields only two results. Created in August 9, 2010, r/witchcraft is a subreddit for redditors interested in all things witchcraft related. As of April 2023<sup>19</sup>, r/witchcraft hosts almost 370,000 “witches”<sup>20</sup>, ranking at the top 1% of subreddits in terms of size.



*Figure 4. r/witchcraft post by u/Necroluxe on asking for recommendations for Black owned metaphysical shops.*

User u/Necroluxe made a post on May 31, 2020, asking for online Black owned metaphysical store recommendations (Fig. 4). Although six people upvoted the post, indicated by the number in the upper left corner, only two people commented. Etsy, Haus of Hoodoo, and Treadway Botanica, the latter two of which are Black owned spiritual stores based in New Orleans, were recommended. While this Reddit post is not specifically asking about Hoodoo, one commenter notes that “most hoodoo shops are black owned,” indicating the extrapolation of Hoodoo from the OP’s (Original Poster) Black metaphysical practice.

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<sup>19</sup> All statistics in this section of the thesis are made according to this reference point. That is, the data are representative of March and April 2023 but destined to change/increase given the nature of social media and online forums.

<sup>20</sup> Redditors who subscribe to r/witchcraft are called witches.

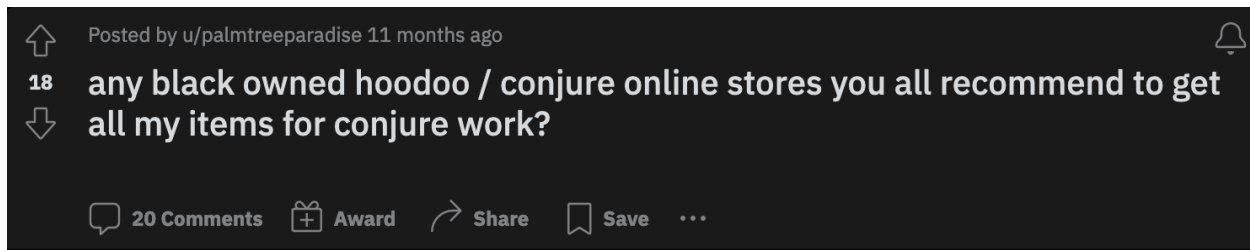


Figure 5. *r/ConjureRootworkHoodoo* post by *u/palmtreeparadise* asking for recommendations for online Black owned Hoodoo stores.

A more recent post from April 27, 2022, was made on *r/ConjureRootworkHoodoo*<sup>21</sup>, a subreddit created on October 19, 2012, with over 7,000 members (Fig. 5). The post found more traction than the previous *r/witchcraft* post despite *r/witchcraft* having a greater than fifty times larger user base than *r/ConjureRootworkHoodoo*. While a comparative sample size of one post provides little reference point for how much activity occurs on these subreddits, the commenters on the *r/ConjureRootworkHoodoo* post recommend a more substantial list of Black owned Hoodoo stores: Big Liz Conjure; Conjural; Memphis Conjure; Third Generation Conjure; Haus of Hoodoo; Crescent City Conjure; Mojo Life, The Afrikan Witch Bitch; SaTar’Ra; HooDoo Hannah; Love, Light and Lemonade. One Redditor posted a link to a Shoppe Black article titled Black Owned Hoodoo Shops for Assorted Spiritual Needs and Tools<sup>22</sup> which provides an annotated list of eighteen Black owned Hoodoo and Conjure stores and resources. This mighty list is one of the few readily available compendiums of Hoodoo resources that I have been able to find<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Smaller Hoodoo subreddits also exist, such as *r/HoodooRootsConjure* (>1,600 members), *r/hoodoo101* (created in February 2022, 49 members), and *r/HoodooRootworkConjure* (created in August 2020, 4 members), but these communities are far less robust and presumably have userbases that overlap significantly with *r/ConjureRootworkHoodoo*: our main Hoodoo subreddit of interest and analysis.

<sup>22</sup> <https://shoppeblack.us/black-owned-hoodoo-shops/>

<sup>23</sup> On June 4, 2019, *u/EziliFredaCharm* made a post titled “Authentic Hoodoo Resources:” which provides a list of 18 “authentic black/indigenous Hoodoo practitioners” along with their associated social media accounts and store links. This is the second list of Hoodoo purveyors that is of appreciable size.

On the same Reddit post, users discuss the proper sourcing of Hoodoo supplies. Some users noted that given the mass marketing of Hoodoo supplies and non-Hoodoo specific ingredients, there are no hard and fast rules on where to source ritual materials. From the inception of Hoodoo, practitioners have been utilizing whatever ingredients were most readily available in the cupboard or backyard garden. As one Redditor put it, it's "what our grandma's did [sic]" (u/palmtreeparadise, 2022)<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 6). These posts encompass the ways contemporary practitioners seek Hoodoo artifacts as well as the ways in which they recall traditional practices of local foraging as a kind of ritual/ontological power—the belief that "naturally sourced" artifacts are more powerful and magically potent (Brandon, 1991).

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<sup>24</sup> Citations for Reddit posts are based on the OP's username. Therefore, when I cite a comment from another Redditor on the same post, the citation will reference the OP.



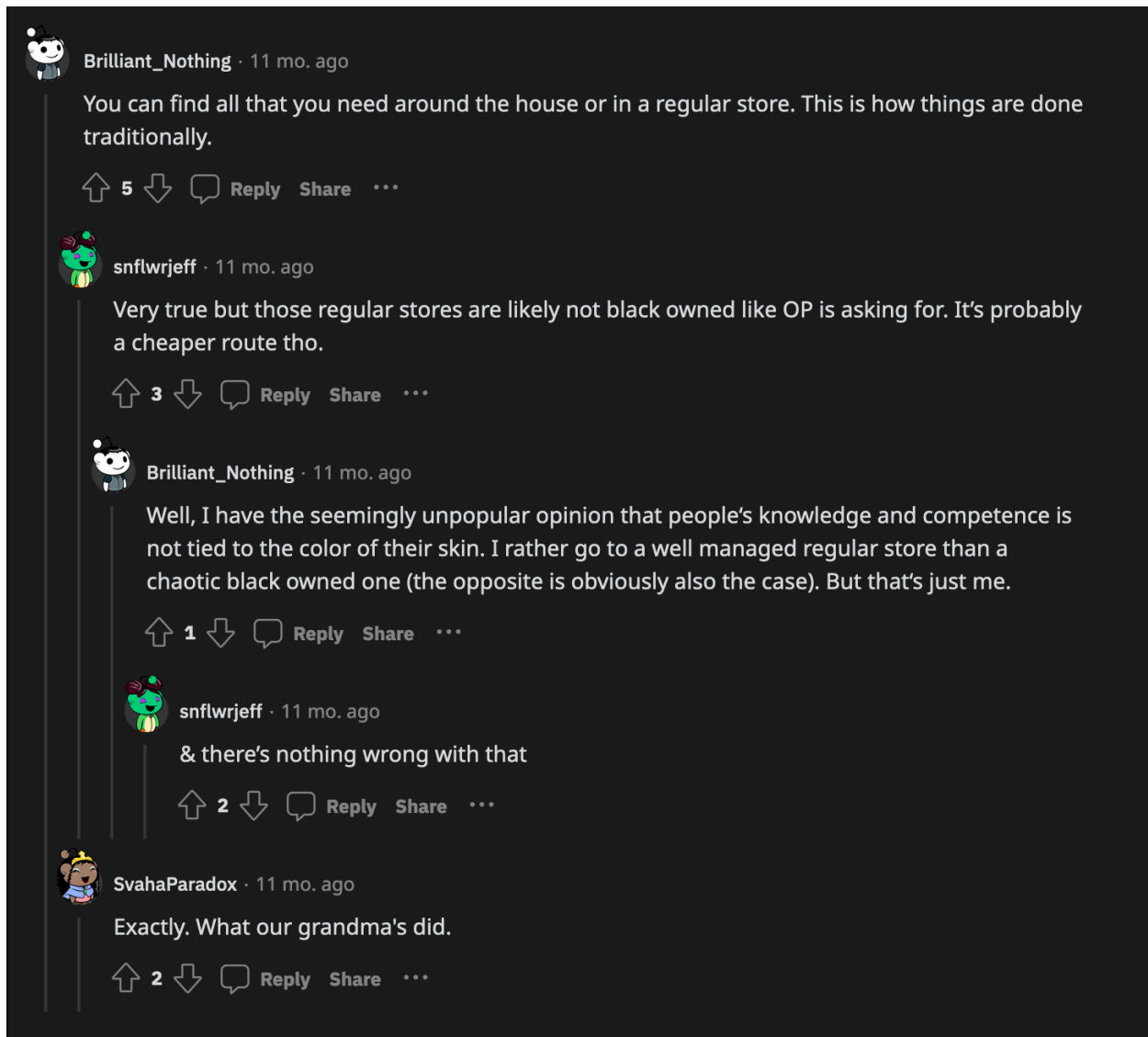


Figure 6. Comment thread from post titled “any black owned hoodoo / conjure online stores...” referencing resourcefulness of traditional Hoodoo artifact sourcing.

While power is sometimes found intrinsic to the root—simply acquire the necessary ingredients and follow the desired recipe for the desired effect—it is also possible to implicate a need for sacred literacy, artifactual literacy, ritual literacy. Perhaps nothing is inherently sacred. Rather, as agentic beings, we prescribe values of sacrality and profanity onto our environment. Thus it is possible that the High John de Conqueror root is not sacred because the root is inherently sacred but becomes sacred when we bestow sacrality upon it! “Protective substances need not be

outwardly extraordinary, even though they may be intrinsically strong. It is its ritual use that turns mundane stuff into magical protection—and even the poorest man or woman has help as near as the kitchen cabinet” (Snow, 1993, pp. 49-50). Instead of focusing on “theoretical perspective[s],” one Redditor places greater importance on the actual practice of Hoodoo as a fluid medium (Fig. 7). u/Butterscotch894 tells the OP that *Mojo Workin’* is just an “OK book” and that they should instead elevate the root, “focus on herbs first” (u/I\_LV\_2\_EAT\_ART, 2023). To focus on the power of the root and their belief in it.

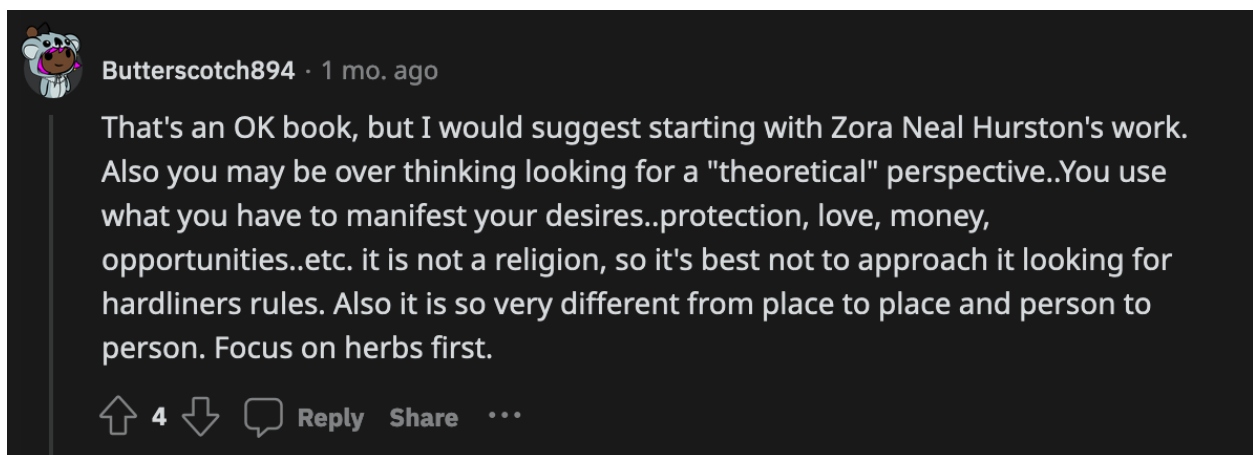


Figure 7. Comment from post titled “Asking for help and direction for hoodoo text for naturopathic medicine and divination” suggesting the OP center herbs, not theory, in their practice.

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The following three examples of healing that I provide are not specific to Rootwork but confer a need for bio-psycho healing. Part of the problem of siloing dis-eases into categories is that a single dis-ease may have many healing paths. Healing interventions for addiction, for example, can be psychological (e.g. psychotherapy), biological (e.g. medications or roots), and conjural (e.g. invoking spirits or Psalms) (NIH, 2017). Thus, the categorization of these examples is fluid and depends largely on the register of one’s analysis. For what it’s worth, these examples deal with issues closer to standard notions of physical and mental health. The ancestral literacies

and healing of Conjure and the agentive social resistance of CyberHoodoo would be beyond most allopathic diagnoses of addiction, anxiety, and other psychiatric conditions. So while some examples may involve both Rootwork and Conjure, I have made the conscious choice to discuss them in only one of their possible categorizations to avoid redundancy. Such is the kind of sacrifice that must be made when attempting to categorize holistic, integrated healing traditions into binary categories<sup>25</sup>.

