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In the Shadows of the Invisible Institution: Southern Black Folk Religion and the Great Migrations

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In the Shadows of the Invisible

Institution: Southern Black Folk

Religion and the Great Migrations

By

Sakina M. Hughes

"Today Negro race pride is forcing many more or less illiterate Negroes to give up, or at least subdue and refuse to pass on, the old beliefs for fear of ridicule from the more developed members of their race."¹

As the narrative of Southern Black spirituality wound through Reconstruction, the turn of the century, and interwar period, it diverged into two streams, one of which remained at least partially underground and invisible to the dominant American culture. One stream of Black spirituality can be followed through to the many denominations of Black churches. The other stream, the more elusive of the two, sharing common roots, has gone by many names.

Conjure, [Hoodoo](#), witchcraft, and black magic are a few of the terms used to describe this rich tradition. This work will utilize the term Hoodoo to represent the traditions that developed from the meeting of African and Protestant ideas in the southern United States. This worldview, [having been birthed inside the invisible institution² on plantations across the South](#), was steeped in magical traditions acknowledging the power inherent in the natural and the supernatural world. It came under great attack by whites and some middle and upper class Blacks because many believed it was backwards, low class,

¹ Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 581.

² [This phrase was first used by E Franklin Frazier in *The Negro Church in America*](#) to describe the spirituality on slave plantations that was primarily out of view of the mainstream American religious consciousness.

or superstitious. Moreover, as Blacks began to copy the mainstream white models of economics and society, they also began to use the white model of religion and spirituality. Black ministers and lay people in the trendsetting assimilating elite³ often equated humanity, high culture, and prosperity to the model of America's dominant white culture and applied pressure to the Black lower classes to follow their example. Because of the elites' efforts, Hoodoo "...continues to be largely unknown and at least partly unknowable...as such magical shamanism was practiced clandestinely...not only throughout the slavery period, but long after."⁴ Blacks migrating North brought Hoodoo with them and it thrived, lingering in the shadows of the mainstream American culture. Though many had abandoned shamanistic traditions, those who did hold on tenaciously to their beliefs helped to preserve and extend an autonomous African heritage, making an important contribution to community and survival."⁵ Despite the secrecy, the separation from their homelands, the discouraging assimilating elite Blacks, a discriminating white mainstream, and the threat of the fires of Hell, Southern Blacks who

³ The term Black trendsetting assimilating elite is used here to describe those African Americans who believed that social, economic and other forms of progress for Black Americans would be attained through assimilating to mainstream white models. The Black trendsetting elite in no way rivaled the wealth or resources of white upper classes, though it did maintain a position inside the Black community of relative power and capability. This status was more often defined by one's place in one's community and level of education. Some of these positions of power, less often defined by wealth, include small business owners, ministers, deacons, college graduates in various professions, as well as their wives and families.

⁴ Charles Joyner, "Believer I Know," in *African American Christianity: Essays in History*, ed. Paul E. Johnson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 34.

⁵ Joyner, 36

migrated North, especially Southern Black women, were able to maintain cultural pride through keeping their spirituality alive and bequeathing their spiritual beliefs about the practice of Hoodoo on to successive generations.

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The Black Church has been historically recognized as both a catalyst for and a paradigm of progress in the African American community. But what did that progress leave behind? Southern Blacks who migrated North looked to their northern churches for material as well as social and spiritual support. This "...exodus from the South during the Great Migration years was tantamount to a religious pilgrimage out of the wilderness into the promised land."⁶ So Black migrations to the North seemed, not only socially and economically advantageous, but also providential. However, instead of fully embracing these new members, established Northern Churches encouraged or made compulsory the giving up of southern cultural practices and what they described as religious superstitions. In 1926, when the author of Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro Newbell Niles Puckett asked a well-respected professor at a traditionally Black college to comment on the spirituality and superstitions of African Americans, the latter responded reflecting a common and growing sentiment. The professor replied,

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⁶ Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke university Press, 1997), 56

“This year we have decided that it would not be wise to suggest an assignment such as you wish because of the intense race consciousness of the recent years, which includes temporarily the desire to forget the past in pressing forward to the future.”⁷

Unlike the lower economic-class subjects of Puckett’s other interviews, this professor was proud to be a part of a burgeoning middle class of Blacks who identified with ideals of progress and modernization for African Americans. The professor’s sentiment was reflected by many mainstream Black denominations in the North that aimed to conform their religion and their Christianity to the model of mainstream white denominations. Ministers taught this message from the pulpit on Sunday mornings as lay people reinforced it in Bible studies and auxiliary groups during the week.

