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Conjure Magic and Supernaturalism in Nineteenth-Century African American Narratives

YVONNE CHIREAU

Nearly every large plantation, with any considerable number of Negroes, had at least one, who lay claim to be a fortune-teller, and whom his fellow-slaves regarded with more than common respect.

—William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home*

There is much superstition among the slaves. Many of them believe in what they call “conjuration,” tricking, and witchcraft; and some of them pretend to understand the art, and say that by it they can prevent their masters from exercising their will over their slaves.

—Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*

I had a positive aversion to all pretenders to “divination.” It was beneath one of my intelligence to countenance such dealings with the devil as this power implied.

—Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*

Since the latter decades of the twentieth century, fascination with African American folk supernaturalism has generated a renewed focus on hoodoo, divination, rootwork, and other vernacular expressions of what is known as conjure magic. Novelists, artists, and musicians have mined black spiritual beliefs and practices for creative inspiration, while literary critics have interpreted

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the motifs and archetypes of magical realism in fictional narratives. Given that magic and supernaturalism occupy such a prominent place in African American culture, one would expect greater scholarly attention to be given to their historical antecedents. However, this has not always been the case; analysis of the social contexts in which black American magic and its traditions have emerged has been neglected, and more work remains to be done in order to understand the meanings and functions of these phenomena within the material purview of their enactment, particularly during slavery.¹

In this essay I consider supernaturalism in non-fiction writings by African American authors in the slavery and post slavery eras. I include memoirs, such as the earliest autobiography by a black American woman (Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*, 1836), as well as expository life-stories of enslavement, such as the first published narrative by a fugitive bondsperson (William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave*, 1825). The sources also include popular reprinted editions of popular autobiographical works, including those of Frederick Douglass (*Narrative, Life and Times*, 1855, 1892), and the semi-autobiographical novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, as well as the relatively obscure journal and diary of Rebecca Cox Jackson, who is known to be the first black female Shaker Elder (Jackson, *Journals*, 1864). Expressions of conjure magic in this literature range from minor references to fuller reports from lived contexts, with accounts that encompass a one-hundred-year period during which black literary production reached its zenith in the United States. These narratives of supernaturalism by African American authors may be considered retellings of experiences derived from personal histories, and they offer evidence of the widespread nature of magic and supernatural traditions, as well as the worldview they exemplified within slave and free black communities. Taken together, this literature provides a composite vision of the social landscape in which conjure magic and supernatural beliefs were embedded, as seen through the eyes of African American writers, observers, and participants.²

Nineteenth-century writers glossed supernaturalism using a variety of terms. While the English expression “Conjuration” occurs in numerous descriptions referring to occult and spiritual harming (and healing) by both black and white authors, many written works also utilized terms such as “tricking,” “cunning,” “rootwork,” and the popular yet regionally specific identifier, “goopher”—as featured in Charles Chesnut’s novel *The Conjure Woman* (1899). Black writers sometimes conflated supernatural practices with terms like “witchcraft,” “sorcery,” and “Voodooism” so as to inflect sinister intent, supporting a prevailing view that conjure magic traditions were malevolent and illicit. At the other end of the spectrum, some authors adopted theological language in order to frame their interactions with the supernatural world by

characterizing efficacious spiritual works as biblically sanctioned and divinely inspired. Within these writings Christian “magic” qualified as consistent with the providential acts of God and was deemed to exist within a theological realm of “miracles and wonders,” in contrast with the derogatory terminology that was used to describe conjure as a lesser, potentially diabolical practice. As we will see, African American Christians’ descriptions of visionary foresight, mystical premonition, and other miraculous abilities may be seen as paralleling aspects of conjure magic. I have argued elsewhere that conjure and supernaturalism overlapped in black American religious cultures, and that for some practitioners the use of conjure did not preclude Christianity’s legitimacy as a viable, co-present religious orientation.³ Rather, conjure merged with Christianity in particular contexts in which black people addressed their material conditions using a spiritual idiom by engaging an unseen reality using efficacious, instrumental practices and beliefs. Nineteenth-century black authors may have disagreed on the meanings of supernaturalism; their understandings of “magic” may have seemed contradictory, but their writings referenced ideas and actions that focused on spiritual power and its relation to material existence. The understanding of these African American practitioners, to the world at large, reflects a consciousness that we might locate within the rubric of “conjuring cultures.”⁴