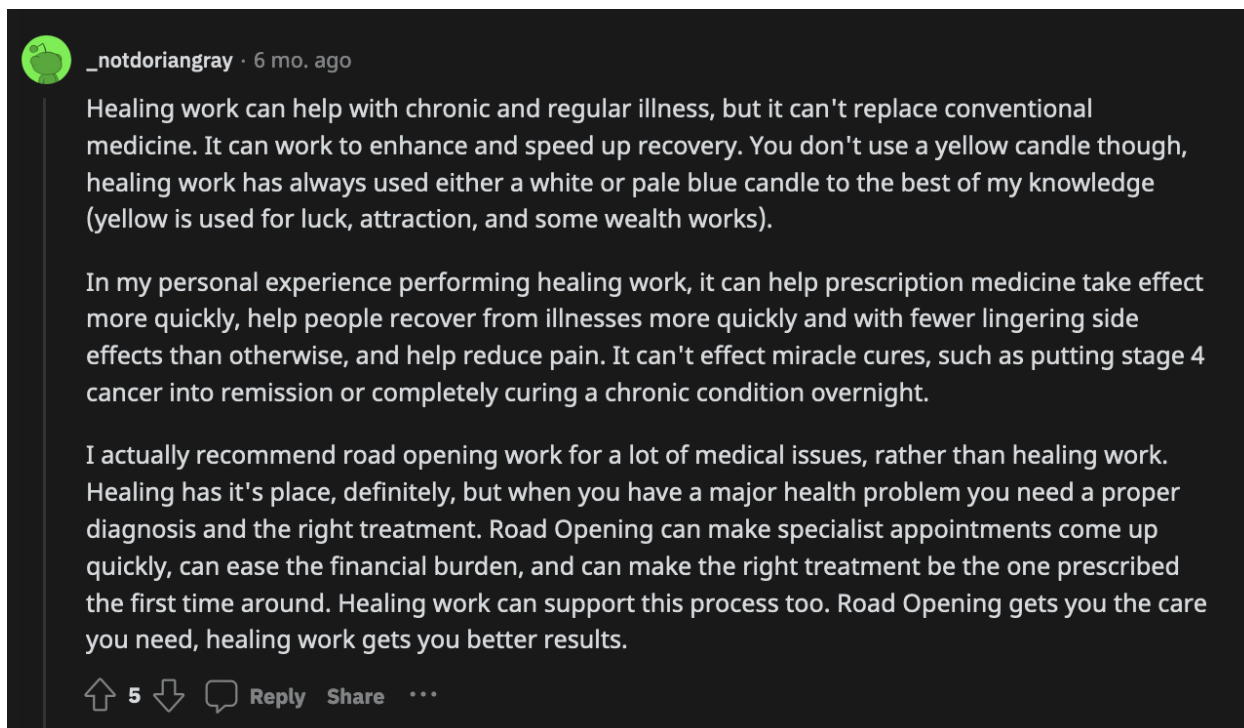
On May 29, 2022, one user asked about health spell work to help with their long term stomach problems (u/GoddessRme, 2022). u/\_notdoriangray who runs their own Patreon page, Marketplace Conjure, is a prolific commenter on r/ConjureRootworkHoodoo. They respond with a model of cooperation (Fig. 8). In their experience, Hoodoo healing work and allopathic medicine exist as complementary halves. The former helps with chronic or everyday illnesses while the latter is important for more serious conditions such as cancer. They recognize that while Hoodoo is magic, it is not a miracle system and is unable to put “stage 4 cancer into remission or completely [cure] a chronic condition overnight.”

In addition to direct healing work, u/\_notdoriangray suggests the OP also consider road opening work<sup>26</sup>. This again works in tandem with allopathic medicine by helping to ease the stress of scheduling hard to book appointments and making “the right treatment be the one prescribed the first time around” (u/GoddessRme, 2022).

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<sup>25</sup> Binary in the sense of being Rootwork (or Conjure or CyberHoodoo) or not. Or whether illness is mental/psychological or not. A trinary understanding of HHLs can also be invoked as both understandings simultaneously coexist.

<sup>26</sup> Commenters in another post titled “Any herbs/roots for receiving answers, health going in a more positive direction?” similarly suggested road opening work as well as the use of cleansing baths, life everlasting, and uncrossing work to help with logistical health issues (i.e. blockages from doctors unwilling to help and insurance mishaps). Notably, u/desireelws suggests an uncrossing mantra to listen to on YouTube as well as working with the Hindu god, Ganesha (u/RUsureitsnotbutter, 2023).



*Figure 8. Comment from post titled “Health spell work??.....anyone?” suggesting ways to combine Hoodoo and allopathic medicine for optimized healing.*

Another Redditor by the usertag u/IndieBenji (OP) inquired about using spells and conjuring for smoking cessation. The OP is “Tired of Smoking!” and hopes “to try and use intentional magick” to quit smoking after ten years (u/IndieBenji, 2022). Like u/\_notdoriangray, the OP recognizes that Hoodoo healing, although sometimes metaphorized as the spectacular and miraculous removal of reptiles and amphibians, does not work via miracles. But no miracles does not disqualify powerful medicine and intention magic(k). u/Anxious-Mix754 incorporated psychedelics into their (Hoodoo) healing repertoire when they “started microdosing psilocybin and within a week like magic no more smoking 🧘” (u/IndieBenji, 2022). While they acknowledge that psilocybin is not traditionally used in Hoodoo, they suggest that the OP consider the sacred

medicine as a possible treatment<sup>27</sup>. Studies have confirmed the efficacy of psilocybin-facilitated smoking cessation, but such studies are arguably confounded with intentions (Johnson et al., 2017). An “intentional magick” reading of psilocybin research highlights that all participants have the intention of smoking cessation. Because there is no “intention control group” for which participants who do *not* want to quit smoking receive psilocybin, it is not too farfetched to deduce the influence of intention(al magick) on treatment. In fact, intention setting (situating one’s mental environment) and patients’ immediate physical environment have shown to play important roles in safely guiding psychedelic treatment (Baker, 2022; KCLA, 2022).

Other users responded to the OP suggesting the recitation of Psalms<sup>28</sup> (Psalms 23, Psalms 103, Psalms 51:7) and the preparation of cleansing baths as a starting point for breaking bad habits. The invocation of Psalms demonstrates the applicability of Conjure in the treatment of addiction. Both baths and prayers were prescribed as iterative rituals, to be done five or nine nights in a row. This is necessary given the stubbornness of addictions which “are deeply entrenched, and you need to do a lot to cleanse away the habits of a lifetime” (u/IndieBenji, 2022). Connecting Reddit to other Hoodoo resources, u/\_notdoriangray provides a link to an article they wrote on the history and function of the Hoodoo bath (Cherche, 2021).

Commenters agreed that any banishment work involving graveyards or crossroads is best left for more experienced practitioners and should be conducted in person, not virtually. In recommending that some work be reserved for experienced local practitioners, these Reddit users recognize that more complicated/dangerous rituals require more adept ritual literacies. While some

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<sup>27</sup> There is limited use of fungi in Hoodoo as other flora, roots, and leaves proliferate (Chireau, 2023). I have, however, personally speculated the myth of Flying Africans as metaphors for psychedelic trips. Perhaps a future research pursuit?

<sup>28</sup> A commenter in the previous post health spellwork post by the name of u/kharri77 also utilized Psalms. “When I had covid, I did an egg cleansing ritual & read Psalms 26. I also enchanted my tea & put an orange on my altar. It worked & I feel no aftermath or long covid!” (u/GoddessRme, 2022).

rituals such as candle burning or altar work can be learned quickly online with the proliferation of how-to videos across TikTok and YouTube, learning graveyard work (i.e. “to remove an addiction and take it to the cemetery to die”) crosses the line for casual experimentation and self-directed learning.

u/\_notdoriangray also suggests that *after* the OP takes their baths, they should follow up with work to increase their willpower. “You can get a mojo hand tied for this purpose, or you could carry a Master Root with you as a pocket piece. If you are doing the bath nine days in a row, pray on and feed your root or hand the day after your last bath. If you are doing the baths weekly, pray on and feed the root or hand the day after your bath every week” (u/IndieBenji, 2022). As a student of social psychology, I am wary of willpower based interventions as they are largely ineffective (Duckworth et al., 2018; Loewenstein, 2018). And given the biological bases of addiction, one typically requires more than just willpower to overcome it (NIH, 2017). The combined effects of psychedelic treatment, psychotherapy, and intentions, however, is powerful. It is therefore possible that while magic might not affect willpower, which hold strong psychological connotations and denotations, it instead taps into some other metaphysical source of self-control and/or becomes something upon which to anchor one’s intentions.

Given the present evidence for the cooperative efficacy of Hoodoo and allopathic medicine<sup>29</sup>, I speculate that Hoodoo medicine may be particularly pertinent for the treatment of conversion disorder: a psychological condition in which physical and sensory problems, such as paralysis, numbness, blindness, deafness or seizures, are present with no discernable underlying

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<sup>29</sup> Through a holistic approach to wellness, “it would be wrong to see [traditional African beliefs] as an alternative completely separate from the orthodox medical system...[when we are] perfectly able to talk about roots and psychology in the same breath...This intertwining of traditional, popular, and biomedical ideas results in a system that is constantly evolving to accommodate changing needs...broad enough to include pathological agents as diverse as sorcery and viruses in the etiology of illness and it is flexible enough to incorporate a new problem such as AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) when it appears” (Snow, 1993, p. 33).

neurologic pathology (CHOP, 2017). Also called functional neurological system disorder, conversion disorder implies a metaphysical cause of illness, typically prolonged emotional stress. In such a case, the holistic rebalancing of HHLs may affect a wide enough net of change to heal the cause of one's conversion disorder. Through one's conviction and confidence in the efficacy of Hoodoo, as well as their sense of mastery and control over an illness, Hoodoo offers great potential for healing metaphysical illnesses and intergenerational trauma (H. Brody, 2000; Hong et al., 2021; Ward, 2013). I expand on the intergenerational healing of Conjure and CyberHoodoo in their respective sections.

### *Podcasts*

Episode four of the Conjure South Spellcast Podcast, titled "Sex Conjure," begins with a standardized (read: ritual) introduction to the show and its co-hosts: Queen Cotaliya, Hoodoo queen of the imperial court Milner-Meadows Des La Pound; Madame Afro Afrodite<sup>30</sup>; and The Urban Alchemist. The dialogue flickers between French and English, quilting together a creolized language that linguistically situates the podcast in Mobile, Alabama—a two hour drive from New Orleans. Queen Cotaliya acknowledges and checks-in with her co-hosts on how they are feeling, emphasizing the podcast medium not as merely for the dissemination of information, but as an intimate space for personal connections. The overarching theme of the episode is demystifying sex and intimacy Conjure. Madame Afrodite brings up the matter of spiritually transmitted demons (STDs) as an unfounded matter of concern, retorting that "you should watch who you have sex with anyway!" Counter to the logic of sex (positive) Conjure, misleading beliefs like these quite

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<sup>30</sup> The name of the co-host, Afro Afrodite recalls the creolized, syncretic quality of Hoodoo. Afro recalls Africa while Afrodite invokes the Greek goddess of carnal love and beauty, Aphrodite. It is a fitting reference and marks Madame Afrodite as a sex conjuror. The repetition of "afro" further leans into the layered and double meanings within Hoodoo (Gundaker, 1998).

literally demonize sex. Part of the problem, Madame Afrodite says, is the increasing number of people learning Hoodoo offline (logically, I think they misspoke and meant to say online) and not from elders, leading to distorted notions of Hoodoo and ATRs.

Perhaps surprising to Hoodoo newcomers, Queen Cotaliya and Madame Afrodite both note the limitations of magic. Madame Afrodite tells listeners that while sex magic is powerful, sometimes you just don't got it! Queen Cotaliya adds that "magic is not your mental medicine." It is not a cure-all for any and every problem. Sometimes, in addition to magic, deep self-reflection and development is necessary. This is to say that magic is not an alternative to mundane wellness practices. Both can work in tandem to sustain one's overall wellbeing and health.

The conversation eventually pivots to herbs and spiritual allies which Madame Afrodite notes can be different for different practitioners. She lists off ginger, damiana, orange, vanilla bean, sugar, and honey as common ingredients to have in one's repertoire. But it takes work to figure out what ingredients and what recipes work for each individual because "sometimes those herbs and spiritual allies, they probably cannot stand you" (Queen Cotaliya Meadows et al., 2022). Some people may benefit more from hot ingredients than sweetening ones, "everything can't be for everybody." Each practitioner's personal ritual practice must be individually curated, played with, and explored. Most importantly, "when in doubt, ask a legit herbalist." This deferral to authority and reminders listeners that books and podcasts can only get you so far. There are times when it is necessary to speak to a trusted practitioner. Hoodoo must be practiced in community<sup>31</sup>.

Tha Back Porch Conjure Rootworker podcast, hosted by Ifa Abeyo, demonstrates a similar ritual situating to the Conjure South Spellcast Podcast. Episodes typically begin with long, often

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<sup>31</sup> After the main portion of the episode "ends" (i.e. the outro theme is played), the recording continues to a live call-in client spiritual reading inquiring about nursing school applications. After the discussion, the podcast hosts provide divination and custom work to call-in clients. By engaging directly with listeners, Conjure South Spellcast creates a more personal sense of community.



several minute long musical intros, followed by a welcome greeting. Ifa Abeyo sets the scene of elders chatting on the back porch after dinner. The sun is setting, a warm orange. She welcomes listeners as the sound of a marimba plays dreamy music in the background (Ifa Abeyo, 2021-a).

Episode 1 begins with the following introduction.

*Hey y'all! Welcome, welcome, welcome! This is the back porch conjure worka.*

*Gather round children, gather round. Grab you a cup of tea, morning coffee, a*

*biscuit. Shit, some soda, a cold drink or just a good old glass of water. I want you*

*all to gather round, gather round. This don't got nothing to do with Orisha, so if*

*you lookin' for that, go somewhere else. Down the road, I hear they talkin' about*

*that...or maybe over there on the other sida town. This right here is back porch*

*conjure. That's what this is. This is back porch conjure. (Ifa Abeyo, 2021-b).*

Immediately, we are introduced to the fact that this is a Hoodoo podcast. “It deals with conjure. Rootwork!” and is ill concerned with the world of Orisha which “everybody is talking about” today. “Everybody [feels like they] know more than everybody else” and forgets that at its core, Hoodoo is about helping each other to grow and prosper. It is a lesson on cooperation and collective wellness, practical intelligence, and adaptability. Through performative storytelling, Ifa Abeyo teaches listeners about problems and their respective solutions, to be self-sufficient, and how to source ingredients from closets, cupboards, freezers, the backyard, and nearby woods. She situates her magic in pragmatism and emphasizes the proper ritual of magic rather than its component artifacts because a “99¢ or a 59¢ candle work just as powerful as an \$8 candle” (Ifa Abeyo, 2021b).

Part of what makes this podcast series compelling is that Ifa Abeyo is a southern Hoodoo elder who deftly utilizes digital mediums to participate in online Hoodoo discourse. She contextualizes advice within a performance of storytelling by mimicking the talking around the

kitchen table, snapping beans, soaking collard greens, cleaning chitlins. Giving advice, spreading gossip, the kitchen table was where there was always a solution to any problem that arose, so you never went away “blind, dumb, or retarded.” It was the Amite, Louisiana that she remembered from childhood. When godmother Nora needed a spell to bring back her cheating, alcoholic husband she used collard greens, potato salad, and fried chicken cooked in lard to make him come home and put chamomile into the greens to relax him, make him sleepy. Through storytelling, Ifa Abeyo aims to dispense wisdom, laughter, and tears. She wants to go back to the basics because she knows many of her listeners are not initiated and lack most fundamental ritual and artifactual literacies. She wants to go back to the beginning, when women told stories about how the world worked, how “a wise woman is a well prepared woman.” She references the significance of entering through the back porch, how her aunty said, “you not the president, don’t open my front door.” Entering the back door was for family. She reminds the listener to take their shoes off at the porch, to not track red dirt into the house, to make sure the screen door is properly closed.