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An area of great focus was the elimination of non-Christian behavior and beliefs, including Southern Hoodoo. During the slavery period, “the religious experience of slaves was by no means contained in the visible structures of the institutional church. From the abundant testimony of fugitive and freed slaves it is clear that the slave

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⁷ Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 581.

community had an extensive life of its own, hidden from the eyes of the master.”⁸ At the end of slavery, the Black trendsetting elite began to form and began to assimilate to the mainstream white American culture. The Black religious experience of during the Great Migrations provided a contrast to that of the antebellum period because of Black religious leaders who wanted to bring others into more pure forms of Christianity and prove to the rest of the country that Blacks could also practice a civilized religion free of superstition.

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Since Hoodoo was a worldview and not a religion per se, purging it from the lives of Blacks across America was a great feat. One way that progressive upper class churchgoers were able to influence the minds and hearts of Southern ~~immigrants~~ migrants was the formation of auxiliary church groups. While many of these groups were initiated by church ministers, they were run largely by women in the church whose limited way to exert their leadership was to influence these groups. The auxiliary groups between 1900 and 1950 focused on the moral and intellectual uplift of Blacks and often served to rid the Black community of outdated Southern customs and immorality, including religious and spiritual practices. Darlene Clark Hine documents the domestic feminism phase in Michigan, spanning from 1900 through the

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⁸ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 212.

1920s. This phase in upper class Black women's history mirrored White America's Victorian urge to help and reform the lower classes of American society.⁹ Hine states:

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This period witnessed a frenzy of activity, as virtually every community of Black women across the state organized clubs, and founded special homes to ameliorate the sufferings of the aged, the poor, the infirm, the orphaned and to provide protection...On a scale unsurpassed, educated Black matrons heeding the demands of social responsibility and adhering to prescriptions of virtuous womanhood, aggressively reached out to poorer Blacks...assisted recent female migrants and other Blacks through the organization of local and regional networks of self-help agencies, voluntary associations, and racial uplift projects.¹⁰

Through racial uplift programs the Black assimilating elite reached out to economically oppressed Blacks with resources while enforcing mainstream white Victorian values on them. To the progressive Black elite, assimilation was the answer to racism. They believed that assimilation would prove their humanity and worth to the mainstream society. Thus, many in the once invisible institution came out into the American mainstream to prove Black humanity to a larger society that had historically refused to acknowledge even this basic reality. In this

⁹ Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 59.

¹⁰ Hine, 60.

context, the term progressive refers to those in Black communities who ascribed to the ideas of assimilation into the mainstream white Victorian model of culture and spirituality as a means of racial uplift.

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Racial uplift projects offered material support such as food and shelter for poor Black immigrants while demanding adherence to strict religious rules of conduct. These rules of conduct reflected the Victorian values of White Protestant America that many progressive Blacks wished to emulate.

Victorian religious values rejected the validity of Southern spirituality and shamed many Blacks into giving them up either for the sake of survival in the case of the poorest of the poor, or for fear of hell fire for those who believed upper class religious rhetoric fully. Like their male counterparts in their churches, Black women believed that assimilation would remedy America's epidemic of racism.

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By Christianizing the home and educating the masses, women provided the key to solving the race problem in America. Black women likened their role to that of the biblical queen Esther, who had acted as an intermediary between the king and people. They

envisioned themselves as intermediaries between white America and their own people¹¹

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In the 1920s, sociologist Niles Newbell Puckett observed that, "Today Negro race pride is forcing many more or less illiterate Negroes to give up, or at least subdue and refuse to pass on, the old beliefs for fear of ridicule from the more developed members of their race."¹² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham reflected a similar idea: "Their assimilationist leanings led to their insistence upon blacks' conformity to the dominant society's norms of manners and morals."¹³ Like Puckett, Higginbotham recognized the upper class assimilating elite as the trendsetting class, convinced that racism could be eradicated by their absorption of white values.

One proponent of assimilation, Baptist clubwoman Mary Church Terrell, said in her 1904 presidential address that the Black elite were not living up to their calling by not uplifting the less educated and lower class members of the race.¹⁴ In suggesting that her church sisters "lift as they climb" she expressed less a concern with the poor and uneducated and more of a concern with the consequences that their actions might have on the elite members of the race. She is most

¹¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 143.

¹² Puckett, 581

¹³ Higginbotham, 187.

