

SOUTHERN CONJURE WOMEN: MANIFESTORS OF SOUTHERN BLACK JOY

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A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Literature in English—Master of Arts

2022

## ABSTRACT

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Southern Conjure women are the manifestors of Southern Black joy. Southern conjure women are women from or in the South. These women utilize root work and/or conjure as a means of empowerment, self-preservation, and healing. In the discussion of Southern conjure women, I employ "conjure feminism" to understand the significance of Southern conjure women and their role in society. In addition, I also use Lindsey Stewart's *The Politics of Black Joy* to discuss how root work plays a significant role in the production of Southern Black joy. In my discussion of the Southern conjure woman, I explore Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. I utilize characters from these works as archetypes of Southern conjure women. I also talk about how each character utilizes root work and conjure to manifest Southern Black joy.

This thesis is dedicated to my family.  
Thank you for supporting me and believing in me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Kinitra Brooks and Dr. Kristin Mahoney for their endless support and encouragement.

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## Introduction

In *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature*, Kameelah L. Martin describes a conjurer as a mediator between the visible and invisible worlds: herbalists, fortune-tellers, midwives, spiritualists (34). In *Black Magic*, Yvonne R. Chireau explains that conjurers are leaders within their communities who utilize their supernatural powers for the betterment of their communities. Chireau also emphasizes that conjurers utilize their powers for both benevolent and malevolent magic (106). From both Martin and Chireau's definition of a conjurer, I describe Southern conjure women as women who are from or in the South. They are intermediaries between the visible and invisible worlds. They are prominent figures in their communities, who use their supernatural powers to liberate themselves and others.

To discuss Southern conjure women, I turn to Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass Cypress & Indigo* and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* to discuss the archetypes of Southern conjure women. In Shange's work, I focus on the lives of Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo. Sassafrass is the eldest of the sisters who is a weaver. She utilizes her art as a means for self-expression and self-discovery. Cypress, the middle sister, is a dancer. She utilizes dance as a means for liberation and ancestor veneration. Indigo, the youngest, has a magical perspective on the world. She utilizes her unique understanding to aid and uplift her community. Each sister undergoes a spiritual journey in a quest to find themselves. In Naylor's work, I center the life of Mama Day, who is a matriarch within her family and a significant figure within her community. Mama Day is a midwife and a spiritualist who utilizes her abilities to help and empower her community. Although I utilize these characters to discuss the archetypes of Southern conjure women, the archetypes are not limited to these characters.

In order to gain a better understanding of these characters and explain the significance of Southern conjure women, I utilize conjure feminism. Conjure feminism is a term coined by Kinitra Brooks, Kameelah L. Martin, and LaKisha Simmons. Conjure feminism centers on the knowledge that is passed down to Black women by their foremothers. Conjure feminism also emphasizes the visibility of the conjure woman and her contributions to Black women's "knowledge production." This type of "knowledge production" has aided not only the Black community but also society as a whole. Conjure feminism gives validation to the knowledge and wisdom that Black women assimilate from their grandmother's kitchens, gardens, and homes, and it also recognizes the significance of these places (Brooks, Martin, Simmons). In Kinitra Brooks's "Myrtle's Medicine," Professor Brooks explains that conjure feminism allows Black women to rediscover themselves, and it provides Black women with tools to hold space and heal through spiritual work (Brooks). Furthermore, conjure feminism provides an understanding of the unique experiences and expressions of Black women and how these things shape their realities and interpretations.

To give more insight on Southern conjure women, I also turn to Lindsey Stewart's *The Politics of Black Joy*. In Stewart's discussion of the politics of Black joy, Professor Stewart places Zora Neale Hurston's works in juxtaposition with the works of neo-abolitionists to analyze the politics surrounding the expression of Southern Black joy. Stewart uncovers in her analysis that the overexpression of Southern Black joy leads to ministry. On the contrary, the lack thereof leads to the confines of the neo-abolitionists' narratives. These sorts of narratives take away Black agency. Professor Stewart explains that Zora Neale Hurston's work is a medium in the dialect between ministry and the neo-abolitionists' narratives. This is due to Hurston's art of refusal and acknowledgement of Southern Black joy in the public sphere via her work (Stewart 35).

In my exploration of *The Politics of Black Joy*, I focus specifically on Professor Stewart's explanation of how Hurston utilizes root work as a means of Southern Black joy. I also think about Hurston, who was a conjure woman, and how she utilized root work in her work to celebration Black Southern life and identity. Through the practice of rootwork, Black women have created spaces of healing for themselves and others. In "Myrtle's Medicine," Kinitra Brooks explains that "Black women have long been rootworkers—pulling from ancestral traditions of the African diaspora"(Brooks). Professor Brooks defines "rootworking" as an integrated knowledge practice that comes from Black women's lived experiences. Professor Brooks explains that root work encompasses the "spiritual, intellectual, and practical needs of Black women" (Brooks). Root work is an intergenerational medicinal practice that has been utilized by Black women as a means of healing and spiritual empowerment. Root work also gives Black women autonomy over their bodies and their sexuality.