Even though she roots her practice in tradition, Ifa Abeyo understands that Hoodoo is not static. “I want you to evolve as well. And it’s okay to rebrand, reinvent, and go back, but go with what you know.” Hoodoo simultaneously looks to the past for guidance and evolves into the future. Ifa Abeyo recognizes that not everyone will agree with her practice, but that it’s okay because she has no interest in glitz and glory. Just do what you know!

Even so, there is power in performing Conjure the way(s) it used to be. To this point, Ifa Abeyo deliberates on when it would be best to record the episodes and concludes that the evening would be optimal because “back porch Conjure work was really in the evening. That’s when egun spoke.”

While podcasts may not involve the same level of active engagement that is characteristic of Reddit—though it is possible to read others’ Reddit posts and never post or comment themselves—podcasts offer a different, more embodied learning experience which engages aural (and sometimes visual) senses. The integration of digital technology into Hoodoo does not detract from its practice. It expands it by opening new ways to engage with the sacred.

### *YouTube*

YouTube channels like Yeyeo Botanica which dabble in an assortment of Hoodoo adjacent practices provide a wide selection of how-to videos. As a medium of audio-visual learning, YouTube best mirrors actual in-person apprenticeship-based learning. In “TOP 10 SPIRITUAL BATH/WASHES YOU NEED!| Yeyeo Botanica,” Elemi shares ten must know spiritual baths and why she likes them. Even in the how-to video format, Elemi makes room for individual differences in Hoodoo practice and recognizes that what works wonders for one person might not work for someone else. “You could maybe use money [bath] and ‘come to me’ together. Right? Because there are times when people think you have to use only one at a time. In my world, there are no rules. As long as it works and makes sense” (Yeyeo Botanica, 2023). The combinatory effects of these baths apply sympathetic magical logic to either increase the specificity of one’s intentions or to expand the coverage of effective areas, but finding the right combinations that work for each individual may require trial and error.

A trend we will continue to see with websites and online stores is the cross referencing of media, such as when u/\_notdoriangray cites their own Patreon page for an article on magical baths. YouTube videos can be linked in Reddit or Facebook posts. Comments may cite videos when giving advice. YouTube shorts (short form, looped, vertical videos with a maximum length of 60

seconds) or snippets from longer videos may be repurposed for Instagram reels or TikTok videos, leading to overlapped content. Like any other internet personality, most YouTubers will encourage viewers and listeners to like and share their content and to follow their other platforms such as Twitter or Instagram. In addition to teaching through embodied demonstrations of ritual practices, YouTube engages users in multisensory ways and weaves a complex network of integrated ecosystems of knowledge through cross referenced links and collaborations with other content creators. Just as Hoodoo practitioners must exist in community and in relation to one another, Hoodoo media is heteroglossic and does not exist in isolation.

### *Websites and Digital Storefronts*

With the proliferation of the internet, most brick and mortar businesses have some online presence. Other stores exist solely online or utilize online marketplaces like Etsy which is popular among small vendors of vintage items, art, and handmade goods. I categorize the offerings of online stores into three categories:

1. Objects/artifacts: herbs, candles, crystals, mojo bags
2. Services: spiritual consultations, exclusive lessons, or Hoodoo courses
3. Merchandise: branded apparel, mugs, tote bags

I consider the first two here and discuss merchandise (merch) in the later section on CyberHoodoo. The essential artifacts of Hoodoo such as candles, oils, honey jars, powders, and altar items can be acquired through a variety of online vendors. One might consider what is lost (and what is gained) when perusing and purchasing Hoodoo artifacts online. One certainly loses the embodied experience of walking into a store, hearing the doorbell chime as you enter and being greeted by the eclectic aromatics of herbs and candles. Perhaps shopping online is at least marginally “better”

than mail-order given that online stores can have higher fidelity images of products and product reviews. But clicking and scrolling through catalogs and shopping carts will never be the same as buying in person or gathering ingredients from one's cupboard and backyard.

With the integration of New Age practices, the use of certain artifacts such as white sage, which exists outside the original lexicon of Hoodoo pharmacology, has proliferated. No matter how digital Hoodoo becomes, it will never be devoid of physical materia. What is Hoodoo without roots and medicine? Perhaps if a seismic shift were to occur in the indeterminable technologic future and our consciousnesses became uploadable to virtual simulations of alternative realities, at which point we could exist solely in metaphysical forms, we could do without roots. But at that point, perhaps we would simply call it something different altogether as the definitional bounds of Hoodoo could no longer constrain such a reality. Hoodoo continues to evolve alongside its sacred and magical artifacts, not removed from them.

As for Hoodoo spiritual services, two types are typically offered: spiritual readings/work and lessons/workshops. Each practitioner maintains their own rules around the practice of these services. Some practitioners require that customers come in person for spiritual consultations. For Houngan at the Haus of Hoodoo, phone calls, FaceTime, Zoom, etc. are out of the picture and consultations are not performed under time restraints. They can last a couple minutes to hours depending on the individual case. Halicue who runs The Gilded Apsara is quite the opposite, offering online readings via Zoom for fixed costs and durations. Readings are typically one hour with prices ranging from \$110 to \$150.

The ontology of online courses is not so clear. One potential distinction is that YouTube videos are free and open access while courses typically are not, instead acquirable through one-time-purchase or renewable subscription. If one excludes YouTube educational videos, the online

Hoodoo course landscape is not so robust. In addition to her YouTube how-tos, Elemei from Yeyeo Botanica also offers a few premium courses such as a “Spiritual Tools 101: Whats and Whys,” a prerecorded virtual training class for \$50. Fredericka from Conjuria offers a “Healing the Womb (Part 1)” class for \$75. Given that the latter is labeled as part one, one must deduce that there is at least a part two, but part one is the only course offered in the “classes” tab of Conjura’s website. Excitingly there is also a tab called Conjuria Academy, but the tab is currently empty and reads, “Coming very, very soon.”

Certain Patreon memberships, a site where users can pay to view premium creator content, offer exclusive courses. Juju Bae’s Patreon has three subscription tiers: The Jujus (\$10/month), The Juju Baes (\$22/month), and Bad Bitch Witches (\$50/month). Each tier has increasing numbers of perks such as shoutouts, early access to merch, and replays to Zoom workshops. At the highest tier, subscribers receive access to one exclusive article and video per month along with all previous tier perks, allowing them to uniquely access certain ritual and spiritual knowledge. The video may be a reading, lecture, tutorial, or spell working. Bad Bitch Witches also receive recordings of all relevant outside events and recordings to all past classes. Despite the explicit labeling of these courses as didactic, it should not detract from the pedagogical function of Reddit and Facebook groups. Active engagement through asking questions and replying to others may well augment one’s learning from YouTube videos and live workshops and constitute a holistic Hoodoo learning experience and hasten the development of one’s ritual literacies.

## Conjure, Psycho-Spiritual Healing, Ancestral Cooperativity

In an interview with Hurston, Aunt Shady Anne Sutton reflects on the Civil War, “These young Negroes reads they books and talk about the war freeing the Negroes, but Aye, Lord! A heap sees, but a few knows. ‘Course, the war was a lot of help, but how come the war took place? They think they knows, but they don’t. John de Conquer had done put it into the white folks to give us our freedom, that’s what. Old Massa fought against it, but us could have told him that it wasn’t no use. *Freedom just had to come* [my emphasis]” (Hurston, 1943). Through the power of storytelling, Aunt Shady Anne weaves a reality in which white folk have no power over Black people. One in which “freedom just had to come.” What real investment did white folk have in freeing Black people? John de Conquer ended slavery, not emancipation; so power came from the (grass)roots and tore down the institution of slavery. How we tell stories matters. In this section, I dissect the conjural (freedom) pedagogy of storytelling.

Stories are powerful because they open possibilities and futures (Adichie, 2009; Markus & Nurius, 1986). For centuries, white people refused to document slave revolts during the Middle Passage, painting the illusion of slavery as benign and civilizing. When Black men entered the academy, writings about Black-male led ship revolts proliferated with women remaining submissive below deck. This, however, is illogical and countered by Dr. Rebecca Hall’s analysis of slave ship captain’s logs. Slave revolts were fought on one in ten slave ships. Why would enslaved men be unfettered and allowed on deck? Not only is such an assumption incorrect, it subverts women’s agency in instigating slave revolts. In fact, revolts were more likely on ships with more women<sup>32</sup> who, by the assumptions of female fragility, were left unchained and allowed on the top deck. The logic of this storytelling, however, is also the source of irony: the deck is

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<sup>32</sup> This fact was initially dismissed as a statistical fluke until Dr. Hall’s reconsideration.

where the weapons are. Therefore it is women who started slave ship revolts. Stories like these which have been re(store)ied—my attempt at a play on words of restored and restoried, that is, retold—illuminate the Black feminine history of the Black Atlantic and the agentive role of Black women in resisting oppression.

These (re)tellings are a means of healing of intergenerational trauma. Recall that the embodied performance of Gullah/Geechee storytelling in which the storyteller is possessed by the affective qualities of an ancestor is a practice of living memory and communal remembering. Concerning Hoodoo, there is an increasing understanding that “ancestral spirituality is foundational to community healing. Not just the healing of bodies, but the healing of relationships. Connecting, restoring, and strengthening relationships between those who came before, those who are present now. Between the dead and the living. Between the natural realm and the social world in which all humanity moves” (Chireau, 2021). By conjuring the spirits of ancestors, venerative storytelling enables Black folx today to (re)connect with their ancestral past. Knowing how to contact one’s ancestors as well as how to maintain healthy, cooperative, reciprocal relationships with those ancestors is what I consider ancestral literacies.

In addition to the psycho-spiritual healing of intergenerational trauma, Conjure also attends to the more banal imbalances of life. Strained relationships with friends or significant others may manifest in mental and physical dis-ease. As such, the resolution of these conflicts through Conjure magic, if successful, would constitute a sort of healing. We can consider even the most pragmatic applications of magic—for love, sex, wealth—as forms of healing which resolve heartache/heartbreak, sexual tension, and financial instability, all of which can induce stress if left unresolved.



Regarding the ritual practices of Conjure, Psalms reading is still commonly practiced as seen in the previous Reddit analysis. In *Hoodoo in America*, Hurston states that “the Bible is the greatest Conjure book in the world [and] Moses...the greatest Conjuror” (Hurston, 1931, p. 414). Proper recitation of Psalms are a matter of ritual literacy and ancestral literacy if used to meditate interactions with one’s ancestors. Like in the use of charms<sup>33</sup> which function off principles of sympathetic magic, the selection of Psalm is deliberate and specific to the situation in some way, either referencing the present situation or the desired effect.

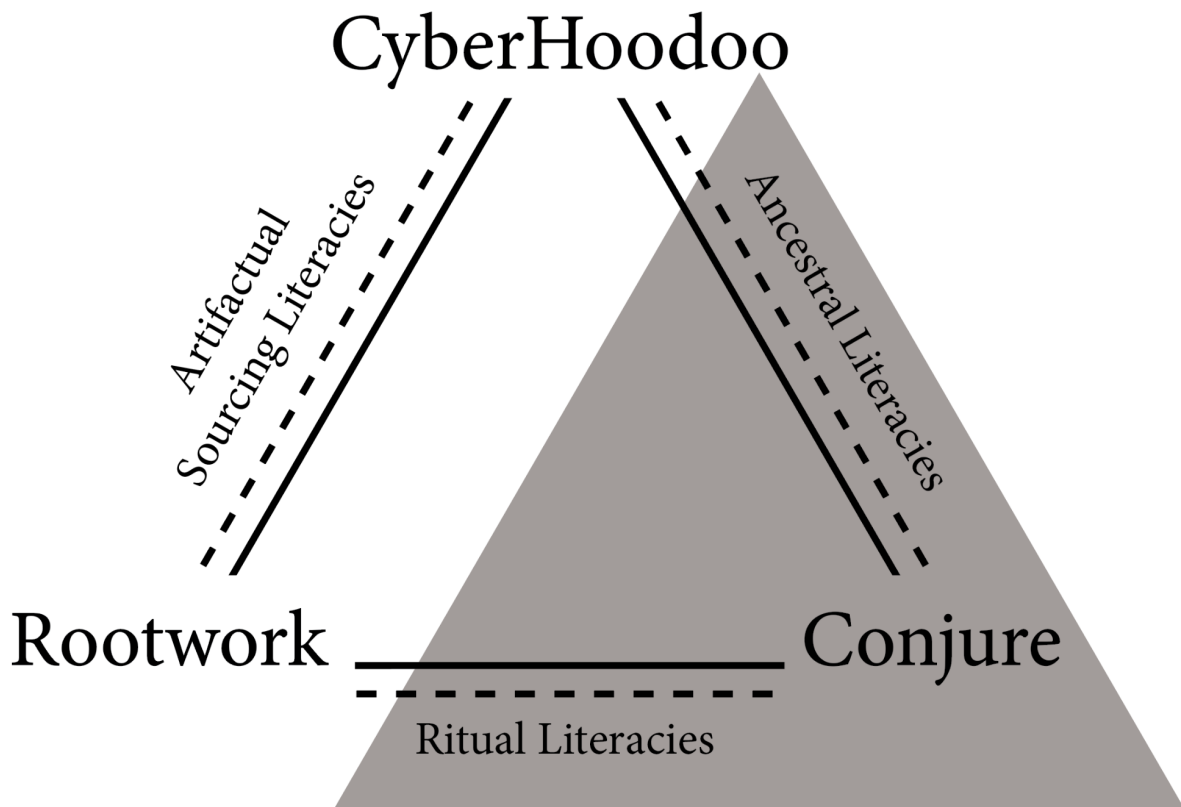


Figure 9. Theoretical overlap of Conjure in HHLs. Conjure is connected to Rootwork and CyberHoodoo by ritual and ancestral literacies, respectively.

<sup>33</sup> Imitative charms use symbolic logic (i.e. salt is a preservative and therefore protects against evil). The phallic High John root instills bravery and protection. Contagious charms function off previous contact. Grave dirt thus invokes the dead.

## Ancestral Literacies and Rerooting

Hoodoo remains a practice of pragmatism, the manifestation of present needs and desires. Concerns around love, breakup, faith, banishment, binding, proper practice, viable ritual/pharmacological ingredient substitutions, counterspells, and reversing work appear often in r/ConjureHoodooRootwork<sup>34</sup>. As I have already discussed some of the bio-psychological healing potentials of Conjure, I now provide examples from an ancestral literacies and spiritual healing perspective. I interpret the process of searching for and reconnecting with ancestors as psycho-spiritual healing.