¹⁴ Higginbotham, 206-207.

interested in reforming the poor, lower class in order to expel stereotypes whites directed at all Black women, showing no regard to class stratification in the Black community.¹⁵

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Uplift...encoded the church women's assimilationist leanings. Organized black church women disseminated throughout the black community the assimilationist message implicit in respectability, and they endeavored to implant middle-class values and behavioral patterns among the masses of urban blacks who retained rural folkways of speech, dress, worship, and other distinct cultural patterns.¹⁶

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Another Victorian aspect of spirituality adopted by and subsequently reinforced by mainstream Northern Black churches was the silencing of women. Unlike Southern religious outlooks that embraced idea of women as healers and teachers, the Northern Black churches took to heart the apostle Paul's command for women to be quiet and respectful during instruction. Paul said, "I give no permission for a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. A woman ought to be quiet...."¹⁷ While women did find some leadership opportunities in auxiliary groups, Bible studies, and social outreach programs, they

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¹⁵ Higginbotham, 206-207

¹⁶ Higginbotham, 195-196

¹⁷ 1 Timothy 2.11-12 New Jerusalem Bible.

were forced to conform to a patriarchal structure that denied their spiritual equality to men. In *Black Churches of Brooklyn*, Clarence Taylor observed:

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The patriarchal values of the larger society and of Christianity itself also added the burden of sexism, including sexual exclusion from the vocation of ministry. As the invisible underground religion of the slave churches of Baptist and Methodist persuasion...often accepted in toto the rules, beliefs, hierarchy, structure, and patriarchal conventions of their white counterparts from whose churches they were now separated....The Black mainline churches of Brooklyn consistently illustrate this exclusion of women from conventional positions of power.¹⁸

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There was no room in the ideal Northern Black church for many Southern traditions; these included folk traditions and certainly Hoodoo.

The feminist etiology of the black Baptist church reflected several intellectual trends of the late nineteenth century. Like other Americans, the Baptist thinkers accepted a priori the notion of certain intrinsic differences between the male and female identity.

¹⁸ Clarence Taylor, *Black Churches of Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 168.

The dominant thought of the age embraced an essentialist understanding of gender, it ascribed to womanhood a feminine essence that was virtuous, patient, gentle and compassionate....woman was considered naturally religious, bound by greater emotionalism, and with greater capacity to sympathize and forgive. Since the manifestation of the feminine essence became most readily apparent in the act of raising children in the home, feminine virtues were most easily equated with maternal qualities. It appeared axiomatic that God and nature had ordained woman's station in life by providing her with a job and workplace incontestably her own."¹⁹

▲ This was, again, the mainstream belief, not that of the thriving undercurrent of Southern spirituality that maintained the spiritual significance of Black mothers, so often the teachers and healers of their homes, neighborhoods and communities.

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▲ One early example reflecting the era's common disdain for Black folkways is William Wells Brown's 1880 book The South and Its People. In this work, the escaped slave turned playwright and essayist chronicles his trip back to the south in 1879-1880. Supporting the

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¹⁹ Higginbotham, 136.

progressive ideas of Northern clergy, Brown condemned the more widely accepted practice of revival meetings and the wandering missionaries who often organized them. He said these churches and men encouraged people to stay out late, participate in frenzied forms of worship, and pass up gainful employment opportunities.²⁰ "The only remedy for this great evil," Brown asserts, "lies in an educated ministry, which is being supplied to a limited extent. It is very difficult, however, to induce the uneducated, superstitious masses to receive and support an intelligent Christian clergy."²¹

Another Southern progressive, Rosa Young, in her article "What Induced Me to Build a School in the Rural District," gives several reasons why, in 1912, she undertook the burden of returning to rural Alabama to start a school for the children of cotton farmers. Young had graduated from Payne University in Selma and desired to educate those children who did not benefit from the existing school system. Deeply disturbed by the "vile and grievous condition"²² of her race, Young states that "Ignorance and superstition in all matters prevailed beyond measure; indeed, the ignorance and superstition among the

²⁰ William Wells Brown, "Black Religion in the Post-Reconstruction South," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 260.

²¹ Brown, 260.

²² Rosa Young, "What Induced Me to Build a School in the Rural District," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 348.

people were amazing.” When the school fell upon hard times, Young, the daughter of an African Methodist preacher, looked to Mid-western white Lutherans for help and support. The Lutheran missionary N. J. Bakke took over her school in 1916 and established several Lutheran schools and churches throughout the south.²³

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Mabel Terry is one of the many Southern Blacks who migrated to Northern cities before 1950. Born in the early 1920s, Mrs. Terry is now a small business owner in Detroit, Michigan. She is a clear

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example of one of the more progressive churchgoers who looked down upon Hoodoo, referring to it as a “poor” Black custom.²⁴ Mrs. Terry

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grew up in Ofahoma, Mississippi. Ofahoma, as she describes it, was an area where primarily landowning Blacks and some whites lived and farmed their own land for subsistence and products to sell at market.