Moreover, to further understand the connection between conjure and root work, I turn to Stephanie Y. Mitchem's *African American Folk Healing*. Mitchem explains that a "conjuror could also be known as a rootworker because knowledge and use of plant life is a part of the practice of conjuring" (106). Also, Mitchem argues that in many instances, the terms "conjuror" and "rootworker" are utilized interchangeably (103). In *Mojo Workin'*, Katrina Hazzard-Donald notes that root work is also associated with Hoodoo (42). In Lindsey Stewart's discussion of Hurston's use of root work as a of liberatory practice, Professor Stewart also notes Hurston's use of figures such as High John the Conqueror (123). High John the Conqueror is a prominent figure in the Hoodoo tradition (Hazzard-Donald 142). Hoodoo is a collection of spiritual practices, traditions, and beliefs developed by enslaved Black people in the Southern parts of the United States. Professor Hazzard-Donald explains that High John the Conqueror is both a



significant figure and a root within Hoodoo (122). In fact, High John the Conqueror root is mentioned in Fredrick Douglass's slave narrative. In Douglass's narrative, Sandy Jenkins, who is a rootworker, gives Douglass the root to help him overcome his situation with the slave-breaker, Covey. Because of the root, Douglass was able to avoid punishment from Covey and eventually escape to freedom (Douglass 108). The High John root, also known as the Morning Glory root, is a powerful root that has been utilized by people for luck, protection, or to make outcomes and situations go in their favor (Hazzard-Donald 124). Katrina Hazzard-Donald explains that the root's "power is derived from its relationship with enslavement and the spirit of rebellion and resistance" (122). In Zora Neale Hurston's *High John de Conquer*, she explains that High John is "our hope-bringer," and he provides us with the power to overcome any situation or obstacle (Hurston 16).

Like High John, the Southern conjure woman provides her community with the spiritual guidance needed for their empowerment. Therefore, I make the argument that Southern conjure women manifest Southern Black joy. This is not to say that Southern conjure women are the only people who can manifest Southern Black joy. Southern conjure women, on the other hand, have been prominent figures in the celebration and liberation of Southern Black cultural identity. In the following chapters, I will discuss the significance of conjure women, and how they employ root work to manifest Black Southern joy. In the chapter, "Where there is a woman, there is magic, " I explore the lives of Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo. I also discuss how Shange utilizes the meanings of their names to connect the characters to South Carolina. I also explain how the plants and the characters are related. First, I talk about Indigo, and her unique way of seeing the world. I also explain her relationship with her dolls and how this relationship is significant to her spiritual development. Next, I analyze Sassafrass and her journey of rediscovery. Finally, I

examine Cypress and how she uses dance as a form of spiritual work. In the chapter "A True Conjure Woman," I explore Mama Day and how she uses her powers as a midwife and conjure to help and empower her community. Finally, in the conclusion, I go into details about the importance and significance of these conjure women and their stories and how they contribute to Southern Black joy, and I also talk about the significance and importance of Southern Black joy and the Southern Conjure woman.

“Where there is a woman, there is magic”

Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass Cypress & Indigo*, deals with the lives of three sisters. Each sister’s name is connected to a plant, and these plants are native to South Carolina. This sort of connectivity shows how the sisters’ identities are rooted in South Carolina. Furthermore, there is a strong connection between the sisters and the plants. For instance, Sassafrass is named after the Sassafras plant. This plant is used to help with women’s reproductive health. Sassafrass is a woman who employs her art as a weaver to celebrate womanhood. Cypress is a plant that is utilized to aid in men’s sexual enhancement. Cypress is known as a lover of several men. Lastly, the indigo plant is significant to the history of South Carolina. Indigo has a strong connection to the land. Unlike her sisters, Indigo has never left Charleston. Moreover, throughout the novel, Shange utilizes medicinal magic to further show the sisters’ connectivity to spiritual work and root work. Each chapter contains intergenerational recipes and or spiritual rituals. In doing so, Shange shows how intergenerational production of knowledge is utilized by each sister to aid on their spiritual journeys.