In a thread titled “Losing faith in hoodoo, ancestors, and God and having a hard time,” the OP seeks advice for reaffirming their faith. Recent job and graduate school applications have been unsuccessful, and their home life is turbulent. Despite maintaining seemingly every possible proper ritual practice—praying at a clean, well-stocked altar, taking spiritual baths, using amulets, meditating, keeping a gratitude journal—their “life feels like it’s falling apart” (u/oanamei123, 2023).

In addition to words of affirmation, consoling the OP that feelings of doubt and loss of faith are normal experiences, five commenters recommended that the OP seek an experienced spiritual reader to help reveal the cause of their adversities. “A seasoned reader will be able to tell you what is going on and ALSO equip you to face it with no fear!” (u/oanamei123, 2023). A reader could help the OP navigate their relationship with their ancestors and reveal unexpected points of contention.

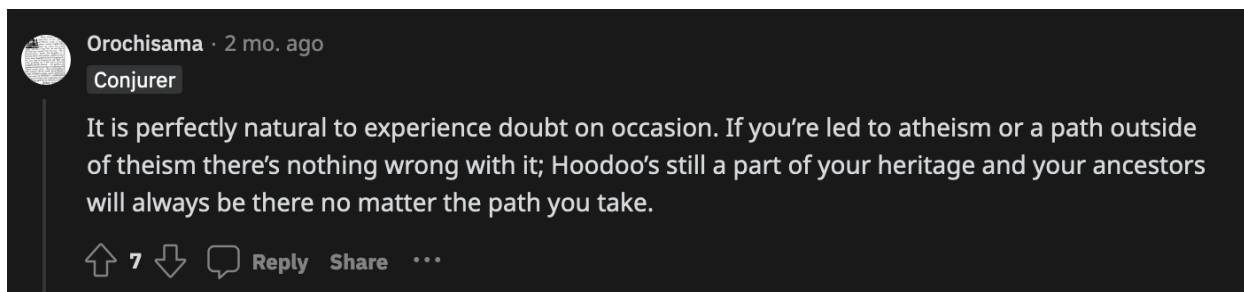
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<sup>34</sup> Examples of recent posts include [sic]:

- Tips On Hotfoot Powder. Cause this bitch gotta GO.
- Recommendations for a coworker who did me dirty.
- I need a spell or something to bring my ex back ❤️ please help me somebody
- Need advice for immediate candle ritual to be done tonight, wwithin next two hours...to banish so they have to suddenly move
- Tips for disposal in crowded downtown area?

What I find most compelling is the discourse around the OP's loss of faith in their ancestors. u/Orochisama suggests that even when one's religious convictions fall by the wayside, Hoodoo remains part and parcel to their identity (Fig. 10). It is rooted in their heritage and regardless of the choices the OP makes, to continue trying to work with their ancestors or to leave them, their ancestors will always be there. u/Orochisama's ancestral literacy/perspective is reminiscent of the story of the prodigal son whose wayward actions do not disqualify him from his father's love. But unlike the parable father, ancestors are human and are not impervious to the pitfalls of humanity. For u/Fit\_Currency121, gods can be the worst, inexplicably upset and uncooperative but ancestors may only be marginally better. Yet still, they implore the OP to "continue to give [ancestors] the reverence due [to] them by virtue of their status" (u/oyanamei123, 2023).

Just as it would be impolite to spontaneously run away in the middle of a conversation, both gods and ancestors require a proper ritual interface, a set of rules of engagement—the generally agreed upon set of implicit (or explicit) rules and procedures for how to act in a specific circumstance. But even when following these rules, sometimes, like with people, they just don't like you, perhaps by virtue of a spirit you "inadvertently offended" (u/oyanamei123, 2023). For these Redditors, ancestral ties cannot be broken. It is thus worth cultivating one's relationship with their ancestors, the effectiveness in which they can contact their ancestors, and always giving ancestors due respect: that is, to cultivate one's ancestral literacies.



*Figure 10. Comment on post titled “Losing faith in hoodoo, ancestors, and God and having a hard time” separating ancestral heritage from theological belief.*

Other Redditors recommend the OP find their power from other sources, circumventing the need to work with ancestors. u/obsessedsim1 is agnostic, having also lost their faith like the OP, but continues to practice Hoodoo and “use rootwork as a way to connect to nature and [them]self. Even when the gods fail us, we know nature gives us everything we need and we continue to take it one step at a time” (u/oyanamei123, 2023). Even being agnostic, they still thank their ancestors and pray to God as a representative for nature, the true provider. Practices of reverence and acknowledgement are not mutually exclusive with grounding in one’s own agency. u/CocoZane feels similarly and doesn’t rely on ancestors for help with Hoodoo work. Instead, they believe that everyone is sufficiently blessed with what they need to find opportunities and to succeed. They do not rely on intercession from higher powers to resolve personal conflicts. While still spiritually active, u/CocoZane recognizes that sometimes mundane, non-magical solutions are the most effective. u/Fit\_Currency121 leans into the same notion of self-agency in guiding one’s successes: “Lastly, if you don’t believe in anything else, believe in you, your magick, and that the spells you are doing to create the life you find value and meaning in are not just in the works but are inevitabilities” (u/oyanamei123, 2023). Even in the absence of faith, one’s conviction and intentions still matter.



r/ConjureRootworkHoodoo

by searching444peace 3 mo. ago



## HOODOO IS A CLOSED PRACTICE

What people are missing as an essential part of Hoodoo practice is our communication and reverence to the spirit world. Those spirits being African and Black ancestors because they were the ORIGINAL practitioners of the magick so who do you think you are summoning when you are white? Not your ancestors. And you're summoning and asking for help from the people YOUR ancestors abused, mutilated, raped, and MURDERED as well as DESTROYED the black family which is why so many of us are picking up the pieces today due the erasure that came from White people. Indigenous American Indian people assisted black slaves in the creation of this magick due to the herbal nature of the practice BUT that practice byway of Indigenous American Indians is Shamanism or something else. Correct me if I'm wrong. I am a descendent of both Choctaw Indian plant healers and Conjurers from SC by way of Louisiana. Stop playing with shit you don't know! You invoke these spirits hell yes they're going to get you! Talk to your own people! This obsession is sick at this point. There are plenty of other magicks that have the same aspects but this is for US and BY US!



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Share

*Figure 11. Post titled “HOODOO IS A CLOSED PRACTICE” by u/searching444peace arguing against the ethics of non-Black folx practicing Hoodoo.*

In a post titled “HOODOO IS A CLOSED PRACTICE,” the OP, u/searching444peace, begins by stating the weirdness of white people calling on African and Black ancestors who were the originators of Black magic (Fig. 11). This weirdness is situated in the historical oppressive relationship between white enslaver ancestors and enslaved African ancestors. The declarative of “Stop playing with shit you don't know!” stands out given this pretext. One must interpret “knowing” as more than just ritual or embodied knowledge. Because the OP tells readers to “talk

to your own people,” to “know” African/Black ancestors must be to be their descendent. Therefore ancestry as a form of knowing is a facet of ancestral literacies.

In a separate comment chain on the same thread, u/razedbyrabbits offers their definition of closed practice as not limited by race but by epistemic knowledge which is bestowed onto others by existing practitioners (Fig. 12). Given the nature of Hoodoo as an oral tradition, “each practitioner gets to decide who they share with.” u/razedbyrabbits continues to state that with the advent of Hoodoo books, previously private knowledge is made publicly available for everyone. Importantly, by accessing these books, one can drive *some*, not all, of the necessary epistemic knowledge to practice Hoodoo. Hoodoo how-to videos further democratize access to Hoodoo knowledge. Tutorials that make use of social media to reach a larger audience of consumers are particularly potent when compared to books which require more sustained attention to digest.

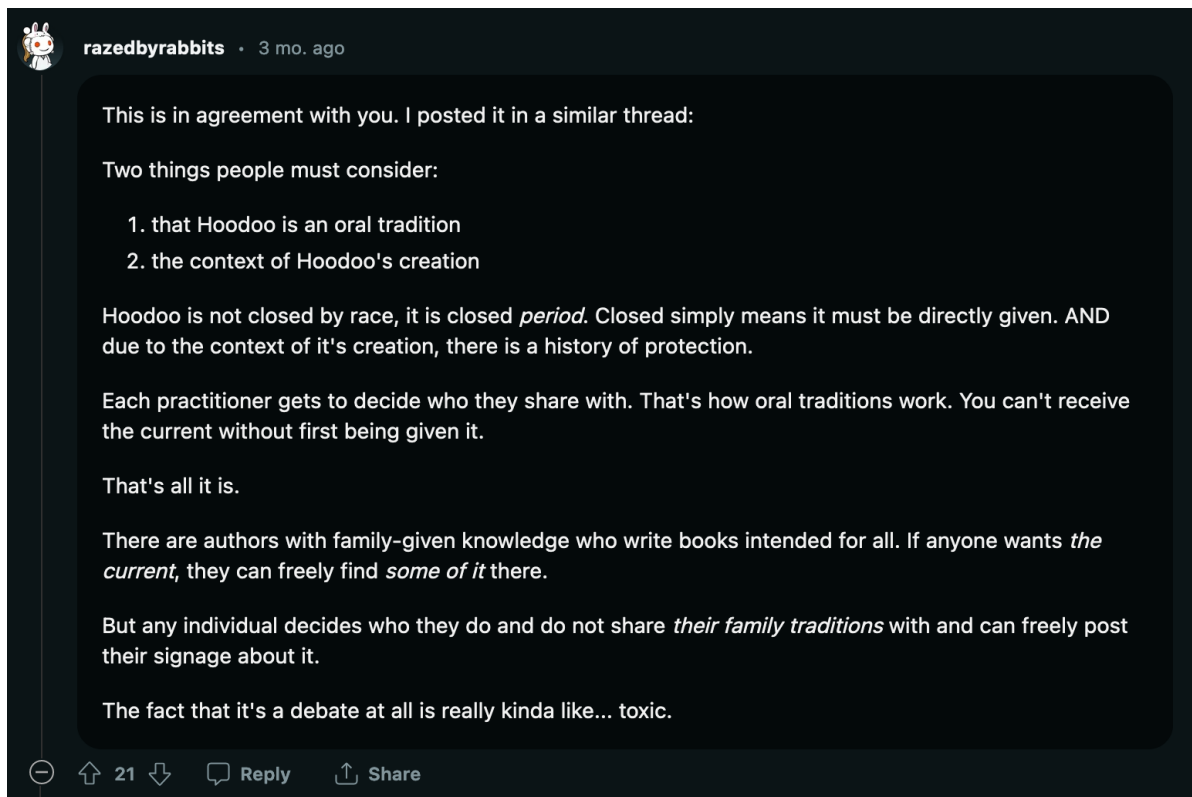


Figure 12. Comment on post titled “HOODOO IS A CLOSED PRACTICE” complicating the implications of closedness and the dissemination of knowledge.

u/Seaside\_1 builds on the epistemological closedness of Hoodoo by noting that regardless of if one is African American or white, learning spells and developing one's ritual and conjural literacies takes dedicated practice. An unpracticed person cannot simply prepare a spell and expect efficacy. Even with detailed instructions, there may be an epistemological gap that prevents a ritual from working, such as the inability to establish a strong connection with spirits. As an alternative, u/Seaside\_1 suggested that those interested in Hoodoo spellwork, particularly those who are non-African American, to hire a skilled African American practitioner to engage with Hoodoo while simultaneously supporting Black practitioners. While not explicitly stated, one should deduce that the user also supports Black people who want to use Hoodoo but do not have the time or desire to learn the practice fully to also hire Black practitioners as a practice of cooperative economics.

u/DarlaLunaWinter suggests that the conversation pivots away from ontological arguments on who can practice Hoodoo given the heterogeneity of opinions surrounding the openness and closedness of Hoodoo. "The truth is this debate is going to go on forever and we're better off talking about the real meat that affects the daily life of the descendants of slaves..." (u/searching444peace, 2023). The two core issues they center are:

1. Profiteering off Black cultural practices and the implicit bias, by non-Black and Black people alike, against Black owned businesses
2. The denial of the history of slavery

To their first point, u/DarlaLunaWinter is not suggesting that people "buy crap from ppl bc they're Black." Rather, they are reminding people to decolonize the implicit internalization of white supremacy that marks our collective consciousness. This is what they refer to as "internal work." u/DarlaLunaWinter then proceeds to challenge the OP's Choctaw Indian heritage, stating that the Choctaw "were one of the biggest Native American participants in the slave trade and were

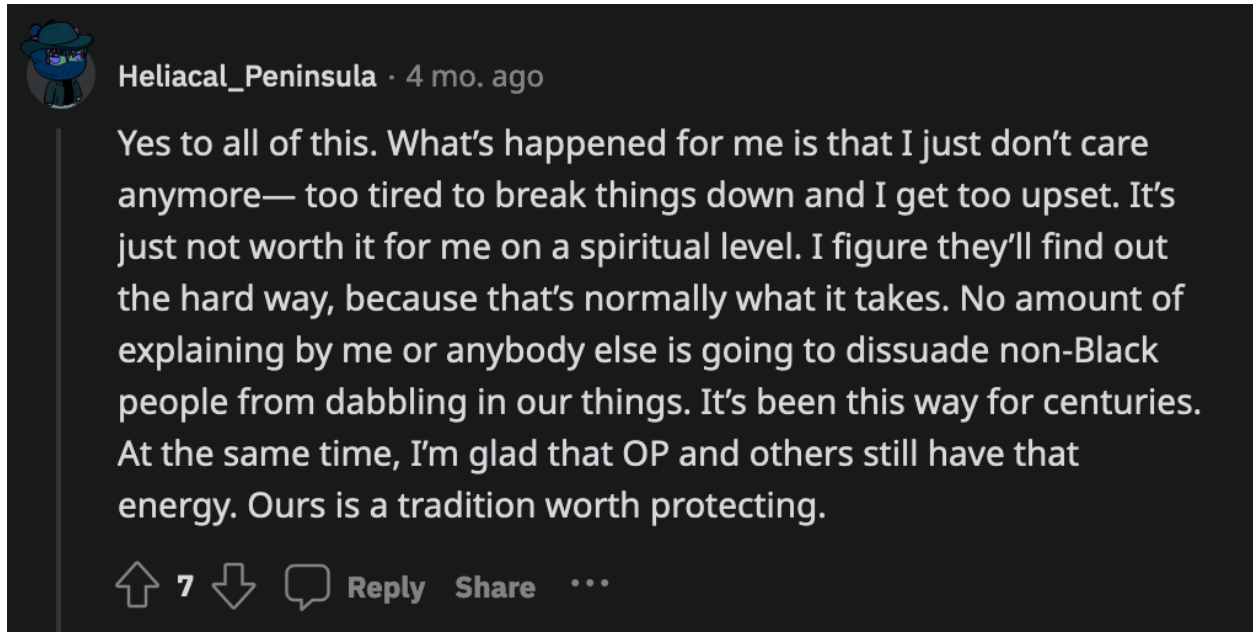
renowned for their skills tracking and returning slaves, were commonly hired as overseers in certain states, and fought for the confederacy during the civil war.” To this point, claiming American Indian heritage does not absolve the OP from having ancestors who exploited Black people. Knowing this history crucially changes one’s relationship with their ancestors and is a form of ancestral literacy.