Blacks in this area took great pride in their self-sufficiency. Mrs. Terry

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describes her religious upbringing as very mainstream. Ofahoma was less a town than a collection of several farms and families, however, there were two relatively nearby churches. There was a Methodist Church to which her mother belonged, and a Baptist Church where her father was a deacon. As a compromise, the family went to each church on alternating Sundays. Outside of these denominational

²³ Young, 347.

²⁴ Mabel Terry, interview by author in Detroit, Michigan, October, 2, 2004.

differences, there was no real variation on Christianity that Mrs. Terry noticed. She said they read the Bible, spent Sundays at church and, did not add anything to the Bible's message being taught by the ministers.²⁵

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Growing up, Mrs. Terry learned at home and at church to stay away from the people who practiced magic and conjure. These people living across the river from her family were known in Ofahoma to be poor, uneducated, superstitious, and backward. She even seemed slightly offended when asked questions about issues that she perceived to belong to poor, uneducated people. Often her response to questions about conjure were "I wouldn't know about that stuff, that was what the poor people did."²⁶ In 1942 when Mrs. Terry moved north, her attitudes about the religion of the poor and uneducated moved with her. She found a Presbyterian church to attend and raised her three children in that congregation.²⁷

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If the study of Black spirituality were solely based the Black church, it would seem that the dominant culture was able to infiltrate the hearts and minds of Blacks, successfully breeding an internalized racism.

Hoodoo, however, remained a force of resistance against white

²⁵ Mabel Terry, interview by author in Detroit, Michigan, October, 2, 2004.

²⁶ Mabel Terry, interview by author in Detroit, Michigan, October, 2, 2004.

²⁷ Mabel Terry, interview by author in Detroit, Michigan, October, 2, 2004.

supremacy and the patriarchal structure that it championed. In *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, Puckett explores the religion and folk beliefs of Mississippi's African American population in the 1920s. Puckett attempted to reveal, and in some instances explain, the various practices of Black Hoodoo in the South. Utilizing the oral histories from interviews he conducted, his own observations and other research, Puckett explored the influences of Hoodoo in the daily lives of the Southern Blacks that he encounters. From folk remedies and church attendance to metaphysical phenomena and concepts of the soul, Puckett illustrated how, for his subjects, spirituality and day-to-day life are inseparable. Equally inseparable, he seemed to suggest, are the purely African influences on Black religion from the European and American folk beliefs, including the Christian doctrine, to which the majority of Mississippi Blacks claimed to adhere. Hoodoo formed from a hodge-podge of African, European, and American beliefs about burial customs, ghosts and witches, charms, spells, and curses. Puckett also commented on the trend he notices in the mid-1920s that many educated and progressively minded Blacks began to shun these so-called superstitious ways. Puckett lamented this phenomenon and admitted that he must act in "haste in collecting this fast-disappearing lore"²⁸ because many of his informants—the conjure

²⁸ Puckett, viii.

doctors and former slaves—were taking with them to their graves vast knowledge and insight into the origins and beliefs of Southern Hoodoo.²⁹

In 1926 African American sociologist, Ira De A. Reid, noted that the Black section of Harlem contained more than 140 churches.³⁰ In the same year, editors of *The Year Book of Negro Churches*, Reverdy C. Ransom and James H. Robinson commented on the absence of new religious groups on that year's federal religious census.³¹ According to Ransom, Robinson, and Reid, this flurry of new cults was due to the spiritual naiveté of Southern migrants and the religious con-artists who fooled them into joining their movements rather than the established Black Northern churches. In *Bound for the Promised Land*, Milton C. Sernett acknowledges the rise of these spiritual con-artists, but also argues that:

African Americans who relocated “up North” brought religious folkways with them that they did not abandon over night, despite efforts to acculturate them made by both national and local representatives of the large African American

²⁹ Puckett, viii.

³⁰ Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke university Press, 1997), 181.

³¹ Reverdy C. Ransom and James H. Robinson, *The Year Book of Negro Churches, 1939-1940* (Philadelphia: A.M.E Book Concern, 1940), 45, in Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke university Press, 1997), 181.

denominations. Sometimes disagreements over how best to assimilate migrants into existing congregations caused internal stress. Newcomers had their own habits of the heart.³²

Some newcomers chose to go to churches that reflected some of their Southern traditions. The emerging Pentecostal Church and other new denominations embraced more Southern spiritual traditions than any

of the established Northern churches. Albert Raboteau, in *Slave Religion*, revealed remnants of Southern folkways in Northern Black

Churches. They describe practices such as the shouting sermons, spirituals, and speaking in tongues and being “caught up in the spirit.”