Who was a conjurer? Nineteenth-century writers often described conjurers as anomalous persons who possessed strange powers, unusual talents, and mysterious abilities, many of whom hailed from the far reaches of the African continent, a geographic locus of supernatural power and authority. In his autobiography William Wells Brown identified an “African” conjure man called Dinkie that he nicknamed the “King of the Woods” (Brown 70), while Frederick Douglass described Sandy Jenkins, a “genuine African” with special abilities comparable to those of “holy men and sorcerers from the Eastern nations” (Douglass *My Bondage* 238). Enslaved hoodoo practitioners known to be born in Africa were typically described as “full-blooded,” “Guinea,” or “salt-water Negroes” in folk narratives. Nigerian-born Olaudah Equiano, who published a memoir prior to the turn of the nineteenth century, recalled that in Africa, powerful “priests and magicians” doubled as “doctors or physicians” and “had likewise some extraordinary method of discovering jealousy, theft, and poisoning” (Equiano 35). Conjure magic thus bridged the ancestral heritage of the Old World and the adopted cultures of North America. Time and again witnesses would recount continuities between indigenous African spiritual traditions and ritual practices and African American supernaturalism.⁵

Nevertheless, although conjure was characterized as “African” as far as its sources and origins, it is noteworthy that multiple streams informed its development in the United States. For example, Native American and Anglo-

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derived traditions inspired the formation of conjure magic and the emergence of the complex of beliefs and practices that blended Christianity, domestic medicine, and Native folk arts in early America. According to the black author Henry Clay Bruce, formerly enslaved in Missouri, it was well known that “conjuring, tricking, and gophering, and the like,” were “believed in by the slaves,” while “spirit dances and other forms of superstition were practiced by the Indians.” Bruce observed that “American white people believed as strongly in another form of superstition called “witch craft,” noting that for this “they burnt innocent men and women at the stake” (Bruce 58). Regardless of its subsequent racialization in nineteenth-century literature, conjure demonstrated strong affinities with ideas from Indian botanical medicine, learned traditions of European occultism, and domestic folk healing practices. A broad complex of supernatural ideas and beliefs drew from a realm of metaphysical understandings that would be tapped by blacks, whites, and Native Americans in the early period.⁶

African American conjure magic practitioners were portrayed as distinct and set apart from other persons in their communities. In literary accounts and descriptions, authors distinguished hoodoo and conjure practitioners by their unique apparel or adornment. Male practitioners, for example, were known to dress in dark clothing and suits, some adopting the title of “Doctor,” while others carried elaborate carved staffs, canes, or bags. Conjure men of direct African descent displayed exotic paraphernalia, such as William Wells Brown’s Dinkie, who wrapped a shed snakeskin about his shoulders. According to Brown, Dinkie also “carried a petrified frog in one pocket, and a dried lizard in the other” (Brown 71). Some practitioners were known to dress in ways suggestive of sexual inversion or transvestism. Writing in an 1878 article for the Hampton Institute journal, black American folklorists identified a hoodoo worker who “had his hair braided like a woman, and [had] rings in his ears” (R., L., G., and A. 31–32). Another writer observed that hoodoo men nearly “always have long hair” (Herron and Bacon 361). Gender ambiguity may have been a means of augmenting the conjurer’s status as a powerful but peculiar border-dweller and outsider. And although males appear more often in historical narratives, female conjurers were by no means unknown. Nineteenth-century black female spirit workers and diviners enjoyed ample influence and prestige within their communities. For example, ethnographic and historical evidence indicates that conjure women dominated the cultural scene on the Sea Islands and in Lowcountry South Carolina in the late nineteenth century, and the presence of black female supernatural healers has been documented throughout the American South. Regardless of gender and appearance, many black practitioners of conjure magic were esteemed for their skills and abilities, even as they were viewed as subversive and dangerous by some members of their communities. The inexplicable powers attributed

to conjure magic would ebb and flow as a tangible presence that was both accepted and feared by African American people throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷

As depicted in African American conjure narratives, supernatural practitioners were thought to possess efficacious powers that they had attained by ritual methods, practices such as prayer, or the use of material artifacts such as charms and roots. The writings also underscore the ubiquitous nature of conjure magic and demonstrate a range of attitudes towards practices and practitioners. Black authors documented an array of supernatural beliefs and practices that mediated the social domains of community, interpersonal relations, and labor. By far, most accounts locate supernatural activities—whether described as superstitions, magic, or religion—squarely within the material conditions of black slave life. The engagement of black writers with practitioners and practices of conjure magic also tells us as much about the motivations and focus of black folk with respect to day-to-day resistance. Narratives by fugitive and former enslaved African Americans, as we will see, provide a view of the uses and meanings of supernaturalism in context, not so much as a spiritual concept, but as a social practice, helpful in addressing the physical, mental, and emotional needs of an oppressed people.