u/DarlaLunaWinter further complicates the implications of Hoodoo race discourse, citing the increasing rates of interracial marriage and how queerness can sometimes hinder one’s relationship with their ancestors. As someone with both African and Irish ancestors, u/DarlaLunaWinter reflects that even though they did not “invite [their] Irish ancestors” to the table, Irish ancestors protected and helped them anyway. Other ancestors are unsupportive of u/DarlaLunaWinter because u/DarlaLunaWinter is bisexual and polyamorous, so while u/DarlaLunaWinter acknowledges those ancestors’ presence, they do not always work with those ancestors as conflict may arise. Just like with living people, practitioners of Conjure are deliberate in who they work with because not every ancestor will be openly cooperative or easy to work with. Knowing which ancestor to ask for what favor is thus a form of literacy.

u/DarlaLunaWinter ends by considering how Hoodoo will continue to grow into the future. How will practitioners confront the ambiguity of race/ancestry of mixed people as it relates to ontological power? What can be learned from the Caribbean, where “there’s a shit ton of light skinned folks who have more historical knowledge and experience with hoodoo adjacent practices?” Other users like u/VeryOpinionatedFem specifically criticize the blaséness with which white people engage with Hoodoo, appropriating it and diluting it into cute witchy tricks. They further criticize the audacity of non-Black Hoodoo enthusiasts to input their opinions on whether Hoodoo is a closed practice despite a clear conflict of interest. Amidst the tension surrounding the



racial implications of Hoodoo ontological authenticity, u/Helialcal\_Peninsula's comment is most telling of the emotional exhaustion that comes with constantly having to deconstruct, explain, and justify Hoodoo as a closed practice.



*Figure 13. Comment on post titled “HOODOO IS A CLOSED PRACTICE” admitting the exhaustion of protecting Hoodoo.*

u/Helialcal\_Peninsula recognizes the essential work of preserving Hoodoo, whether based on literacy or ontology, to protect against the threat of racial domination (Fig. 13). But at a certain point, they could no longer sustain the fight. It became too emotionally and spiritually draining, a tiresome and uninteresting burden from which they could see little benefit. For u/Helialcal\_Peninsula, spiritual healing simply meant avoiding unnecessary conflict.

## CyberHoodoo, Psycho-Social Healing, Cooperative Economics

The universe is infused in a heteroglossic soup of the sacred and the profane. There is no distinct separation between physical and spiritual worlds. Instead, spiritual and digital worlds share a symbiotic relationship with our contemporary physical environments. Like radio waves, if we can tune into the right frequencies<sup>35</sup>, we are able to engage spiritual and digital realities, the latter of which has become indispensable to our daily lives. While traditional Hoodoo practice is most concentrated along the Gulf coast, the boom of digital culture has made (Cyber)Hoodoo a national phenomenon. In this section, I explore theories of digital spirituality, fugitivity as a form of healing, and how technological advances and the proliferation of social media have vastly expanded the reach and interconnectedness of American Hoodoo culture.

Even when considering the most contemporary forms of Hoodoo conjure, we must revisit the past to situate the present. In simultaneously looking back and looking forward, we can apply a historical retrospective and future imaginative to engage with the present time. Digital Black religions<sup>36</sup> are not something new. Megachurches and televangelism have long utilized radio to integrate the sacred into mundane daily affairs (e.g. commutes to work). The practice of Bayou folk healing too has been technologically augmented through the practice of spiritual telemedicine. During the early rise of COVID-19, so too was there a shift in Sunday services transitioning to online mediums like Zoom and other video conferencing software. These are more specifically forms of techno-spirituality defined as the process in which “religious institutions and persons attempt to make their forms of spirituality [and transcendent experiences] more readily accessible”

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<sup>35</sup> Magic can also be understood in terms of frequencies. “I’ve found that different magical systems effect [sic] different layers of reality. If the ancestors can’t help you, maybe try a Shem angel. Could be your particular situation needs a different frequency” (u/oanamei123, 2023).

<sup>36</sup> Recall Erika Gault’s definition of digital Black religions as “the study of Black folks’ digital pathways to healing and wholeness (freedom) and their religious contribution to the development of digital technology” (Gault, 2022).

through web based technologies, mobile applications, and other human computer interfaces (Butler, 2022, pp. 45). Techno-spirituality differs, however, from digital spirituality in that digital spirituality “is more broadly focused on the integration of digital mediums into one’s way of life” (Butler, 2022, p. 46).

Concerning the practice of digital integration, Butler (re)defines spirituality as “a lived epistemology—a code,” consisting of the “murky and mundane elements of life where transcendence, muck and mire meet through embodied behavior” (Butler, 2022, p. 41). Rather than constructing spirituality around affective experiences of transcendence, interconnectedness, feelings of greater cosmic meaning, the practice of daily ritual takes the spotlight. Although grand spiritual experiences (perhaps one induced during a fungal psychedelic trip as suggested by the Redditor replying to the post regarding smoking cessation) may feel more monumental given their sheer sensory grandeur, we should entertain the possibility that micro-rituals are more telling of one’s true spirituality. Mundanely banal, they represent the default mode of spiritual consciousness. Just as social cognition is the default for our brains, daily, hourly, minute by minute rituals represent the core of our spiritual being (Meyer, 2019).

While these micro-practices may seem insignificant, by cyberizing Hoodoo with technology, the potency of individual personal rituals is aggregated and leveraged for collective social change. As Hoodoo practitioners take to the streets and offer the High John de Conquer roots to protestors at Black Lives Matter marches, broader Black social movements take on a religio-cultural significance and amass a psychosocio-spiritual collective Black identity. The empowerment of CyberHoodoo does not directly come from its cybernetics, rather digital technology crucially extends the accessibility and influence of ritual through digital means. With

the added temporal freedom of video documentation, Instagram stories, and Facebook posts, the limitations of linear time are further dissolved.

What remains is Hoodoo's ability to bring together communities for radical healing and political ends. "Black religion itself can be thought of as a [counter hegemonic] technology invented by Black users (enslaved Africans operating as the original content creators!). Black technological invention for the purpose of survival and freedom has found multiple forms of expression in America's history. Digital Black religion is only one of the more recent incarnations of that reality" (Gault, 2022, p. 9). Moreover, while Black religion, the invisible institution, underground railroad, and other "Black technologies of freedom have often run counter and under radar to the networks of white supremacy," CyberHoodoo is set apart by its relative hypervisibility (Gault, 2022, p. 9). Since the start of the Atlantic slave trade, Black folx have been under surveillance and scrutiny, oscillating between invisibility (e.g. in political discourse, policy, academia) and hypervisibility (e.g. police arrest, gun violence, media). In juxtaposition to the invisible institution, CyberHoodoo does not have an explicit need to be invisible or hidden. It "hides" in plain sight: in the subreddits, websites, YouTube channels that the vast majority of non-practitioners of Hoodoo ignore and have little interest in.

Though some still argue that Hoodoo is a closed practice (whether ancestrally or mentorship wise), much of the information about the practice of Hoodoo is readily available online, whether through books, videos, courses, or forum posts. And if one is to assume that CyberHoodoo, like any living, breathing organism, is to continue to exist and thrive, it must have a way (preferably multiple ways) to reproduce itself. In *Hoodoo in America*, Hurston lays out the three ways in which one becomes a Hoodoo doctor (Hurston, 1931; Kuma, 1977):

1. By heredity

2. By serving an apprenticeship under an established practitioner
3. By the “call”

While heredity, the “call,” and peculiar births (e.g. being born with a caul) may still be valid ways of initiation, the modern “initiate”<sup>37</sup> most likely relies on the availability of vast digital educational resources. While CyberHoodoo may not authentically imitate traditional<sup>38</sup> Hoodoo practices, it nonetheless sustains its cultural practice and function through social and intergenerational healing. As with all things, Hoodoo is in a constant iterative cycle of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The ontological state of “Black religion and/as technology [is therefore] not bound to a particular tradition but can be understood as part of a broader set of religio-cultural-spiritual practices deployed by Black people for the purposes of liberation, healing, and thriving in an anti-Black world” (McCormack, 2022, p. 53). Given that Black people today are not enslaved, the conditions of the Jim Crow era may be a more apt comparison to the affective quality of CyberHoodoo resistance. While still liberatory, it would simply be inappropriate to equate contemporary circumstances to the life-or-death stakes of Hoodoo under slavery or Vodou and the Haitian Revolution. The fire of CyberHoodoo resistant instead burns as a hot (sometime grieving, sometimes angry, sometimes joyous) ember, scorching and subverting white power not through insurrection or poisonings of slave masters, but through reaffirming Black existence through digital means.

As a counterpart to resisting the white gaze, CyberHoodoo offers an alternative route through love and healing. Like the first eclectic emergence of Conjure and Rootwork, CyberHoodoo pulls and borrows (or more radically, “steals”) from whatever resources are

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<sup>37</sup> Might we consider novices who dabble in Hoodoo solely for their personal affairs as initiated into a CyberHoodoo collective?

<sup>38</sup> Arguably the notion of what is considered traditional or classical (the progenitor or primal form) is amorphous, rejecting objective definition.

available. Hoodoo was the driving force in creating a collective African identity through the creolization of diverse ethnic groups. Now, the interconnected cyberwebs of Hoodoo knowledge offers the same possibility.

With the increased prevalence of young, Black, female, and gender queer Hoodoo practitioners<sup>39</sup>, contemporary Hoodoo practice offers a powerful reclaiming of (ancestral) roots by African diaspora who actively leverage ancestral spirituality for community healing (Chireau, 2021; Pitts, 2019). The fact that many of these CyberHoodoos are Black women is perhaps unsurprising given that “Black women out of necessity and rich traditions of ingenuity remain at the center of technological freedom movements” (Gault, 2022, p. 12). Their work follows the histories of powerful Black Hoodoo women who were chiefly responsible as the repositories of domestic healing knowledge, folk remedies, rituals, and medicines. Through female specific healing practices, Hoodoo women invoked a divine feminine sensibility which was augmented by sacred medicine, roots, and herbalism. (Re)calibrating the scholarly lens to spotlight Black, female, queer people subverts both white supremacy and the male gaze.

In the process of reclaiming Hoodoo as Black cultural heritage, CyberHoodoo affords the opportunity to boldly reinstate Hoodoo as cultural resistance, healing, and liberation. Marcelitte Failla’s analysis of Black womxn witches supports the notion of CyberHoodoo as a distinctly Black/African American practice. Failla notes the rise in Black womxn and femme witches in the recent decade and bimodally decodes the mechanism of their cyber practices into two facets: those of ontological power and those of Black worldmaking. She discriminates the ontology of Black

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<sup>39</sup> Albert Wuaku, professor of African and Caribbean religions at Florida International University reflects that African diasporic traditions “are indeed growing in the U.S....[and] have a strong appeal to groups of African Americans who have been struggling with questions of identity, who don’t feel they fit so well within the American system. They’re especially appealing to women, who tend to hold more powerful positions within the African traditions than in Western cultures” (Pitts, 2019). The elevated position of women in these traditions supports the rise of Black witchiness and the divine feminine, reflecting the histories of Black midwives and healers. Now, women are entrusted with power and no longer seen as lesser than the male conjurer.

witches as those having “innate abilities to harness divine energies such as the ability to see or hear spirits—effectively [fostering] personal agency through a repetitive online discourse encouraging other Black womxn and femmes to tap into their ontological power” which is independent of whiteness, multireligious, and beautiful (Failla, 2022, p. 30). Failla importantly reminds us that Ifá, Vodou, and Hoodoo are *not* witchcraft but Africana spiritual technologies to hone one’s ontological power. Thus it seems that the Black Hoodoo witch, like the Vodou priest or priestess, is a coveted role practiced by a select few whose powers of spiritual engagement exceed that of the normal populous. But one must wonder where these Black witches source their ontological power. If on the basis of melanin and ancestry, then their power is ultimately bound to Africa<sup>40</sup>. Through eclectic online engagements with podcasts, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Black witches continually (re)shape distinct narratives and identities of technological Black folk. In accruing followers, likes, and listeners, Black witches further garner trustworthiness and legitimacy while simultaneously cultivating joy, digital ecologies, and (worldbuilding) new Black planetary bodies.

Through the practice of rituals, mysticism, and divination, Black witches demonstrate their power through clairaudience (metaphysical hearing of the spirit realm), clairvoyance (extrasensory perception, typically referring to some sort of vision), clairsentience (metaphysical feeling or affective perception), clairscent (power to smell and interpret particular scents) (Failla, 2022). While the categorical distinctions of clair-senses are many and somewhat arbitrary, I would like to add claircognizance (mystical, intuitive knowing) to this list. Claircognizance may be particularly important to the invocation of the Black witch as it highlights the intuitive knowing that Failla and Black witches like Juju Bae (whom Failla analyzes) delineate from learned or

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<sup>40</sup> This will be a central concern for the upcoming section especially around the rhetoric of restricting Hoodoo as a practice of fugitivity and form of healing.

acquired spiritual and ritual literacy. Though one could argue that even claircognizance need not be innate. If one is simply initiated into the occult knowledge, they might develop an intuitive knowledge which they did not initially possess. It is undeniable that the ability to intuitively sense and know what is imperceptible is indispensable to the practice of Black witches, on or offline.