Pentecostalism represents the very surface of the deep stream of southern spiritual remnants and practices known as conjure. Other

practices, viewed as superstitious or overtly pagan were met with criticism and disapproval. These churches, while still not fully

accepting southern spirituality allowed for an evolution of some practices of slave religion. But the thriving stream of Southern

Hoodoo went deeper than any institutionalized practices. Though Southern Hoodoo “never approached the complexities of Haitian

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³² Sernett, 182.

Vodun...it achieved a distinctive character above the level of simple, unorganized sorcery.”³³

Despite the many the many obstacles, these habits of the heart have not been entirely forgotten; rather pieces of them have been bequeathed to the children and grandchildren of the Great Migrations. These beliefs and customs have demonstrated a remarkable longevity and durability. Among the traditions carried north were practices ranging from beliefs about good and evil omens to herbal remedies that often overlapped ingredients and rituals with spells, charms, and prayers.

Darlene Waller, the daughter of Southern migrants to Michigan, revealed a worldview filled with magic that her mother bequeathed to her that she later passed on in part to her children.³⁴ The idea of mothers as spiritual teachers, though largely lost in mainstream religious traditions, was evident in the Hoodoo that came north. Born in 1954, Mrs. Waller was baptized in and attended Baptist churches in Detroit. She, her mother, and her sisters were devout Christians: they attended church and Sunday school each week and prayed on their knees every night. Like so many other Southerners, however,

³³ Charles Joyner, “Believer I Know,” in *African American Christianity: Essays in History*, ed. Paul E. Johnson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 35.

³⁴ Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004.

Mrs. Waller's mother, Tempie Mae Simmons, held a set of beliefs outside of church doctrine. Since, by their very nature, many folk beliefs are so thoroughly interwoven with the rest of life, it is often difficult to ascertain where the mainstream or accepted practice ends and the alleged superstition begins. Puckett commented:

But any survivals of African religion have become, to the whites, superstition; showing that the difference between superstition and religion is something purely in the mores—the same belief being religion to one folk and superstition to another. Religion among the Southern Negroes is so full of what the whites call superstition that it would be impossible to disentangle the two did we not have our present concept of Christianity as a standard.³⁵

[Here](#) Puckett compares religion and superstition in terms of white and Black. Though representation of Blacks who would also call folkways superstition is absent, his argument remains compelling. For migrants and their children who grew up in northern cities, the line between legitimate Christianity and folkways was, at best, blurry. One of the many areas that illustrates this phenomenon is the practice of medicine and healing. Black, white, wealthy, and poor accepted the

³⁵ Puckett, 520-521.

conventional wisdom in using herbs for health reasons: the bark of the white willow was often used as a pain killer, the comfrey leaf used in poultices as a bone healer, chamomile and the root of the valerian plant as mild sedatives, among many others. These recipes, however, often crossed over into the magical realm. As Puckett observed, conjuration was “constantly having a hand in the practical affairs of life.”³⁶ Those who grew up in homes practicing this often could not make a distinction, and indeed, did not realize that there was a distinction between medicine and magic.

Southern folk remedies covered a wide range of cures. The recommendation for a toothache is to pick the aching tooth with the splinters from the north side of a pine tree that had been struck by lightning and then throw the splinters into running water, thus immediately alleviating the pain.³⁷ [Mrs.](#) Waller recalls that her mother’s cure for a sty is to go to the intersection of two streets and say, “sty, sty get off my eye, jump on the next person that comes by.” The next time a person walked through the intersection, the sty would be transferred, thus healing the original sufferer. A cure for pink eye

³⁶ Puckett, 310.

³⁷ Puckett, 372.

involved placing a few drops of one's own urine into the affected eye to clear it up.³⁸

Another common cure in conjure was for sore throats believed to be caused by a fallen palate. Puckett wrote that "There is supposed to be a hair on the crown (and sides as well) of the head which supports the palate, and the usual remedy when the 'palate draps' is to pull this 'palate-lock' up quickly, twist the wisp of hair up tightly and tie with a string (or piece of cloth)."³⁹ In his father's Mississippi manufacturing plant in the early 1920s, there was a woman who regularly cured this ailment. If a client did not want his or her hair pulled, she placed a spoonful of salt and pepper in the mouth to aid the palate to "hop back to its accustomed place."⁴⁰ In the 1950s and 1960s when [Mrs. Simmons](#) administered this cure to her daughter, it had changed little. [Mrs. Waller](#) remembers her mother pulling her hair tight to the top of her head with a rubber band, and then blowing a spoonful of pepper into her throat whenever she complained of this ailment.⁴¹

Other practices and beliefs that she spoke of were passive practices such as accurately interpreting omens, defensive measures to guard

³⁸ Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004.