Indigo, the youngest sister, consorts with spirits. Indigo can often be found sitting among her dolls. These dolls are her companions, who keep up with Indigo’s changes, moods, and dreams. When out in public, Indigo is always seen carrying one of her dolls. While engaging in conversations with others, sometimes she excuses herself because her dolls are calling. Indigo’s relationship with her dolls often leads others to believe that she has "too much South in her" (Shange 3-4). In LeRonda S. Manigault-Bryant’s *Talking to the Dead*, Manigault-Bryant discusses the practice of talking to the dead among Gullah Geechee women. Manigault-Bryant explains that talking to the dead is a spiritual experience where connections are made with the deceased, and the presence of the dead reveals more than words. It is through this four-tiered

process—openness, acknowledgment, acceptance, and communication—that these women connect to those who are gone yet still remain" (105). In essence, Indigo talks to spirits whom she has physically crafted into dolls by utilizing items from the earth. Indigo's enchantment allows her the openness, acknowledgment, acceptance, and communication needed to connect with the dead. These spirits are her companions, who understand and effectively communicate with her. Indigo's affinity for spirit allows the dead to communicate with her through her dreams. Indigo finds joy in conversing with her dolls and carries them everywhere. Indigo's relationship with her dolls gives her a different outlook and perspective on the world. Indigo employs this outlook not only to liberate herself but also to liberate others.

Indigo keeps a moon journal. Indigo's moon journal contains different rituals that are suitable for the different phases of the moon. The moon journal includes rituals for self-love, keeping a lover, getting rid of evil spirits, and venerating ancestors. This sort of knowledge production is discussed within conjure feminism. In Kinitra Brooks's "Myrtle's Medicine," Professor Brooks explains that conjure feminism "liberates the diasporic and folkloric practices of spirit work." Indigo uses her knowledge of the moon phases, herbs, and folkloric practices to construct rituals that are suitable for certain situations or ailments. Moreover, when Indigo receives her period, she creates a ritual for herself and her dolls.

"When you first realize your blood has come, smile; an honest smile; for you are about to have an intense union with your magic. This is a private time, a special time, for thinking and dreaming. Change your bed sheet to the ones that are your favorite. Sleep with a laurel leaf under your head. Take baths in wild hyssop, white water lilies. Listen for the voices of your vision; they are nearby. Let annoying people, draining worries, fall away as your body lets what she

doesn't need go from her. Remember that you are a river; your banks are red honey where the Moon wanders" (Shange 19-20).

Indigo's moon ritual allows her to embrace her menstruation with "an honest smile." Indigo explains the significance of a woman's menstruation and how it is an "intense time with [their] magic." In doing so, Indigo takes away the negativity associated with menstruation. Indigo provides a unique perspective on how women should view their menstruation and how they should care for themselves while they're going through their cycle. In doing so, Indigo creates a self-care ritual that gives them an appreciation of their womanhood.

Sassafrass, like her mother, is a weaver. Sassafras, unlike her mother, does not want to weave clothes for Miz Fitzhugh, so she moves to Los Angeles to join the Black artist movement. While in Los Angeles, Sassafrass meets Mitch, a fellow Black artist who plays the alto sax. After meeting Mitch, Sassafrass falls in love with him, and they move in together. Sassafrass feeds off her love for Mitch and art and utilizes it to write poetry and weave Afrocentric decorations for their apartment. She employs women like Josephine Baker as muses for her poetry and art. However, Mitch does not see value in her creativity or the expression of her sensuality. When Sassafrass "sequestered a sequin-and-feather hanging shaped like a vagina for Josephine Baker." Mitch makes her hide her creation because he believes it is unsuitable "for a new Afrikan woman to make things of such sexual nature" (Shange 78). In Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," Lorde says, "It is a short step from there to the false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of the male model of power" (Lorde 53). Mitch uses the ideology of the "new Afrikan woman" as a means of oppression. The ideologies surrounding the "new Afrikan woman" stifle Sassafrass's creativity because they limit the idea of "Black pride" to the

confines of Black patriarchy. In addition, Mitch's understanding of the "new Afrikan woman" is also limited because he views the "new Afrikan woman" from a patriarchal standpoint. In essence, Mitch uses his distorted view of what and who the "new Afrikan woman" is to oppress Sassafrass and control her views about how she should create and act as a Black woman. In doing so, Mitch limits Sassafrass's growth both creatively and spiritually. Sassafrass is unable to express her sexuality and celebrate her womanhood in the ways that she desires. Mitch's treatment of Sassafrass causes her to lose her sense of self and self-worth. In losing her sense of self, Sassafrass does not realize the value of her craft.

Sassafrass carries around a sense of pride in her mother's craft. Weaving is an intergenerational gift that the women in her family have utilized for generations. It gave Sassafrass a sense of pride to know that the women in her family did more than make babies. "Sassafrass had never wanted to weave, she just couldn't help it. There was something about the feel of raw fleece and finished threads and dainty patterned pieces that was as essential to her as dancing is to Carmen DeLavallade, or singing to Aretha Franklin. Her mama had done it, and her mama before that; and making cloth was the only tradition Sassafrass inherited that gave her a sense of womanhood that was rich and sensuous, not tired and stingy" (Shange 91-92). In their discussion of conjure feminism, Brooks, Martin, and Simmons explain that "Black women represent a community of inheritors." Sassafrass is an inheritor. She inherits the craft of weaving from her foremothers. Sassafrass utilizes this craft to carry on the legacy of her ancestors. In doing so, Sassafrass keeps the knowledge of her ancestors alive. Sassafrass's craft also keeps her true to herself because it is rooted in her being. Through her craft, Sassafrass taps into her sensuousness and embraces her womanhood.