To further complicate the liberatory endeavor of Black digital religions, we might also consider Black transhumanism and Black posthumanism, which suggest that while people<sup>41</sup> exist, the “human” does not. Borrowing from literary-feminist hermeneutic readings of the Bible, the human is a white supremacist “text of terror” whose sole function is to segregate and discriminate that which is human (read: wealthy, white, cis het, men) from that which is not human (read: Black, indigenous, people of color, trans, queer folx) (Schones, 2021; Tribble, 1984). Implicated in the seemingly benign construct of the human are histories of colonization, racism, sexism, transphobia, the facade of respectability politics. Under this framework, we can unpack the ways in which Black people use Hoodoo to subvert and supersede the need to be labeled human under a racialized, capitalist system.

Helping to negotiate humanity, digital spirituality is *both* a tool of escape *and* a tool for immersion in the dynamics of daily life. Escaping the boundaries of white-colonialist hegemony, CyberHoodoo empowers Black folx to play in imaginative, subversive, new realities as the practice of digital fugitivity—retiring, if only briefly, to digital (Hoodoo) havens. Crucially, we must be wary of hyper-fixating on fugitive models which comes at the risk of dismissing situated-nonfugitive resistance. In the context of enslavement, to enshrine fugitivity as the sole means of

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<sup>41</sup> “In contrast to the universal construct of the human[,] people would be considered local and complex, embodied and ancient. Local in the sense that they come from somewhere [even if that place is unknown], from some people [i.e. ancestors]. People have a history with a local ecology that more often reflects mutuality and regeneration than excavation and extraction [such as the application of Hoodoo knowledge of local roots and herbs]. People share a connection to those from whom they originate, and are informed by ancestral knowledge—whether consciously aware or not (genetics are an example of indirect ancestral influence). The complex subjectivity of people requires an equally complex understanding of the relationships between people, spirituality, and technology” (Butler, 2022, pp. 42-43).



liberation would be to discount the experience of 97.5% of enslaved Africans who resisted and defied slavery from within the plantation (Jagmohan, 2023). Moreover, doing so would erase the resistance of almost all enslaved women given that 80% of fugitives were men (Jagmohan, 2023). Recalling our radio frequency analogy, Du Bois' double consciousness is one of the essential Black technologies used to toggle between the liminal spaces of whiteness and Blackness, analog and digital, human and meta-human, fugitive and bound, plant and animal and fungi. It complicates and situates (digital) fugitivity in our contemporary, post-technicolor, but not post-colorism world.

Insomuch as the simple act of survival is radical, the potential for Black folk to thrive and flourish outside of white aesthetics and pedagogies is profoundly powerful. Butler invokes the avoidance of death and decay as resistance, resisting entropy, and countering invisible systems. It is worth pushing these theories further. What if we shift our framework to embrace death (the dead, ancestors) and decay (recycling, Sankofa, returning to the earth). Thinking beyond the binary of flora and fauna, a third option appears: the possibility of fungal knowledge. Fungi, funga, and fungivity<sup>42</sup> break the ultimatum of bondage and respectability by analogizing the complex, multiple, and evolving creolized forms of (Cyber)Hoodoo. Neither plant nor animal, CyberHoodoo rejects white hegemony and exists as simultaneously familiar (using mundane, familiar apps like Twitter, Reddit, Instagram) and foreign (other, defiant, joyous). Hoodoo and its constantly shifting cyber/fungal/mycelial networks continue to adapt and evolve “in the midst of the variability associated with ever changing environments [as] a form of [wellness and] resistance” (Butler, 2022, p. 41). It remains indispensable to the Black digital ecosystem and exists subversively and subterranean. It is only fitting that “to mushroom” is a synonym for thriving.

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<sup>42</sup> I am borrowing from the title of *Fungivity: A Sketchbook Compilation* by artist Alex (Kingsley) van Zandt. They sometimes go by the username of Alekivz. <https://twitter.com/alekivz>

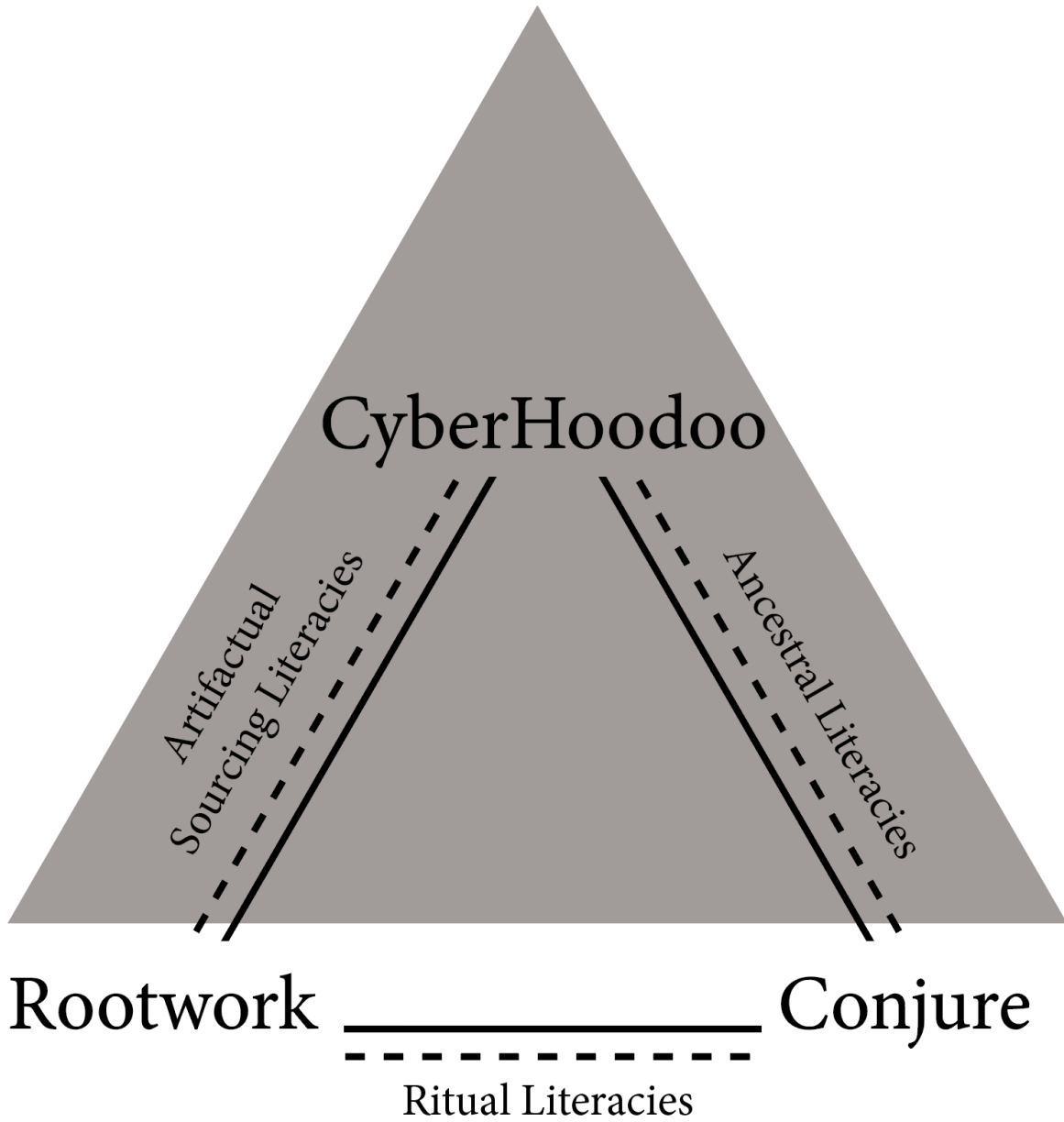
While new digital technologies (computers, smartphones, social media) have helped to blur the sacred and profane, so too have roots and plants acted as technological flora to extend our spiritual capacities. Plants are the easiest media to access spirit, expressed by the Yoruba phrase, “Kosi Ewe, Kosi Orisa.” That is, “no plants, no Orisha/spirits.” To reduce plants to ephemera would be to strip them of their agency as co-practitioners (recall cooperative roots) of Hoodoo and constrain their botanical pedagogy. It is therefore impossible for computers to replace the need for analog technologies of roots, plants, and candles which remain the fundamental tools of Hoodoo, cyber or otherwise.

The existence of a cyber realm does not ensure the mutually exclusive destruction of analog Hoodoo practices—we’re all still alive and present as physical humans, after all. Instead, digital technologies augment botanical technologies, increasing the accessibility of Hoodoo materia and Hoodoo knowledge. While I defined artifactual sourcing literacy as primarily referring to knowing where to buy artifacts (e.g. roots, candles, merchandise) and why particular artifactual sources (e.g. one’s own backyard vs. a department store) may be better or worse for certain artifacts, I add two stipulations: technological literacy and cooperative economic literacy. Technological literacy refers to knowledge of how to navigate the websites and other digital mediums to find what you’re looking for, whether an artifact to purchase or answer to a question. It is the embodied feeling of clicking, typing, scrolling, the verification of truth in an information dense cyberspace.

Cooperative economics concerns the ethics of “buying Black,” returning “full triangle” to our discussion of where one can source their roots. While some vendors may sell mislabeled and hence “fake” herbs, Hoodoo can still be efficacious even with products purchased from a reputable white vendor. But there is a distinct economic power in sourcing from Black owned stores

(Akitunde, 2019). Buying Black supports Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s call to strengthen Black institutions as a form of resistance.

Pragmatic it may be, there remains a certain pain with buying Hoodoo supplies from non-Black, specifically white owned, businesses. The author of the Shoppe Black article on Black Hoodoo shops reflected on an early experience of buying what they felt was a faulty and exploitative product from a white woman who was “waxing poetic on the forced separation of Black families and trafficked children conducted by her own ancestors. She [the white merchant] was benefiting from a craft that had been beaten out of and stolen from my people by hers. Selling a statue that, as she wrote, contained the spirit of Black mothers” (Lawson & Lewis, 2020). In the penultimate section, I discuss how gatekeeping is an act of self-preservation and fugitivity—restricting spatial access so that Black folx are beyond the reach of oppression—when contextualized in histories of colonization and oppression. I also provide examples of technological literacy and the joy/pride that comes with buying from Black owned businesses. Lastly, I provide a brief exploration of Black merch celebrating ancestors, Black joy, and witchiness as a practice of wellness, joy, and liberation.



*Figure 14. Theoretical overlap of CyberHoodoo in HHLs. CyberHoodoo is connected to Conjure and Rootwork by ancestral and artifactual sourcing literacies, respectively.*

## Ancestral Ontologies: Reclaiming Hoodoo as Healing

### Reddit

Even with new ways of conferring spiritual authority, who owns and can practice Hoodoo remains a common area of discussion. While the older generation of Hoodoos and rootworkers tend toward Hoodoo as a practice for everyone, especially after its commodification, younger generations seem less keen to allow such openness. In many ways, millennial and Gen Z Black young people are reclaiming Hoodoo as their own, forming cybernetic, communal networks of Black spiritual consciousness. In constructing a space that is made by and specifically for Black folx, CyberHoodoo problematizes the fact that white people can appropriate other cultures with little repercussion while making accusations of reverse-discrimination when not allowed into reclaimed BIPOC spaces. Multiple Reddit posts discuss whether Hoodoo is a closed practice. I unpack the ways in which by arguing the closedness of Hoodoo, Black practitioners enshrine Hoodoo as a form of fugitive sanctuary.

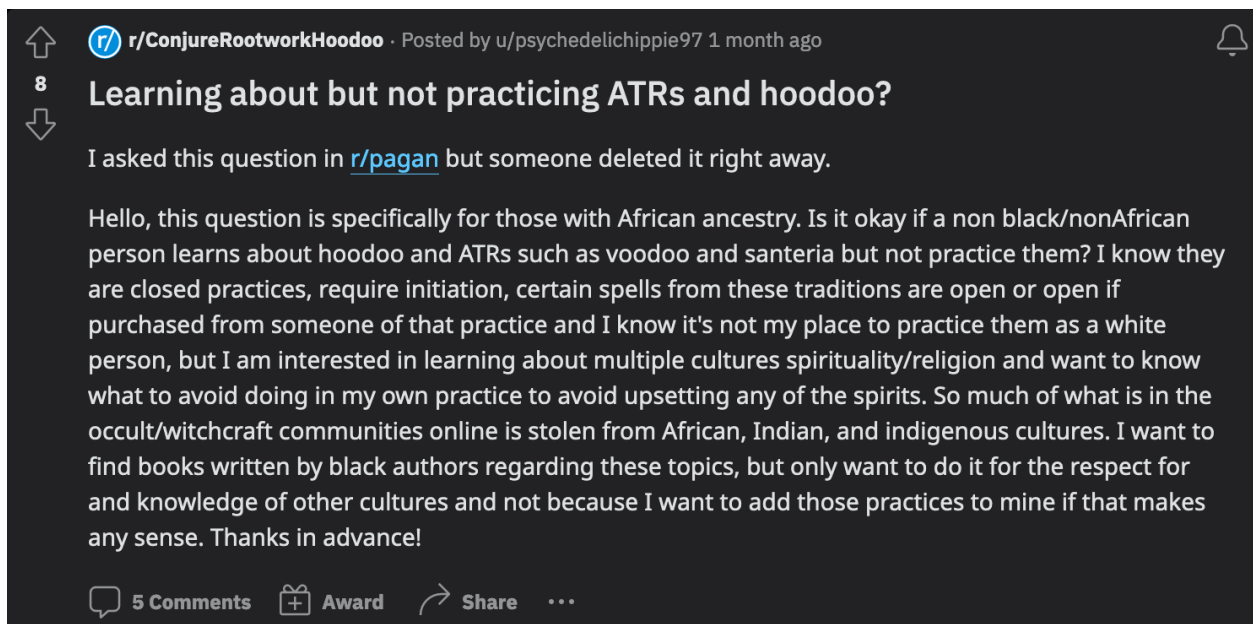


Figure 15. Post titled “Learning about but not practicing ATRs and hoodoo?” by u/psychedelichippie97 asking about the ethics of non-Black folx learning but not practicing ATRs and Hoodoo.

In a post from March 17, 2023, user u/psychedelichippie97<sup>43</sup> asks regarding the ethics of non-Black/non-African people's study of ATRs (Fig. 15). I have no way of knowing why the user's original question posted in r/pagan was deleted, so I leave that to your own speculation and hermeneutics. Despite the user's seeming openness to learn from "books written by black authors," they incorrectly refer to "voodoo and santeria" as ATRs, demonstrating their limited knowledge of Afro-Atlantic religions (u/psychedelichippie97, 2023). u/Equivalent\_Sky5649 (whose Reddit avatar would lead one to assume they are a female presenting Black person) responds to the post with a critically reflective and thorough (almost 1,000 words!) comment. They concur that "New Age Spirituality" has co-opted the religious and spiritual practices of many POC and in the process reduced sacred artifacts into collectable trinkets. They encourage the OP to start by learning more about the history of new age practices and its colonial implications and to find a practicing community that is willing to accept them. Once sufficient trust is established, the community becomes a supportive network in which mistakes become learning opportunities through mutual uplift.