³⁹ Puckett, 368.

⁴⁰ Puckett, 369.

⁴¹ Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004.

one self from harm, even some forms of magic to affect change in ones environment. The accurate reading of omens seemed to be an ability of great importance to Mrs. Waller and much of her beliefs focused on this ability. To Mrs. Waller, this ability was the most important aspect of her mother's spiritual teaching and involved some of the most crucial spiritual lessons besides the redemptive message of Christ to pass on to her own children.

Mrs. Simmons taught that bad luck and death omens should always be heeded.⁴² Among them were "a black cat crossing your path, your left hand itching, and your left eye jumping." Some omens were more serious and warned of death in the household or extended family.

Mrs. Waller explains that one of the strongest signs is to hear ones name being called. This happened several times during her childhood and adult life to her and her family members just days before someone in the family died.⁴³ A second strong death omen may come in a vision. She recalls that her older sister woke one morning to see a woman dressed in white standing beside her bed. The family interpreted this as being a spirit or ghost coming to warn of death. Waller recalls that within a week a member of the extended family

⁴² Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004.

⁴³ Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004.

died, proving the accuracy of the omen.⁴⁴ Another sign that her mother spoke of was when a black cat looked into a person's home.

Mrs. Waller does not recall seeing this happen, but believes it is another sign of death.⁴⁵

While the accurate reading of omens is an important part of Mrs. Waller's worldview, two other aspects of her mother's traditions seemed to remain strong, if not in practice, in belief. Guarding from the energies of enemies including the living and the dead, and the ability to affect negative or positive change in the natural world by using sympathetic or other forms of magic were a large part of Mrs. Waller's worldview growing up. Puckett documented very similar practices in the 1920s. Protecting oneself and loved ones from harmful spells and energies was important for the former slaves of 1920 as well as for Mrs. Waller's mother in Detroit in the 1950s through present times. She remembers that her mother would have the children to hang bundles containing various items above her doorway or bed.⁴⁶ This sort of bundle is often referred to as a fetish.

Puckett recorded that many Southern Blacks in the 1920s relied on fetishes for varying outcomes. Fetishes could be used for good or for

⁴⁴ Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004

⁴⁵ Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004

⁴⁶ Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004

ill will. They were used for protection from enemies, to ward off evil, to heal an ailment, or to attract a lover or spouse.

So long as these fetishes are used simply for protection, the owner is a practitioner of white art, but, when they are used to injure others or force others to do certain things pleasing to the owner of the fetish, their possessor is said to practice black art....All the enemy has to do is get some of his victim's hair, his nails, or water in which he has bathed, and have a witch-doctor make a concoction which, buried in front of the victim's door, or secretly hung in his room, will bring sure death.⁴⁷

In her interview, [Mrs.](#) Waller recounted a story that still causes her to feel uneasy after several decades. In the mid-1960s a woman claimed to be in love with her father, but he refused to leave his family.

Knowing that the woman was "up to something," [Mrs.](#) Simmons invited her into their home to sit and reason with her. The woman admitted that she had turned to conjure to get what she wanted. She revealed that she had buried several death fetishes in [the](#) Simmons' front yard, with the hopes that she would finally be able to take her husband. Two months later, [Mrs.](#) Waller remembers the woman visiting her home again. This time she was there to apologize and bring bad news: she had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer.

⁴⁷ Puckett, 175-176.

Mrs. Waller remembers merely weeks later when, while viewing the woman's body at the funeral home, Mrs. Simmons told her never to dabble in black magic: the consequences could be drastic. At this point in the story she pauses and says that this is why you should never do black magic to hurt people: your plans could backfire and all that hatred could come back and hurt you.⁴⁸

Though as an adult Mrs. Waller began to question her beliefs, her habits of the heart eventually won out and compelled her to bequeath at least some of the knowledge of this long, rich tradition to her children. When she was married, her husband had differing views about her strange beliefs. He urged her to abandon many of her previous ideas about the world because they gave credit to witchcraft, which was, he said, against the Bible. Mrs. Waller admitted that she tried to forget about her mother's teachings. She said, "You don't want to believe in it because it seems so foolish. But it's still there after all these years. It's a part of me and I think there's some truth to it because that's what I was taught."⁴⁹