The presence of conjure magic practitioners in black communities was corroborated by numerous sources in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature. African American authors often referenced conjure to introduce readers to these lesser-known features of slave folk life and culture. Irving Lowery, a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church, included a historical reflection as part of his narrative of “sketches and memories” of slavery in antebellum South Carolina. “It may appear strange to the reader, but it is true,” he wrote, “...this belief and practice of Voodooism and conjuration originated in Africa, and was brought over to America when the native African was brought here and made a slave. The idea is deeply rooted in the Negro thought and life” (Lowery 81). Contemplating his experiences in antebellum Missouri, the abolitionist William Wells Brown wrote that conjurers held an established role in slave communities. “Nearly every large plantation,” he recalled, “had at least one, who laid claim to be a fortune teller, and who was granted with more than common respect by his fellow slaves” (Brown 70). Recounting memories of his bondage in Virginia, the author Henry Clay Bruce (brother of the distinguished Mississippi senator Blanche K. Bruce) disclosed that “a large majority [of the enslaved] believed strongly in all kinds of superstition, Voodooism, gophering, tricking and conjuring” (Bruce 52). Reflecting on the impact of conjure in the social arena, he noted that the conjure men “held whole neighborhoods, as it were, in such mortal fear, that they could do unto the Colored people anything they desired.” He remarked that it was believed that “...they could and would do to anyone who dared to interfere with them

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or even dispute their word, or question their ability to carry out what they claimed to be able to do" (52). Other authors envisioned conjurers as supernaturally empowered humans in form, as described by Jacob Stroyer, a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in South Carolina, who pictured them as spirits of light, or "witches" in disguise, hidden within the enslaved as "persons who worked with them every day." According to Stroyer, "...both men and women, who, when they grew old looked old, were supposed to be witches" (Stroyer 54–55). These beings, he wrote, were able to conceal themselves, bring illness and affliction, and cause wayward and lost persons to drown in enchanted watery spaces. Despite having been chastised for his superstitious ideas, Stroyer claimed that he "held the idea that there were such things, for I thought as the majority of the people believed it, [and] that they ought to know more than one man" (56).⁸

The literature depicts African American conjurers and their workings as powerful, yet obscure to those outside of their immediate communities. William Wells Brown relayed a dramatic incident involving the clash of wills between a slave driver and a plantation conjurer in his autobiographical narratives. Called Dinkie, the "Goopher King of Poplar Farm," this conjure man was "deeply immersed in voodooism, goophering and fortunetelling," and considered to be "his own master" on the Missouri plantation where Brown lived. When a new, aggressive white overseer was hired to manage the farm and was determined to discipline the enslaved workers using violence, the confrontation between the two was inevitable:

"Follow me to the barn," said the impatient driver to the Negro. "I make it a point always to whip a nigger, the first day that I take charge of a farm, so as to let the hands know who I am. And now, Mr. Dinkie.... I shall give you a flogging that you will never forget." At this juncture, Dinkie gave a knowing look to the other slaves, who were standing by, and said, "Ef he lays the weight ob his finger on me, you'll see de top of dat barn come off" [Brown 76].

Tensely gathering, the other bondsmen waited outside the barn, but when Dinkie and the overseer eventually emerged, they silently went their separate ways. Through some remarkable action on his part, Dinkie had avoided the slave driver's lash. Stories of his power quickly spread among the members of the black community. Brown, for his part, remained the impassive narrator, remarking only that to him, "how the feat had been accomplished, was a mystery" (75).