Cypress has a deep appreciation for life. Cypress likes sweet wine, cocaine, and lots of men. Her house is "full of folks from dusk to noon." Cypress does not allow any chairs or shoes in her house. She keeps an altar for the Orisha. Cypress also has strict rules about keeping her home neat and free from negativity (Shange 102). In Stephanie Y. Mitchem's discussion of healing, she says, "African American women have found ways to work around their marginalized status, including use of folk knowledge in the development of new forms of folk healing...This spirituality may be nurtured at home or in the church" (Mitchem 85). Cypress does not allow her marginalized status as a Black woman to determine the trajectory of her life. Cypress indulges in life's pleasures. Cypress lives her life unapologetically because she has a sense of self-awareness. Cypress's sense of self-awareness is due to her connection with the Orisha. Although Cypress's home is always filled with many visitors, Cypress does not allow others to disrupt the ambience within her home. Cypress understands the importance of keeping her home sacred. It is through her home's sacredness that allows Cypress to remain grounded and spiritually in tune.

Cypress dances with a Black underground dance company in San Francisco. During their "Black Out" performance, they paid homage to the Haitian spirit Damballah.

"The dancers had been in the aisles doing modern black American contractions and slides and swivels and things, and now they were all ancient and African and wholly non-West Coast California. It's so magic folks feel their own ancestors coming up out of the earth to be in the realms of their descendants; they feel the blood of their mothers still flowing in them, survivors of the diaspora" (Shange 114).

During the performance, Cypress, and the other dancers transition from modern Black dance to African ritualistic dance as a means to evoke the spirit of Damballah. The transition between

modern Black dance and African ritualistic dance shows how the dancers utilize the art of dance to connect with their ancestors. The performance itself not only evokes the ancestors of the dancers but those of the audience as well. In Katrina Hazzard Donald's "Hoodoo Religion and American Dance Tradition," Dr. Hazzard-Donald discusses ceremonial dance. Professor Hazzard Donald explains, "When an individual stepped into the allotted space, they commanded the surrounding community's attention and support. In the sacred circle, the center was a vortex of spiritual energy and power which represents a separate sacred realm, one not of the material realities of enslavement. It represented a reality which connected one to the ancestors and reconfirmed continuity through both time and space" (196). Cypress and her fellow dancers commanded the audience. Through their performance, they created a vortex that connects the present to the past. Their performance was a commemoration and veneration of the ancestors of the diaspora.

After Indigo receives her period, she undergoes a transition from girlhood to womanhood. During the transition, Indigo's mother forces her to put her dolls away. Indigo replaces her dolls with the violin. It becomes her new companion. Indigo studies the violin every summer; however, "she concentrate[s] more on learning what Aunt Haydee knew. Giving birth, curing women folks [and] their loved ones. At first, Aunt Haydee only allow[s] Indigo to play her fiddle to soothe the women in labor, but soon the mothers, the children sought Indigo for relief from elusive disquiet, hungers of the soul" (Shange 222). In Stephanie Y. Mitchem's discussion of healings, Mitchem explains, "African American women's embodied spirituality is grounded in a different perspective of the human person, a perspective that unifies body and soul within the life of the past, present, and future community in conversation with an ever-present God. This holistic view of the person in community is a ready-made construct for the development of, or



attachment to, folk healing" (85). Indigo's inability to communicate with her dolls does not sever her relationship with spirit. She understands the fluidity of spirit, and she maintains her connection through the violin. She employs the violin to communicate and relay messages for spirits. Indigo's connection permits her to speak to people's souls through music. Working with Aunt Haydee allows Indigo to see the beauty of healing and midwifery, and she realizes that her purpose is grounded in her connection with her community. Indigo understands that joy for her is in servitude to and for her community.

After leaving Los Angeles, Sassafrass and Mitch moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to join "The New World Found Collection."

"Sassafrass had tried everything to be a decent Ibejii, a Santera. She desperately wanted to make Ochá. To wear white with her Elekes. To keep the company of priests & priestesses. The New World Found Collection where she & Mitch had been living for over a year offered spiritual redemption...Mitch just made things harder. Always complaining, refusing to work with the other men, disrespecting the deities, cursing...He wandered from the collective frequently, returning incoherent, dirty, and unacceptable" (Shange 211).