Any hesitation she experienced in teaching her children concerned their welfare in an unexpected way. Mrs. Waller felt that her mother's

⁴⁸ Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004

⁴⁹ Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004

knowledge of the spiritual world was a great burden. After experiencing [an](#) evil omen, she would often worry for days about to whom it might apply. She was not sure if she wanted to open her children's minds to this kind of stress. She said, "I did not want to [tell her children about some spiritual things] because when you know about stuff, it bothers you. Like dreams. I believe they tell you about reality and can give you warnings. This is something God does to help us."⁵⁰

[Mrs.](#) Waller's hesitancy to tell her children about [Hoodoo](#) is common among children of the Great Migrations. Indeed, hesitancy and anxiety echoed throughout almost all of my interviews with migrants and their children. While some of the interviewees displayed a hesitancy to tell based on their desire not to be associated with witchcraft, others seemed to speak as though they were guarding family secrets or even trying to protect me from something that may be detrimental to my spiritual health. One such person is Finious LJ Carson. [Mr.](#) Carson's family moved from Carthage, Mississippi to Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the 1940s. Later, his family moved back to Mississippi where he lived with his grandmother, Nola Lee. Nola Lee made her livelihood as a fortuneteller. She was both revered as a

⁵⁰ Darlene Waller, interview by author in Livonia, Michigan, November 1, 2004

miracle worker and feared as a witch in her hometown. Getting through [Mr.](#) Carson's anxiety to tell me about her was slow going, though when he did start to open up, he revealed vivid memories about this woman who believed, practiced and taught the traditions of Hoodoo.⁵¹

I first learned of Nola Lee during an interview with [Mr.](#) Carson's cousin, Toni Lockett. [Mrs.](#) Lockett, another child of the Great Migrations North, is a devout Baptist who initially denied any knowledge of Hoodoo. She is very strongly opposed to the beliefs and practices because she believes that they are satanic. She describes her spirituality as based only on the King James Version of the Bible; anything outside of this grace is evil and against God.⁵² When questioned further, [Mrs.](#) Lockett admitted that she had heard of people, though again making very clear that they were not in her immediate family, who cast spells and made charms. These people, she said, even had the nerve to go to church, though the true Christians knew who they were and stayed away from them. She recalled that some people cast spells to try to make others "go crazy" or be involved in fatal accidents. She also knew of women who would mix their menstrual blood into their lover's food hoping to ensure love

⁵¹ Finious LJ Carson, telephone interview by author, March 13, 2005.

⁵² Tony Lockett, telephone interview by author, March 13, 2005.

and faithfulness. She admitted that she did not like to talk about such things, though recommended that I talk to her cousin LJ about his grandmother, Nola Lee. She warned, "don't you dare tell LJ I told you this, but his granma was a witch and a fortuneteller. He would cuss me out and never talk to me again if he knew that I was saying things about her!"⁵³

According to Mrs. Lockett, everyone in the community knew Nola Lee as the witch in red. She always wore nice, new clothes, but her outfits were always entirely red and she often wore several layers. Though for many she stirred fear, even devout churchgoers were seduced by her reputation and sought her help in more desperate moments.

These people, Mrs. Lockett believed, were weak Christians who were not firmly rooted in the Bible. If they had been firmly rooted in Christianity, they would not have given in to the "old, superstitious" ways, as she dismissed Hoodoo.⁵⁴ Mrs. Lockett's attitude may reflect the attitude of so many other Blacks who dismissed Hoodoo as superstitious, though maintained a certain fear or acknowledgement of its power. Henry H Mitchell's *Black Church Beginnings* tells a story revealing similar attitudes:

⁵³ Tony Lockett, telephone interview by author, March 13, 2005.

⁵⁴ Tony Lockett, telephone interview by author, March 13, 2005.

In 1945 when a California pastor from Louisiana was discovered dusting the communion table and the four corners of the sanctuary. His purpose had been to gain protection from the critics of his personal life. This resort to witchcraft was not forgiven. Members refused to receive the communion he had prepared and dismissed him summarily. This reaction was righteous indignation but undoubtedly included some hidden fear of superstition also.⁵⁵

This is an important story because it reveals that the pastor's church peers were familiar enough with Hoodoo to be able to recognize his actions, but they also rejected his use of it. This story and my interviews reveal some of the social consequences of practicing Hoodoo, and the importance of making that practice as clandestine as possible.