First-person accounts of magical acts and actors proliferated in nineteenth-century African American fugitive slave literature. Henry Bibb, a runaway who admitted to have openly practiced conjure, asserted that supernaturalism and magic was a way of life. "There is much superstition among the slaves," he averred, "Many of them believe in what they call conjuration, tricking, and witchcraft; and some of them pretend to understand the art, and say that

by it they can prevent their masters from exercising their will over their slaves" (25). Louis Hughes, enslaved in Virginia, maintained his belief that "the custom in those days [was] for slaves to carry voo-doo bags. It was handed down from generation to generation; and, though it was one of the superstitions of a barbarous ancestry it was still very generally and tenaciously held to by all classes" (Hughes 108). Hughes, as others, adopted conjuring artifacts as sources of personal protection: "I carried a little bag," he admitted, "which I got from an old slave who claimed that it had power to prevent any one who carried it from being whipped" (108). Similarly, in his 1837 narrative Charles Ball stated his conviction that enslaved black people maintained staunch beliefs in conjure magic and occultism. He claimed that "the Negroes of the cotton plantations [were to be] exceedingly superstitious ... and they are indeed prone, beyond all other people that I have ever known, to believe in ghosts, and the existence of an infinite number of supernatural agents" (Ball 260).

Conjure traditions were certainly embraced by some enslaved black folk within the unpredictable institution of bondage. As described in the narratives, the uses of conjure were very specific to the needs of black men and women as they endured day-to-day, near-pathological regimes of oppression. According to reports, conjure practices allowed bondspersons to counter the egregious threats of violence and pervasive fear in their reality, as their actions extended to purposes such as supernatural provisions for self-defense and physical protection. For the enslaved, such tools would have been seen as indispensable, whatever form they took. M.F. Jamison, a bishop in the Colored Methodist church in Georgia, recalled in a memoir published after the turn of the century that he used the charms given to him by a black conjuring "expert" named Uncle Charles Hall. "Uncle Charles Hall was a kind of Hoodoo" he explained, "He could prevent the white folks from mistreating you, hence those of us who could believe in such would visit him and have him 'fix' us" (Jamison 39). He related how the conjurer would create supernatural objects for Jamison and the others for protection, with explicit instructions on their maintenance. "He would make us Jacks," he noted, using the popular name for rootworking charms, "and direct us where to get certain kinds of roots to chew and to anoint with three times daily" (39).

Writings by formerly enslaved authors that referenced the use of the supernatural were often riddled with narratives of anxiety, uncertainty, and dread of confrontation with those charged with enforcing order in the slavery regime. In one of the most memorable passages in black American literature, Frederick Douglass describes his showdown with a brutal slave owner named Covey that involved the use of conjure magic. The dramatic retelling of his experience turns on Douglass' awareness of his own newfound empowerment during a crucial fight scene. Offered an enchanted root by the plantation

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conjuror Sandy Jenkins, Douglass was assured that he would be protected from Covey's violent advances. Douglass, for his part, had reservations, doubting that the conjuring object had any protective value. Prior to their confrontation he appeared even more doubtful. Fully expecting to be punished for leaving the plantation without permission one weekend, Douglass questioned Covey's disinterest upon his return:

[The] ... conduct of Mr. Covey made me begin to think that there was something in the root which Sandy had given me; and had it been on any other day than Sunday, I could have attributed [his] conduct to no other cause than the influence of that root; and as it was, I was half inclined to think the root to be something more than I at first had taken it to be [Douglass *Narrative* 81].

With root in pocket, during the inevitable physical altercation, Douglass strikes back at the white slaveholder for the first time, and in that moment, he writes, "*the slave became a man.*" Accounts of conjure magic by other African American writers resonate with Douglass' description of his self-empowerment, underscoring the presence of a vernacular cultural system. In black folk narratives and stories by the enslaved, a provisional faith in the utility of supernatural practices provided a focus for hope and empowerment. One sees this with cases in which authors articulate pivotal moments of emotional and psychological hardship, wherein the turn to unknown powers is part of an inexorable process of discovery. In an extraordinary account of his life in slavery, William Grimes described how his own fears gave way to acute supernatural perceptions, possibly due to trauma he had experienced as a young man. Grimes, who suffered under ten different slaveholders over a twelve-year period in Virginia, Georgia, and Maryland, endured miserable poverty and abject hunger. He externalized his distress in graphic visions of ravaged skeletons, haunted spaces, and spectral night terrors. "I had been praying to God ever since I knew what God was" (Grimes 16), he wrote after one particularly vicious and brutal attack by a sadistic slave owner. In what has become a convention in African American fugitive narratives, Grimes describes going to a female diviner, or fortuneteller, in order to determine his odds of success in running away (21). His faith in the fortuneteller was rewarded by a prediction that was bleak but precise. Grimes, the woman said, would surely prevail with his planned escape, but it would take years before it would actually occur (25).