During Sassafrass's time in Baton Rouge with "The New Found Collection", Sassafrass is initiated into Santería. Santería is an African-based religion founded in Cuba (Chireau 67). Sassafrass looks at joining the collective as a fresh start, and she is optimistic about her new journey. Sassafrass is also committed to the mission of the collective. Sassafrass has an ardent desire for spiritual redemption. Sassafrass is dedicated to change, and she is optimistic about becoming a priestess in Santería. Sassafrass loves her new life. On the other hand, Mitch is not committed to change at all. He is constantly out of regulation within the collective and he has continually been disrespectful to the devotees and the Orishas. Mitch is exhibiting his previous

toxic behaviors, which makes it difficult for Sassafrass. Sassafrass's connection to Mitch is stunting her growth within the collective.

In fact, during a birthday celebration for the Orisha, Shango, Sassafrass makes an offering and prays for a baby. Mama Mbewe and Mama Sumara assure her that her wish will be granted, but they also warn her that she will soon fall from grace if she does not abandon Mitch. Mama Mbewe and Mama Sumara explain, "The new one shall be cursed, if you don't renounce the father. Believe us, he is unclean" (Shange 216-217). In *The Spirit of Intimacy*, Sobonfu Somé discusses the illusion of romance. She explains, "Romantic love is an attraction that cuts off spirit and community, leaving two people to invent a relationship by themselves. It is the opposite of a relationship that lets spirit be the guide. Romance ignores all the stages of a spiritual coming together, where we begin at the bottom of the mountain and gradually travel in unison to the top. It does not leave room for the true identity of the people involved to show through. It fosters anonymity and forces people to masquerade" (96). Sassafrass is in a period of transition. She is rediscovering herself and uncovering her purpose. However, to move to the next level in her journey, she must make a difficult decision. Sassafrass's relationship with Mitch is keeping her stagnant. Sassafrass is blinded by her love and infatuation for Mitch. Mitch's obstructive behavior makes him problematic in the eyes of the collective. Sassafrass is well respected in the community. However, it does not make up for Mitch's negative behavior, and the elders of the collective warn Sassafrass that her constant need to uphold her relationship with Mitch will not only be detrimental to her, but also her unborn child.

Unfortunately, Sassafrass fails to take heed to the advice of the elders, and she falls from grace.

"Sassafrass wore white. She prayed. She wove cloth, not thinking who it was for. She'd fallen from grace. Mama Mbewe, Mama Sumara, Mama Iyabodé passed chickens over her all night. In the morning, she saw a vision of her mother. She lay on a bed of oranges, surrounded by burning yellow candles, eating honey. *'I think I'm going to carry these spirits right on home. I guess I live in looms after all. Making things: some cloth and one child, just one'*" (Shange 218).

After Sassafrass falls from grace, she goes through the process of atonement. During the process of atonement, her elders passed "chickens over her all night." The next morning, Sassafrass gets a vision of her mother, and she realizes that she must return home. The vision gives Sassafrass a unique perspective on her gifts, and she realizes that the fulfillment that she was searching for was already within her. Sassafrass also understands that Mitch is a liability, and she only has room for one child in her life. Upon this realization, Sassafrass returns home to Charleston.

After leaving San Francisco, Cypress travels to New York with a dance company. While in New York, Cypress hopes to be discovered by a major dance company. However, after arriving in New York, things do not go as planned, and Cypress ends up in and out of relationships and dance studios until she reconnects with Leroy. He provides her with a sense of stability and shows her how to give herself to someone else without losing herself. Her experiences with Leroy teach Cypress that her purpose is more significant than just dancing.

"Cypress laid waste to the tunnels, caverns, and the shadows of the other world. She drew upon memories of her own blood: her presence would be a mortal threat to those who wounded, maimed, her ancestors, her lovers, Leroy. Like those women before her who loaded bundles on their heads and marched off to fields that were not their own, like the 'bearers' of her dreams swamped with births of infants they would never rear, Cypress clung to her body, the body of a

dancer; the chart of her recklessness, her last weapon, her perimeters: blood, muscle, and the will to simply change the world” (Shange 208).

In Lindsey Stewart’s discussion of root work, Professor Stewart explains that root work privileges our relationship with our ancestors and allows us to draw on the strength of our ancestors to overcome oppression (86). Cypress’s journey to New York allows her to rediscover herself. In her self-discovery, Cypress reconnects with her ancestors. It is through her connection with her ancestors that enables Cypress to understand her purpose. Within that understanding, Cypress concludes that her purpose is bigger than just dance. Cypress realizes that she must use her gift of dance to "change the world." In doing so, Cypress leaves New York and heads back to Charleston with a dance company whose sole mission is dedicated to the fight against racism, and the fight for civil rights.

### “A True Conjure Woman”

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* begins with a genealogical map to show Miranda Day's (Mama Day) bloodline from her great grandmother Sapphira Wade to her great-niece Ophelia (Cocoa).