At the emotional climax of the response, u/Equivalent\_Sky564 reflects on white colonizers and white anthropologists' extractive relationship with ATRs and questions the OP's true intentions. Why would the OP only want to learn about the traditions but not practice them? To simply confirm that, yes, New Age beliefs do appropriate from ATRs? "How come people of European descent always want to learn about everyone's culture but their own?"

*To me and my community, a white person wanting to "study but not practice" hoodoo is just a thief in waiting. We don't want to feel this way but acknowledging historical evidence helps us protect ourselves from being literally hate crimed.*

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<sup>43</sup> Again, there is an intersection between psychedelics and Hoodoo, this time in the u/psychedelichippie97's username.

*Black people are not animals in a zoo that you can just observe and report on, we are people with traditions we hold sacred. If you are really trying to embrace decolonization in your approach to study perhaps study Black history instead and get a deeper understanding as to why a group of people would actively leave another group out for safety reasons and why it IS life or death for us. Study how white marketeers have treated Hoodoo and what the white world [sic] has done to Hoodoo practitioners. Study why the leading books and mainstream items on Hoodoo are created by white people and are widely distrusted by most Black people (we don't use them store bought spells babe). Study the history of Creoles in America, of Black folks in Latin America, the history of lynching and of the Pentecostal Black Church and develop an understanding of these people and why they hold their practice so close to them instead of trying to pick up "spells" from them in the marketplace. (u/psychedelichippie97, 2023)*

For u/Equivalent\_Sky564, Hoodoo is closed out of necessity, not because they “want to” but because of the historical evidence that justifies it—the fear of being hate crimed. They are all too wary of “[thieves] in waiting” who appropriate Hoodoo practices without showing due respect<sup>44</sup>.

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Regarding technological literacy, one must remember that the implicit anonymity of the internet means most comments should not be taken as full truth. Reddit karma—acquired by receiving upvotes from other Reddit users on comments or posts—is a proxy for trustworthiness but only affords so much authority. It remains secondary to real-world embodied Hoodoo literacy

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<sup>44</sup> Other posts discussing the appropriation of Hoodoo have gained significant traction. A post from August 23, 2021 titled “Questions for non-black people who try to practice and spread false info on Hoodoo.” has 66 upvotes and just over 100 comments as of March 2023 (N/A “u/[deleted],” 2021). “HOODOO IS A CLOSED PRACTICE,” discussed in a previous section has 84 upvotes and 70 comments.

and dedicated learning. A post by u/Existing\_Birthday790 on August 19, 2022, makes this exact point (Fig. 16).

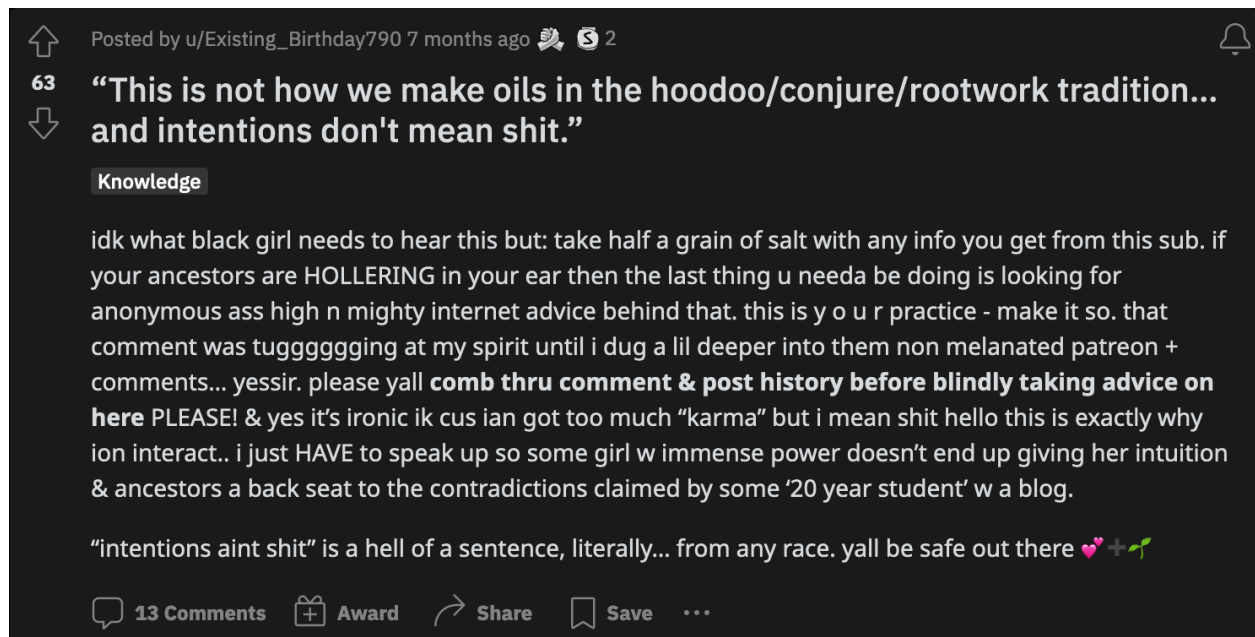


Figure 16. Post titled “This is not how we make oils...” by u/Existing\_Birthday790 reminding Black girls to apply a critical lens to information online.

u/Existing\_Birthday790 warns Black girls, perhaps in solidarity, to take comments on r/ConjureRootworkHoodoo with a grain of salt. The OP wants Hoodoo practitioners utilizing Reddit to put intuition, intentions, and ancestors first and to vet and commenters by “**comb[ing] thru [their] comment & post history before blindly talking advice** [emphasis not mine].” To have a critical eye is an essential technological literacy in an increasingly information oversaturated world. u/Existing\_Birthday790 recognizes the irony of their plea, that they have only a modest amount of karma while u/\_notdoriangray who wrote the comment the OP is challenging has almost 100 times the OP’s karma. Nonetheless, no amount of karma makes one impervious to mistakes. The title of the post references a comment made by u/\_notdoriangray 12 days prior in a



thread titled “Attraction/love oil” in which they made the contentious claim that “intentions don’t mean shit” (N/A “u/[deleted],” 2022) (Fig. 17).

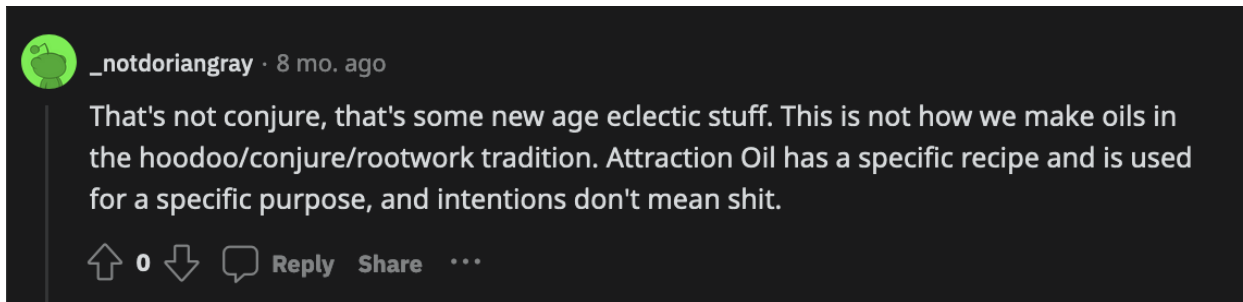


Figure 17. Comment on post titled “Attraction/love oil” claiming the uselessness of intentions in magic.

Many of the comments responding to u/Existing\_Birthday790’s post echo the dangers of blindly trusting online advice through words of affirmation (Fig. 18).

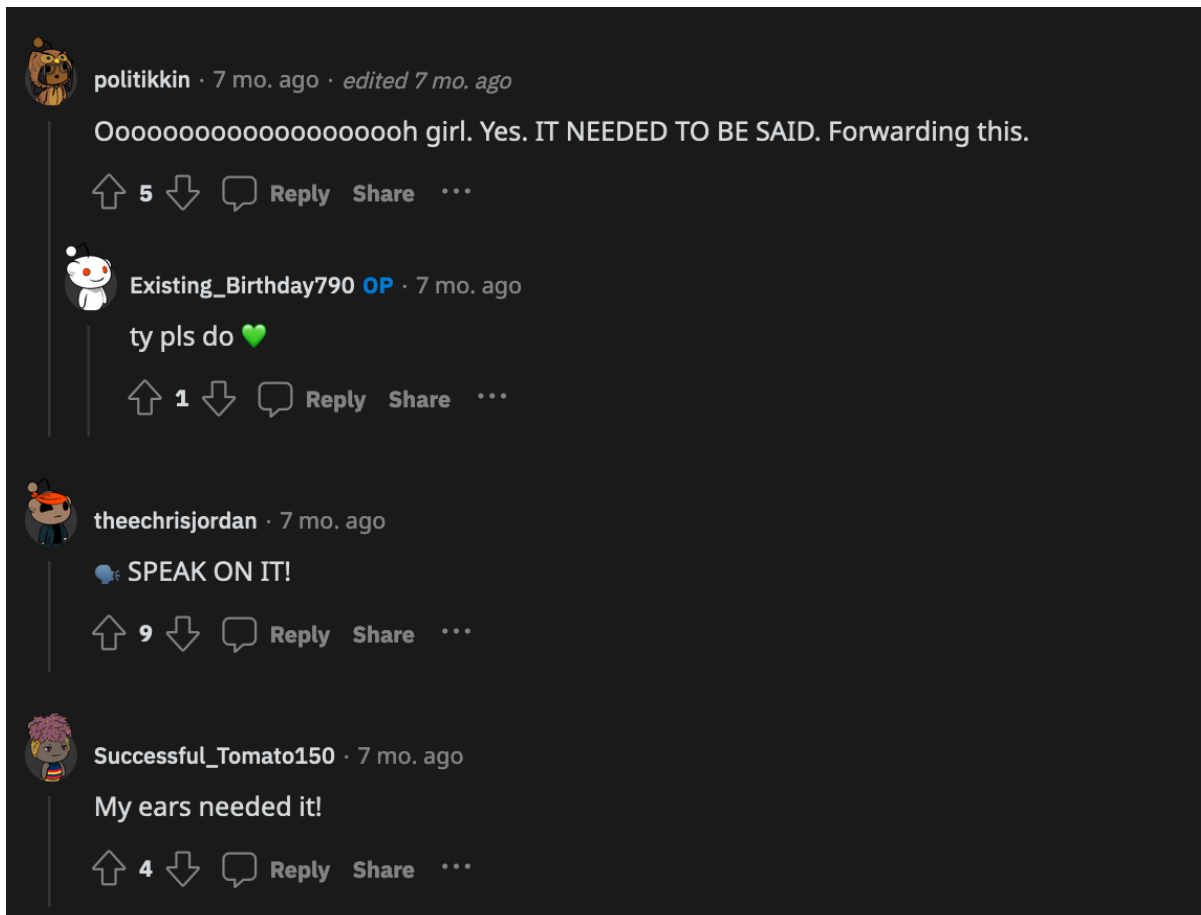
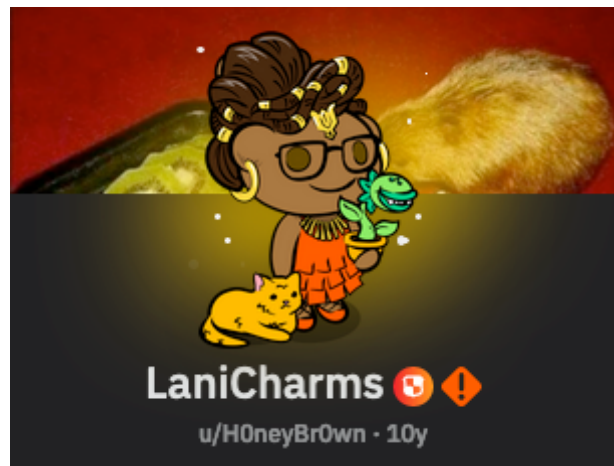


Figure 18. Comment chain on post titled “This is not how we make oils...” affirming the OP.

On a similarly joyous note, Redditors have the option to customize their profiles by dressing up their Reddit avatar. While this may initially seem like a superfluous opportunity for customization, it allows Redditors to “perform” race, gender, and other markers of identity and use avatars to celebrate Blackness and Black beauty. In a comment chain on the “This is not how we make oils...” post, two users complement each other on their respective avatars (Fig. 20). Given that these comments were made seven months ago, it is very possible that the users have since changed their avatars—in fact, u/sadomila changed their avatar as I am writing this analysis. The screenshotted avatar is therefore not their current avatar. One might further extrapolate that u/sadomila has changed their avatar multiple times since the comment given that u/H0neyBr0wn compliments u/sadomila on their avatar facial expression, which at the time of the screenshot is an extremely generic smiley face. This is all to say that the instantaneous flexibility of these Reddit avatars offer a playfulness to identity performance. Users are not locked into one persona from the creation of their account. They are given the autonomy to change and accessorize their avatars into all plural forms and expressions they desire, though most of the customization/clothing options are paywalled for premium subscription Reddit users (Fig. 19).