While eschewing styles of supernaturalism that were deemed inimical to Christian values, it was not unusual for enslaved blacks to enlist the services of seers, prophets, and divination specialists for assistance. Olaudah Equiano wrote about his interaction with a Philadelphia woman "who revealed secrets" and "foretold events," even though as a Christian he "could not conceive that any mortal could foresee the future disposals of Providence, nor did [he] believe in any other revelation than that of the Holy Scriptures" (34). The

fugitive bondsman Anthony Burns placed his faith in divination in hopes of gaining knowledge so as to avoid capture, viewing the dangerous and life-threatening prospect of flight with great trepidation. Burns was compelled to ask a fortuneteller about his fate, specifically, if he would ever be a free man. His biographer records that Burns went "into the kitchen of his employer one day, [and] he found there a fortune-teller who at once beset him to cross her palm with his shilling" (Stevens 169). The narrative concludes that Burns "waited with secret anxiety" to hear whether the fortuneteller would "prophesy to him of freedom." According to the account, "when at length she did promise him that long dreamed of bliss, he almost fainted with the rush of emotion." In the end, however, the fortuneteller's prediction failed Burns, and at the appointed time he was not freed, and "his faith in fortune-telling," the narrative claims, "was naturally staggered" (169).

To be sure, the varieties of fortunetelling and divination traditions described in African American slave narratives appear to be commonplace practices for accessing knowledge of an individual's fate and future. Some of the most frequently reported accounts from nineteenth-century writers concern the experiences of enslaved persons who enlisted conjure practitioners with the predictive apparatus of divination, dreams, visions, and foresight, which were used for valuable insights into one's success or failure at escape, a viable but most hazardous act of slave resistance. The work of diviners and fortunetellers also extended into arenas of magical protection, including the ability to identify potential misfortunes and afflictions, and thereby provide seekers with a measure of knowledge and control. In offering predictive services as well as defensive measures for supernatural redress, conjure magic practitioners ameliorated some of the great fears and concerns of fellow members of slave communities.

At times, the use of special visionary abilities for prediction by gifted persons paralleled the divining practices of expert conjure practitioners in black communities. Harriet Tubman, for instance, relied upon trances, dreams, and second-sight to alert her of impending danger, which sometimes included prophetic warnings of future events, such as her vision of the abolitionist John Brown and his fateful demise, as described in her autobiography (Bradford 54). Frederick Douglass, neither a "true believer" in the power of African American magic nor a complete skeptic, recounted in his narrative how Sandy the conjure man persuaded him to accept the possibility of the efficacy of the supernatural by offering him the enchanted root, with uncanny foresight and awareness of the impending danger he would face. Douglass, in different versions of his narrative, seemed ambivalent toward conjure magic, while in other moments he acknowledged its usefulness for addressing the powerlessness and fear of the enslaved. Douglass admitted that Sandy "had been to me the good Samaritan, and had, almost providentially, found me

and helped me when I could not help myself." He concluded, "how did I know but that the hand of the Lord was in it?" (Douglass *My Bondage* 171).

The disposition of some writers towards supernatural works, which were viewed as "magical" and contrary to those pious works that were deemed more acceptable, informed the manner in which black authors portrayed conjure magic. Notwithstanding the distinctions that were drawn by observers, it is clear that the role of the conjurer, when contrasted with the Christian practitioner, was effaced in practice. For example, when ex-slave William Webb prepared special bags of roots for other African Americans to carry in order to keep peace between masters and bondspersons on local plantations in Kentucky, the roots, he noted, were to be used in conjunction with prayer. When asked about the function of the bags, he explained, "I told them those roots were able to make them faithful when they were calling on the Supreme Being, and to keep [their] mind at work all the time." Webb, who also believed in the mystical significance of dreams, prophecy, and "sleight of hand," was an individual who combined the roles of conjure specialist and spiritual authority (Webb 20, 22).