In a time when the rich traditions of Hoodoo had come under attack, Nola Lee stood firm in her determination not to forget her heritage. The changing times brought the limitations of mainstream society into the spiritual realm of Black women, beginning the shift from respected teachers and healers to silenced sisters in the church pews. When women who sought religious power "were actively opposed and

⁵⁵ Henry H Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 42.

isolated,"⁵⁶ Nola Lee and women like her would not be relegated to the pews, not be silenced, and certainly not willingly give up their power. So at the risk of being ostracized, or at best called backwards, women like Nola Lee resisted the racism and sexism that attacked their culture from all sides. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks states, "The suggestion that women must obtain power before they can effectively resist sexism is rooted in the false assumption that women have no power. Women, even the most oppressed among us, do exercise some power."⁵⁷ Hooks' theory reveals the lifestyle of the women and men who continued to practice Hoodoo after Reconstruction.

Mr. Carson's recollections of his grandmother were much less critical, though he believed that some of her practices were less than righteous. He began to recall what he believed to be less malignant or harmful stories about his grandmother's Hoodoo: love and relationships. Among other gifts, Nola Lee was known to "make people fall in love."⁵⁸ Crucial to the function of her spell was the use of charms and fetishes. Similar to protection fetishes, Nola Lee created a charm which the person in need was to wear. Very often

⁵⁶ Clarence Taylor, *Black Churches of Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 171.

⁵⁷ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984), quoted in Clarence Taylor, *Black Churches of Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 165.

⁵⁸ Finious LJ Carson, telephone interview by author, March 13, 2005.

she placed these charms on bracelets or necklaces. If for any reason the piece of charmed jewelry came off, the spell would be broken.⁵⁹

Carson remembers several men who came to his grandmother for this reason, and were satisfied with the results of her work. One man who came to Nola Lee, Mr. Carson recalls, could not get up the nerve to even speak to the woman he desired, believing that she had no idea that he was interested in her because her family had more money than his. Nola Lee created a charm bracelet for this man, advising him to go about life as usual, and not to worry about trying to approach her. Shortly afterward, the woman introduced herself to him, a relationship began, and they were married. Years into the marriage, the man lost his charm bracelet and, as Nola Lee had predicted, his wife left him, taking their children, never again reconciling with her husband.⁶⁰

Nola Lee seemed to have an omniscience beyond the sight of a watchful parent or community member. On the way to church one morning, Carson recalls that she told him that the girl he had his eye on would talk to him after the service and that he should feel at ease because she liked him as well. This was surprising to him, because he had never expressed these feelings to anyone and, furthermore, the young lady had never approached him. Much to his amazement, just

⁵⁹ Finious LJ Carson, telephone interview by author, March 13, 2005.

⁶⁰ Finious LJ Carson, telephone interview by author, March 13, 2005.

as Nola Lee had predicted, the young woman approached Mr. Carson after the service. He said that he often thought about asking his grandmother to help him with women in this way, however, he was uncomfortable with “tricking” someone into falling in love. As a young man, he was quite nervous about approaching women, but he was even more nervous to repeat the fate of the unfortunate man who lost his family over a lost piece of jewelry.⁶¹

In 1926 Newbell Niles Puckett lamented the loss of Southern Black folk traditions. Others made concerted efforts to cleanse Black America of its so-called backwards and uncivilized practices. Many, on both sides of the issue predicted this inevitable loss. In his essay, “The Baptist Church in the Years of Crisis,” R K Burkett suggests that “mainline denominations were unable to respond effectively to the spiritual and social needs of the Black community.”⁶² Perhaps disconnect was a result of the paternalism of Northern churches, blinded to the reality of the strength of Hoodoo and its integration into so many lives. The current of Southern Hoodoo remained strong in the hearts of migrants. The testimony of Darlene Waller and others is a testament to the strength and flexibility of folk spirituality in African American culture.

⁶¹ Finious LJ Carson, telephone interview by author, March 13, 2005.

⁶² R K Burkett, “The Baptist Church in the Years of Crisis” in *African American Christianity: Essays in History*, ed. Paul E Johnson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 134.

While expressions of folk beliefs may always be shunned as backwards or superstitious in a society that often lauds progress over tradition, folk beliefs remain alive and active in the hearts of the descendants of the Great Migrations. Though beliefs will inevitably metamorphose and practices will change to fit other aspects of a living culture, the roots will always reach back to Africa. Indeed, the ability to bend and grow to fit the changing currents of society is the greatest strength of Black folk culture. As a proverb asserts, a tree that is unbending is easily broken.⁶³ If the story of Africans in America has asserted on message through generations of attempted subjugation and cultural genocide, it is to firmly say that its culture is bendable, flexible, and therefore, durable.

⁶³ Lao-tzu, *Tao te Ching*, trans. Gai-Fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Random House Books, 1972), 76.

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