*Figure 19. Reddit avatar of u/H0neyBr0wn with unique selection of premium clothing.*

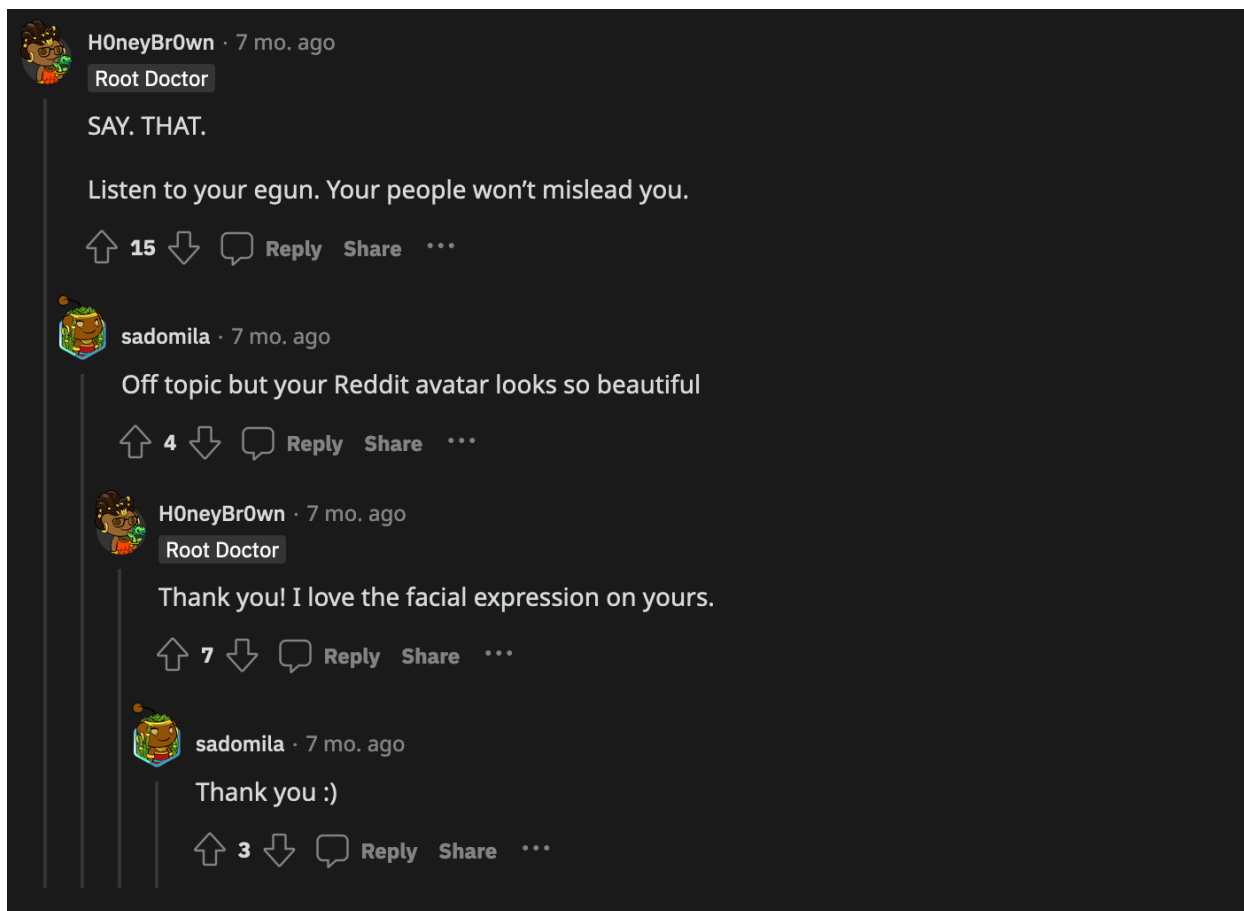


Figure 20. Comment chain on post titled “This is not how we make oils...” depicting two Redditors complementing each other’s avatars.

### Podcasts

Like the Conjure South Spellcast, Hoodoo Plant Mamas also begins with an acknowledgement of each host. In episode 21 of Hoodoo Plant Mamas, “Spirit Writing and JujuBae,” both hosts are tired and experiencing less than optimal mental health, but they take time to acknowledge what they are grateful for. More than just cursory small talk, these check-ins help set the tone for each episode. They are personal and honest. This episode is of particular interest because it is a collaboration between CyberHoodoos: co-hosts Dani Bee and Leah Nicole talking with Juju Bae about writing, storytelling, and books as spiritual practice. A Little Juju Podcast,

hosted by Juju Bae, also has special co-hosts on occasion, such as episode 75, “To Study Hoodoo Study History,” in which Juju Bae interviews Professor Yvonne Chireau. Through interactions like these, CyberHoodoos interconnect their digital ecologies into expansive relational networks. Even the sponsor of the episode, Biddie’s Baby Cakes, is a node in the context of CyberHoodoo. By uplifting a Black owned, Mississippi based baking company, the ethos of cooperative economics reemerges. To this point, while podcasts are labors of love, they are labor nonetheless. Thus, Dani and Leah make a note to share the multiple ways listeners can support the podcast whether through following them on social media, writing reviews on Apple podcasts, joining their Patreon (with \$2 and \$5 tier options), or through one time donations using Cash App or PayPal. Regarding sponsors, they are especially interested in working with more BIPOC and queer owned businesses. After the interview ends, Dani and Leah take time to reflect on “what [they] are holding onto from [the] interview.” These reflections, like the post episode call-in reading of Conjure South Spellcast, let listeners in on a more organic, on-the-spot discussion between the podcast hosts.

### *Websites and Digital Storefronts*

Juju Bae identifies herself as a “cunty-conjurer,” offering a radical feminist reclaiming of a label of sexual objectification. The hyphenation of cunty-conjurer may even imply the function of female anatomy as catalyst for Hoodoo magic, empowering her Hoodoo spellwork. Similarly, Juju Bae subverts accusations of Hoodoo as witchcraft and heathenism by joyously identifying as a “bad bitch witch.” Marketing this phrase, she is one of many digital spiritual influencers today who deftly navigate the complex interactions of online spaces, capitalism, and sacred experiences. “Through social media, online forums, podcasts, YouTube channels, and mobile applications

[CyberHoodoos and their cultivated] digital [sacred] spaces provide new religious terrain for beleaguered followers transitioning from other faith traditions” (Gault, 2022, p. 7).



Figure 21. Screenshot from Juju Bae’s website store of select branded merch.

The rising popularity of Black affirming apparel has been instrumental to the coalition of collective Black identity. Although not Hoodoo specific, I have personally seen a respectable number of Black students around campus repping sweaters and laptop/waterbottle stickers with the iconic phrase “I am my ancestors’ wildest dreams.” In the same regard, Juju Bae sells bucket hats that read “juju” and “Bad Bitch Witch” as well as Juju Bae branded phone cases and water bottles. Black Lives Matter too has their own apparel, flags, and trinkets like most large scale contemporary social movement groups. The Wellness Community Shop, run by Queen Po, offers a greater selection of designs and catch phrases including the following:

1. JuJu Pussy
2. Revolutionary Witch
3. Natural Born HEALER

4. Hoodoo Voodoo Santeria Yoruba Candomblé & More [in a descending column]
5. Black Love is Revolutionary
6. Black Doctors Matter/Black Nurses Matter

The explicit politicization of clothing brings to mind the wisdom of Toni Cade Bambara, that “the role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible” (Lafeet et al., 2021). Through the adornment of Hoodoo merchandise, sartorial choices manifest the aesthetics of resistance and joyously reclaim cultural identity and agency for Black diaspora. This is the healing of the individual and collective soul.

## **Moving Forward: Imagining Hoodoo Freedom Dreams**

HHLs decode the complex cybernetics of Hoodoo, health, and wellness. Contemporary practices of (Cyber)Hoodoo reclaim Hoodoo as cultural and spiritual resistance. In doing so, CyberHoodoo recovers, preserves, and makes available traditions that would have otherwise been forgotten or lost for Black Americans while simultaneously addressing problems of the present and honoring those that came before. HHLs are especially powerful not only because they support Black people's anti-racist work, but because they are a tool to be wielded against terror. "[Black magic] is a power that enacts a culturally inspired sensibility and a spirit of resistance for our new age" (Chireau, 2021).

"To be" CyberHoodoo (under an animist episteme) is to embody the active resistance and redefining of Blackness, self, and agency. It is the literacy to "read" digital web pages and resources. It is the seeking of holistic healing and joy. It is the breath that gives life to imagination and possible futures. Rooted in the same ethos of resistance, liberation, and freedom-seeking as traditional Hoodoo, HHLs and CyberHoodoo are fundamentally freedom-oriented projects. Far from being racially neutral, they undermine the complex structures of dominance that persist in digital spaces. Only time will tell how Hoodoo will continue to grow and evolve alongside new technologies and emerging sociopolitical issues. Until Black folx are truly liberated, the work of (Cyber)Hoodoo and all its future iterations is not done.

## Appendix

Before the 20th century's commodification and subsequent homogenization of ritual recipes and practices, Hoodoo was a largely local phenomenon. Building on the schemata of mail-order roots, the integration of Hoodoo with contemporary digital technologies and social media has expanded Hoodoo to the national scale. In the appendix of *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce*, Carolyn Morrow Long lists a substantial, though not exhaustive, list of spiritual stores in the United States from which she had previously visited in person or purchased from through mail-order. Long provides names and locations of 67 stores spanning thirteen states and the District of Columbia as well as the names of the original owners, present owners, the owner's racial/ethnic background, and years of operation when available. Over one third of these businesses are/were white owned. Long also provides the addresses of 23 wholesale manufacturers of spiritual artifacts and a list of websites offering spiritual consultations or ritual materials. Many of these websites are now dated and some of the businesses are no longer in operation. To my knowledge, there is currently no compendium, directory, or thorough public Excel file documenting available Hoodoo stores and services. While a couple of Reddit users have made posts asking for recommendations for Black owned Hoodoo stores, these posts are few and far between.

In my attempt to take a broad survey of contemporary, Hoodoo digital resources, I've compiled a list of over 40 Hoodoo websites and a handful of podcasts as of early spring 2023. I have tried to stick to Black owned shops and websites, but it is possible that a few may not be as the race of the owner was sometimes not readily available. Although my construct of CyberHoodoo is ontologically Black, I recognize that Hoodoo is not a materially closed system in



the sense that one is not restricted to buying from Black owned businesses. Hence, I did not exclude certain sites solely based on the ambiguity of the owner's race.

The modest list of Hoodoo podcasts is not meant to be exhaustive but to provide a starting point for those eager to dip their toes into aural Hoodoo mediums. For finding more podcasts and Facebook groups, I recommend searching "Hoodoo," "Conjure," "Rootwork" or any other relevant keywords on the respective website or app (e.g. Facebook, Spotify, Apple Podcasts). Happy exploring and Godspeed!

### *Website Links*

African Witch Bitch Botanica and Spiritual Shop

<https://theafrikanwitchbitch.com/>

Agno's Sweet Things

<https://agenos.bigcartel.com/>

Ancestral Herbiary

<https://ancestralherbiary.com/>

Art of the Root

<https://artoftheroot.com/#>

Beaucoup Hoodoo

<https://beaucouphoodoo.mykajabi.com/>

Beautiful Bru

<https://www.beautifulbru.com/>

Big Liz Conjure/Erzulie's Conjure Garden

<https://www.biglizconjure.com/>

Bruja del Fuego

<https://www.instagram.com/bruja.del.fuego/?hl=en>

Chesapeake Conjure Society

<https://hoodoosociety.com/hoodoo>

Co. Meadows Conjure

<https://comeadows.com/>

Cognac & Conjure

<https://www.cognacxconjure.com/shop>

Coil and Bloom Conjure

<https://coilandbloomconjure.com/>

Conjure Queen

<https://www.iamconjurequeen.com/>

Conjure South

<https://conjuresouth.com>

Conjured Cardea

<https://shop.conjuredcardea.com/>

Conjuria

<https://conjuria.com/>

Crescent City Conjure

<https://crescentcityconjure.us/>

Empress Business Tarot

[https://empressbusinessstarot.godaddysites.com/?fbclid=IwAR1DL52APivg\\_0\\_mgAXYYbM1rer1NzcjJ-c\\_nR2wLQZ4x\\_oNwEh4xTQLCgw#3178e748-f705-4cc9-8d7a-7647061cd65b](https://empressbusinessstarot.godaddysites.com/?fbclid=IwAR1DL52APivg_0_mgAXYYbM1rer1NzcjJ-c_nR2wLQZ4x_oNwEh4xTQLCgw#3178e748-f705-4cc9-8d7a-7647061cd65b)

Gold Water Alchemy

<https://www.goldwateralchemy.com/>

Haus of Hoodoo

<https://hausofhoodoo.com/>

Hoodoo Hannah

<https://www.hoodooannah.com/>

Hoodoo Hussy Conjure Enterprises

<https://www.hoodoohussy.com/>

Hoodoo Medicine

<https://www.hoodoomedicine.com/>

Hoodoo Your Voodoo

<https://www.hoodooyourvoodoo.com/>

HoodooBrownConjure

<https://tinyurl.com/HoodooBrownConjureEtsyStore>

Juju Bae

<https://www.jujubae.com/>

Lady Speech

[https://twitter.com/LadySpeech/media?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/LadySpeech/media?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)

Mama Rue's Head & Hand

<https://www.mamarue.com/>

Memphis Conjure Supply

<https://www.memphisconjure.com/>

Nicole Bowman

<https://www.nicolebowman.biz/>

Professor Chireau's Academic Hoodoo

<https://academichoodoo.com/>

Quoia's Roots

<https://quoiasroots.shop/>

Saint Xolani

<https://www.youtube.com/@xolani/videos>

SaTar'Ra

<https://www.satarra.com/>

Southern Roots Wombman

<https://www.southernrootswombman.com/>

The AfroMystic

<http://www.theafromystic.com/>

The Conjure

<https://www.theconjure.com/>

The Conjure Cleaner

<https://www.conjurecleaning.com/>

The Conjure Goddess

<https://www.theconjuregoddess.net/>

The Gilded Apsara

<https://www.thegildedapsara.com/>

The Queen Po

<https://www.instagram.com/thequeenpo/>

<https://www.youtube.com/thequeenpo>

The Scarlet Sage Herb Co.

<https://scarletsage.com/>

The Wellness Community Shop

<https://thewellnesscommunity.creator-spring.com/>

Third Generation Conjure

<https://www.thirdgenerationconjure.com/>

Wonderfully Dark/Hoodoo Haven

<https://wonderfullydark.com/>

#### *Podcast Links*

A Little Juju Podcast

<https://open.spotify.com/show/41WWzNCSxNEx2dDzhH8QE9>

Conjure South Spellcast

<https://open.spotify.com/show/1uTCc4KYT5j8zoUOtEWUsp>

Hoodoo & Chill

<https://open.spotify.com/show/16mZck8AZbW20RObOycv3d>

Hoodoo Plant Mamas

<https://open.spotify.com/show/1vLzosNn4oZPW5RlhhHu0A>

Mama Rue's Ancestral Musings Podcast

<https://open.spotify.com/show/3I6EC1kK5GSOOa8geG8sdc>

Tay In The Water

<https://open.spotify.com/show/2kS7sYe247Wb6JCc74b1Ng>

<https://www.tayloramarilittle.com/podcast>

Tha Back Porch Conjure Rootworker

<https://open.spotify.com/show/6heL8ZHyutRRt7eeK9e2Fz>

The New Hoodoo Podcast

<https://open.spotify.com/show/7zC7KrkzO9Ddx1DzbS961J>

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