Sapphira was an enslaved woman bought by Bascombe Wade, with whom she bore seven children. Later, she convinced Bascombe to give Willow Springs to his enslaved women and men. Mama Day and Miss Abigail are the grandchildren of their seventh son. Like Sapphira, Mama Day is also influential in Willow Springs.

While Mama Day is preparing for the arrival of her great niece, Cocoa, she receives a visit from Bernice. Bernice is dealing with infertility, and she is seeking Mama Day's advice about trying a new infertility drug. However, Mama Day advises Bernice to continue to take the star grass and teas that she prescribed for her. Mama Day assures Bernice that she will be okay, and that she will make her some ground raspberry to take along with the other herbs that she prescribed for her. She also advises Bernice to "give it time" (Naylor 43). In Katrina Hazzard-Donald's *Mojo Workin'*, Dr. Hazzard-Donald explains that midwives are skilled herbalists who can utilize their skills in herbs and roots to help the childless to conceive (137). As a skilled herbalist and midwife, Mama Day can fully grasp Bernice's situation. Mama Day advises Bernice not to try the drug because she understands from experience that Bernice's body cannot handle the strong drug. Mama Day also understands that Bernice must give the herbs and teas time to work, and she advises Bernice to have patience.

However, Bernice did not heed Mama Day's advice. After Bernice becomes ill from taking "Perganol," an over-the-counter prescription drug that aids in fertility, Mama Day assesses the situation and offers her expertise. After arriving at Bernice and Ambush's, Mama Day discovers pus in Bernice's urine, and she decides to examine Bernice's uterus.

“Miranda slides her fingers up into Bernice real gentle. Them wrinkled fingers had gone that way so many times for so many different reasons. A path she knew so well that the slightest change of moisture, the amount of give along the walls, or the scent left on her hands could fix a woman’s cycles within less than a day of what was happening with the moon. When she gets up to the beginning of Bernice’s womb, she pushes up against it and cups her left hand—heel at the private hair, fingers near the navel --- and presses down. Good things she’s nothing but a bone, Miranda thinks. I could just about feel this womb if I had put my right hand behind her spine. It’s warmer than it should be but that’s from the infection., and it’s gotta be spreading down from her tubes, ‘cause it ain’t here. This womb is good and strong—all my star grass and red raspberry tea—sized right, shape right, moves about like it should. She could hold triplets in here. Lord, girl, why didn’t you just wait? You done undone months of care. When she moves her left hand a fraction to the side and bears down a bit harder, a spot the size of a dime sends off blazing heat. Bernice cries out and tenses her legs” (Naylor 75-76).

Mama Day's years of experience as a midwife allow her to navigate Bernice’s uterus effectively. Her experience also allows her to recognize any signs of irregularity and infection within the uterus. Mama Day has healing powers in her hands and she has the ability to regulate women’s cycles. After discovering Bernice’s womb, Mama Day sees that her herbal concoctions have been helping Bernice and her womb was strong. When Mama Day moves her hand towards Bernice’s ovaries, she discovers that Bernice’s ovaries are inflamed. Upon her discovery, she advises Ambush to call Dr. Smithfield. Mama Day understands the limitations of her expertise as a midwife. At the same time, she also understands the healing powers of roots and herbs.

After contacting Dr. Smithfield, Mama Day goes out into the woods with Ambush's knife to retrieve some choke-cherry bark. Mama Day is knowledgeable about the effects of the bark and carefully administers it to Bernice.

"She props Bernice up in her arms and first makes her suck on a piece of peppermint candy she had Ambush bring her. When Bernice has worked up a good spit Miranda takes the candy from her. 'Now, Bernice, I want you to put this here piece of bark in your mouth and chew good. I'm warning you that it's bitter, but try not to gag. Keep moving it around in there, 'cause if it stay in one spot it's gonna burn the lining of your mouth.' When Bernice has chewed for a while, Miranda makes her spit the bark out in her and then gives her the peppermint candy. Miranda strokes her throat to help the sweet juices go down, and then makes her chew on the bark again. They keep doing this till it's nothing but a pulp and the muscles in Bernice's body start to relax with her breath coming in a little deeper" (Naylor 82).

Katrina Hazzard-Donald explains that "Like the old conjurers known as swampers, most midwives were skilled herbalists, knowledgeable in both the identification of and use of plants and other natural substances" (137). Although Mama Day called Dr. Smithfield, she knows that it is important to keep Bernice stable until the doctor arrives. To do so, Mama Day goes into the woods with Ambush's knife to get "choke- cherry bark." Mama Day's knowledge about different plants and their uses allows her to identify the plant and effectively administer it to Bernice, and Bernice eventually falls asleep.