Likewise, in narratives by Christians and religious sectarians, practices of seership and divination were often conceived as spiritual gifts, and pious spirit workers (who were often black women) configured their faith in such actions within a supernatural framework. For example, black women's mysticism was chronicled in personal written accounts of dreams, visions, and detailed stories of their supernatural incursions within the heavenly realm. Autobiographical writers Jarena Lee and Rebecca Jackson, for example, utilized theological idioms to contextualize their experiences, including spectacular portents and signs from God, and their witness to psychic phenomena such as imperviousness to physical harm, supernatural foresight, and visionary guidance, viewing these as God-given blessings. Jarena Lee described the anguish of her personal conversion travails, which had brought her into direct contact with apparitions of Satan and other monstrous beings, when she experienced the transformative Christian experience known as sanctification. Although described using similar terms, it was divine intervention, not conjure magic, that Lee believed empowered and protected her from both real and imagined threats (Lee). The Methodist itinerant Zilpha Elaw heard disembodied voices and sustained an awakened spiritual state in which she saw "apparitions and angelic appearances" and experienced "trances" of "ecstasy" that provided her with direction and freedom from fear, according to her spiritual narrative (Andrews 21, 39). Similarly, the black evangelist Julia A.J. Foote described the dreams and precognitive visions she experienced as "supernatural" in recounting her own sacred transfiguration into an ethereal form (Andrews). The black Shaker preacher Rebecca Jackson acquired abilities such as clairvoyance, telepathy, and control of the weather as part of her

repertoire of sacred gifts of power, including channeling what she called the "voice of God" and direction by a personal spirit guide (Andrews). In all of these cases, by firmly distinguishing their experiences and practices from conjure magic, black women validated supernaturalism and its powerful manifestations as expressions of their religious faith and spirituality. In their writings they interpreted the content of supernatural practice as divine in its sources, and theologically distinct from the undesignated forces that they believed to be constituted by conjure magic and other occult traditions.⁹

A potential source of uncertainty regarding the viability of conjure magic seen in the writings of African American authors is related to the purported incompatibility of conjure with Christian notions of divine providentialism. African American churchgoers and elites derided conjurers as debased and ignorant, often describing magic as a primitive remnant of indigenous African superstition and heathenism. Many more writers remained unconvinced of the efficacy of magic, and even religion, given the stark contradictions between the morality of the slaveholding system and the hypocrisy of religious slaveholders. Some writers were as scathing in their dismissal of Christianity itself as a legitimate moral and religious system, as they were of conjure magic, as an efficacious and practical one. In her semi-fictional narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs described a white minister that she had nicknamed "Pious Mr. Pike," a paternalistic Christian preacher who delivered a sermon to a congregation of African American slaves on the corrupting effects of conjure. He railed against the vice and immorality of enslaved blacks "tossing coffee-grounds with some wicked fortuneteller," "cutting cards," and "tying up little bags of roots." The preacher promised that God himself would punish the slaves for their transgressions, and insisted they should repent from their dealings with conjure magic. "Forsake your sinful ways," he urged them, "and be faithful servants." Jacobs, for her part, was "highly amused" at the incoherence of the Reverend Pike's duplicitous "gospel teaching" (Jacobs 107).

Many African American writers rejected conjure magic as a spiritual force that could be used for harming, but were more equivocal about adopting supernaturalism as a tool of offense against the physical and mental injustices they suffered under slavery. Henry Bibb, for instance, participated in experiments and testing of the merits of conjure magic during the long years of his capture and enslavement. Bibb described his own great faith in conjuration and witchcraft, only to experience failure when his roots and "conjuring powders" were unsuccessful in protecting him from a slaveholder's violent rage and cruelty. "As all the instrumentalities which I as a slave could bring to bear upon the system had utterly failed to palliate my sufferings," he lamented, in the end, "all hope and consolation fled" (28). Demoralized, Bibb discarded the supernatural objects and ritual items, deciding that there was nothing

more he could do, and later, took flight to gain his own freedom. Believing magic to be unlawful and against the norms of Christian tradition and church practice, many African Americans openly disparaged conjure and rejected conjurers as dangerous charlatans. The Baptist preacher and slave insurrectionist Nat Turner—who has been, incidentally, described by some scholars as a “Christian conjurer”—viewed the use of “conjuring and such like tricks” with “contempt” but believed his own visions, dreams, and supernatural powers to be divinely inspired (Rucker). Similarly, Frederick Douglass had initially characterized the works of conjurer Sandy Jenkins as “dealings with the devil,” but later demurred, saying that “Sandy, with all his superstition [had] too deep an insight into human nature [for me] not to have some respect for his advice.” Douglass would conclude, wryly, that “...perhaps ... a slight gleam or shadow of his superstition had fallen on me” (Douglass *My Bondage* 47).