After Dr. Smithfield arrives, Mama Day fills him in on the status of Bernice. Mama Day tells him that "Bernice got some kinda boil up on her female parts." She explains to him that she gave Bernice "a smidge of choke-cherry bark." Because Dr. Smithfield is not familiar with the herb, Mama Day explains to him that the bark was used to help Bernice sleep. Mama Day goes on to

inform the doctor that Bernice does not have liver damage because she checked her eyes (Naylor 85). In *The Archaeology of Mothering*, Laurie A. Wilkie explains that midwives were the "doctors" in many African American communities because of the lack of access to healthcare and or hospitals. Wilkie also discusses that many midwives work hand in hand with doctors within African American communities (37). Although Mama Day is not formally trained like Dr. Smithfield, Dr. Smithfield still respects Mama Day's expertise on the matter. The interaction between Dr. Smithfield and Mama Day shows that he and Mama Day have a relationship where there is mutual respect. Dr. Smithfield even teases Mama Day about taking his clients. Dr. Smithfield understands the power and significance of Mama Day. He even tells Bernice that she has Mama Day to thank for her strong womb. Mama Day is not only a significant figure within her community, but she is also a well-respected midwife.

After Bernice's over-the-counter incident, Mama Day places her on a routine to help her build herself back up both physically and mentally.

"That morning Miranda had taken a handful of pumpkin seeds and shook 'em in a bottle of saffron water, then another handful of crook-neck squash and mixed them into a little dewberry juice. They were laying out drying on Abigail's back porch in colorful rows of yellow and black. Miranda scoops 'em up and puts them in the pocket of her sweater. 'She got something to keep her busy, and now she got something to hope for.' ...And she'd keep Pearl off her back, giving her them seeds and saying, Every time she comes to visit you plant a black one to carry everything negative she says to you into the ground. And she could even give her hope, saying, Every time you get your monthly, plant a gold one—let the life blood flow out of you into this seed. And come spring, she could tell Bernice, When you take the vines from them gold seeds out into the garden, you're really taking the life round and full—the life will sure to be growing inside of



you. Yeah, she could disguise a little dose of nothing but mother-wit with a lot of hocus-pocus" (Naylor 96-97).

Mama Day understands that an idle mind is dangerous. In knowing this, Mama Day creates a routine for Bernice that will help keep her busy and not thinking about her infertility issues. This routine will also act as a coping mechanism for dealing with the stress of Ambush's mother. In the spring, after the seeds are planted and the golden seeds are flourishing, Mama Day advises Bernice to look at the vine as representing her connection with her baby, and to look at the growth of the plant as the growth of a baby inside her womb. Mama Day explains to Abigail, her sister, that this sort of mother-wit and hocus-pocus will surely help Bernice to conceive and will help keep her mind busy and stress-free. Mama Day's understanding of this sort of knowledge is considered is an example of conjure feminism. Conjure feminism highlights the importance of knowledge production that is passed down intergenerationally between Black women and their foremothers" (Brooks, Martin, Simmons). In this instance, Mama Day uses the knowledge that she has acquired in her years of experience as a midwife and spiritualist and employs it to try to help Bernice overcome her infertility issue.

In Lindsey Stewart's discussion of "Resistance, Refusal, and Root Work," Stewart says, "root work, or John de Conquer, operates in terms of secrecy, thus avoiding recognition from whites. Rather than wage a direct war with whites, John de Conquer shifts the battle to one within the very souls of Black folk" (Stewart 37). Like root work, Mama Day operates in "terms of secrecy." She is careful not to reveal her practice at "the other place." Mama Day pushes Bernice to focus on her well-being rather than her inability to conceive. She urges Bernice to focus on her gardening, which shifts Bernice's focus from the stress and need to have a baby to her mental and physical wellbeing. In doing so, Bernice loses her nervous tick, and the community

acknowledges the noticeable changes within Bernice. Like John de Conquer, Mama Day understands the significance of the wholeness of one's soul and how this wholeness leads to contentment.

Mama Day is invested in her community's well-being. However, Mama Day will go after anyone who threatens the well-being of her family. After Mama Day finds out what Ruby did to Cocoa, she devises a plan to stop Ruby's shenanigans.

“First she’s to head north. Ruby sees her coming up the main road and goes inside and bolts her door shut. Yeah, run inside and lock your door, Miranda thinks, that’s just where I want you. She stands at the gate and calls her name – Are you in there, Ruby? Well, maybe she don’t hear her. She’ll get a little closer. She stands at the foot of the porch and calls her name. Are you there, Ruby? She grips the top of that hickory stick as she gives her one more chance. Loud. Are you in there Ruby? Well, three times is all that she’s required...She don’t say another word as brings the cane shoulder level and slams it into the left side of the house. The wood on wood sounds like thunder. The silver powder is thrown into the bushes. She strikes the house in the back. Powder. She strikes it on the left. Powder. She brings the cane over her head and strikes it so hard against the front door, the window panes rattle... She examines it close to make sure it’ll still hold her weight, and then she turns around to head south on the main road. The door don’t open when she leaves, and the winds doesn’t stir the circle of silvery powder...She’s on her way east toward Chevy’s Pass...West is her last direction” (269-271).