Some black writers acknowledged that skepticism toward the effectiveness of magic informed their acceptance of supernatural practitioners and practices in the slave community. In his autobiography, William Wells Brown provided an intriguing anecdote that illuminated his ambivalence toward conjure magic-styled activities. On the eve of his escape from bondage, Brown visited an elderly slave man in St. Louis who was employed as a fortuneteller. Although he was uncertain about the future, Brown’s hope for some insight prompted him to consult him as a specialist, although Brown had stated that he didn’t believe in such practices. Finally, even when Uncle Frank, the fortuneteller, predicted his safe and successful flight, Brown still could not accept the validity of his powers of foresight: “Whether the old man was a prophet, or the son of a prophet, I cannot say; but there is one thing certain, many of his predictions were verified.... I am not a believer in; yet I am sometimes at a loss to know how Uncle Frank could tell so accurately what would occur in the future” (Brown 90–92).

Irrespective of many of the negative portrayals and dismissals of conjure magic by white slaveholders, Christian ministers, and worried skeptics, African Americans would take up supernatural tools again and again in order to engage insurmountable challenges to their safety and well-being. In this light, conjure magic, divination, and occult supernaturalism might be viewed as metaphysical weapons in the arsenal of protective and offensive practices utilized by black folk, within the conflicted zones of enslavement that they inhabited. The turn to conjure indicates that black Americans were deeply practical and pluralistic when it came to cultural strategies of empowerment and self-defense, and were able to choose pragmatically from the variety of spiritual traditions and implements that were available to them.

While written sources lend credence to the presence of a documented archive of folk memory, they also demonstrate ambivalence on the part of some observers whose reluctance to examine conjure magic has inhibited a

full consideration of the potential meanings of these traditions in their social contexts. Obscured by this reticence, the historical record on conjure magic practitioners and their practices remains sporadic and inconsistent. In the end, the significance of conjure magic in black literature might be gauged according to its meaning (or relevance) to those authors and writers who reported on it, rather than solely on its efficacy and practice. At best, one might cede questions of efficacy in black conjuring cultures by asking of its practitioners, "was it useful and meaningful to them?" instead of "did it really work?"

Accordingly, African American writers have demonstrated a mix of perspectives toward magic and supernaturalism, from outright skepticism and doubt, to wholesale embrace and appropriation. Literary portrayals that disparage conjure magic as immoral and diabolical may also perceive African American supernatural traditions through the lens of Anglo-American religious ethnocentrism, a perception that rests upon contested ideological terrain, with Christianity as a dominant force. Since access to transformative spiritual power might be obtained through practices of prayer, meditation, rituals of ego-relinquishment, spirit possession, and sanctification; conjure magic would have allowed for multiple expressions of spirituality for enslaved black Americans. Lacking an extensive vocabulary for dealing with questions of corporeal affliction, uncertainty, and material suffering under slavery, African American religion was reconciled in the formation of magical traditions in the nineteenth century, and enslaved and free reconciled their spiritual beliefs using alternative means.

What, then, do non-fictional narratives of supernaturalism by black writers tell us about the experiences of African American people in slavery and freedom? In examining works that describe conjure magic, it might be fruitful to consider their sources as narrations of memory rather than fiction, and corroborate their claims as historical truths. In this essay I have highlighted conjure magic in key African American texts and as primary materials. The writings are consistent for what they reveal: conjure magic and the supernatural worldview was an accepted reality for many African Americans during the nineteenth century and beyond. While the narratives may be interpreted as fictionalized products of the imagination, they also remain as documentation of the embodied experiences of enslaved and free black people. They also suggest that the creation of spiritual narratives is as much about recovering personal histories, lives, and empirical evidence of "phenomena," as it is about defining the discourses and rhetorical constructions of the same. Historians tend to eschew questions of religious subjectivity in lieu of interpretive practices that value critical theory and rationalizing analysis over considerations of spiritual and religious meaning. In much of the literature, the absence of a stark dichotomy between sacred and secular arenas in

Africana cultures has contributed to the emergence of worldviews that are ontologically fluid, with the organizing perspective that everyday material concerns have supernatural import, and vice versa. It is perhaps within such a framework that the emphasis on conjure magic in African American literature might be understood. To document black Americans' experiences with conjure—and to view the presence of magic practices in their writings as the vital tools of self-empowerment and resistance—is to confront the stuff of lived spirituality, a field normally associated with the assumptions afforded by academic disciplines like theology and religion. In resolving these methodological problems, the religionist Theophus Smith has identified systems of African American thought and practice that are comprised by what he terms as “Conjuring Cultures,” which exemplify the efficacious, intentional orientation toward reality, in practices that accord therapeutic, protective, and healing impacts. With these powerfully creative functions, conjure magic has produced much of the variety—and moral tension—that has persisted within the lives of the slaves and their descendants. The presentation of supernaturalism should be considered a witness to these experiences, and conjure magic viewed as a most valuable and enduring resource, a significant expression of power and meaning, in the historical experiences of the African American people.

NOTES

1. Conjure is African American magic. As both practice and thought, conjure is delineated by literal and metaphorical enactments with spirits, objects, natural elements, narrations, and other workings that impact human intent to transform reality. Hoodoo incorporates similar processes, sometimes with the intent of harming. Roots or rootworking refers specifically to the use of natural and organic objects in the performance of these actions. Voodoo, which is often misused, was a black Atlantic religion that flourished in parts of Louisiana and in Missouri in the nineteenth century. It is to be distinguished from *Vodou*, the Afro-Haitian religion that was instrumental in bringing about Haiti's independence in the 1700s. In black literature, magic encompasses forms that are constituted within the realm of the senses (that which is perceptible) and those constituted by the immaterial world, what one might call the symbolic universe. See Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 2005, and Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, 2003.

2. On conjure in literature, see most recently Kameelah L. Martin, *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and Other Such Hoodoo*, 2013; on slave narratives see Helen Jaskoski, “Power Unequal to Man: The Significance of Conjure,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, vol. 38, 1974, pp. 91–108; Margaret Jackson, “Folklore in Slave Narratives,” *New York Folklore Quarterly*, Spring 1955.

3. Yvonne Chireau, “Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic,” *Religion and American Culture* 7, 1997.

4. For Conjuring Culture formally defined, see Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, 1994; Sharla Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*, 2000. On conjure as a formation of black slave resistance, see Jason Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African American Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery*, 2007.

5. On Africa and Africans as a site of orientation in conjure magic tradition, see Chireau, *Black Magic, Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, 2003.

6. Conjure originated with the transfer of indigenous African religious traditions, probably beginning in the eighteenth century. Instead of reconstituting as a New World African religion, conjure was born of fragmentation and reorganization of supernatural beliefs. Conjure also incorporated Native American cultural elements and European ideas and practices, thereby producing cultural hybridity and religious/spiritual synthesis. On the nexus of African, Native and Anglo-American magic in literature, see David Murray, *Matter, Magic and Spirit: Representing Indian and African American Belief*, 2007; Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man*, 1895, p. 58.

7. Some black novelists such as Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins offered fuller descriptions of female conjure practitioners, but the historical presence in non-fictional sources remains elusive. Notwithstanding this lacuna in literary representations, critic Kameelah Martin identifies the conjure woman as a cultural icon and folk hero in African American narrative traditions. See Kameelah Martin, *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature*, 2012; see also Lindsey Tucker, "Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," *African American Review*, 28, 1994.

8. On African-derived water spirits and magical landscapes, see Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*, 2012.

9. Visionary narratives by black religious women have most often been discussed in relation to evangelical mission; rarely are they framed in the context of supernaturalism and magic as sources of personal security. See Delores Williams, "Visions, Inner Voices, Apparitions and Defiance in Nineteenth Century Black Women's Narratives," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 1 April 1993, pp. 81–89; William Andrews, *Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia A.J. Foote, Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, 1986; Jean Humez, ed., *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Jackson, Rebecca, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, 1981.

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