Yvonne Chireau explains that "For many black Americans, supernatural harming practices were protective. Conjure provided individuals with the means by which to defend themselves against afflictions that were both seen and unseen" (Chireau 89). Mama Day turns to spirit work as a means to protect her family from further assault by Ruby. Mama Day creates a plan to get rid of

Ruby for good. Mama Day goes to Ruby's house first, which is located north. She calls out three times but does not get an answer. Afterwards, Mama Day takes her hickory cane and slams it against the sides while throwing down silvery powder. In doing so, Mama Day creates a magnetic field around Ruby's home. Then, Mama Day heads south, east, and her last direction was west at the "other place." Later that night, a storm came through Willow Springs, and lightning struck Ruby's house twice, and it exploded. Mama Day utilized her knowledge of "supernatural harming practices" to get rid of Ruby.

Even though Mama Day rid herself of Ruby, she could not resolve Ruby's afflictions on Cocoa. Even though she cut the braids that Ruby put in Cocoa's hair, she could not stop the illness from spreading. Mama Day knows the infection is getting worse, and the only way to save Cocoa's life is through George, Cocoa's fiancé.

“And now there is that boy. Miranda looks down at her hands again. In all her years she could count on half of her fingers folks she'd met with a will like his. He believes in himself – deep within himself -- ‘cause he ain't never had a choice. And he keeps it protected down in his center, but she needs that belief buried in George. Of his own accord he has to hand it over to her. She needs his hand in hers – his very hand – so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before” (Naylor 285).

Root work privileges our relationship with our ancestors. It is our relationship with our ancestors that allows us to overcome situations (Stewart 107). Mama Day is trying to get George to believe in the practices and beliefs of the ancestors. It is the only way to save Cocoa's life. However, Mama Day is aware that it is going to be a challenge because of George's strong will. Mama Day gives George a choice to do things her way or do things his way. In the end, George chooses to

do things his way, and it costs him his life, but he saves Cocoa's life. George's lack of faith cost him his life.

After the death of George, Mama Day goes on the Candle Walk. When Mama Day makes it to the bridge, she begins communicating with George.

“One day she’ll hear you, like you’re hearing me. And there’ll be another time – that I won’t be here for – when she’ll learn about the beginning of the Days. But she gotta go away to come back to that kind of knowledge. And I came to tell you not to worry: whatever roads take her from here, they’ll always lead her back to you” (Naylor 308).

In the discussion of conjure feminism, one of the four tenets is that death is not an end, it is a transition (Brooks, Martin, Simmons). Mama Day does not look at George’s death as an ending. She continues to communicate with him, and she continues her relationship with him. Mama Day understands the importance of communicating with the dead. She also understands the importance of honoring the dead. Mama Day is a medium. She can communicate between both the visible and invisible worlds. As a spiritualist, Mama Day understands that the knowledge that Cocoa will acquire will be revealed when the time is right. Mama knows that Cocoa will eventually take her place as the matriarch of the Days’s Family. She also understands and assures George that no matter where life may take Cocoa, she will always return to him. Mama Day makes George’s transition easier and eases his concerns about Cocoa. Mama Day guides George to the spirit world.

Years later, Cocoa is sitting on the bridge, and she is talking to George about her journey after his death. Cocoa explains to George that she has remarried and that she named her son after him. Cocoa also tells George that one day her son asked about him, and how she called Mama Day,

asking for some of his pictures. Cocoa explains that Mama Day had misplaced his pictures. After that, Cocoa tells Geoge about the breakdown that she had on the phone with Mama Day.

“Oh, I went on and on – bitter tears. All the more so because they had been holding eleven years to come out. And when I was through, her voice was quiet and gentle. Cocoa, if the child wants to know what George looked like, the easiest thing to do is to tell him. And remember, children need the simple truth. So after washing my face and making myself a cup of mint tea, I called my son inside. I put him on my lap and told him that he was named after a man who looked just like love” (Naylor 310).

"Healing is possible on many levels, even beyond the human world. Such a view of healing indicates the sense of being in relationship: with human, plant, animal, or spirit life. Being in a relationship includes natural elements such as water and specific animals. Spirits of the deceased are part of this relational world and another place where healing may be needed. Divine beings are intimately part of this cosmos, ability to interact, to offer healing, or to be in a relationship that needs healing" (Mitchem 91). Although it has been years since George's death, Cocoa still deals with the pain of losing George. During the phone conversation with Mama Day, Cocoa was able to purge the pain that she had been holding on to for eleven years. Mama Day helps Cocoa to realize what was lost rather than what she lost. That moment for Cocoa was cathartic. She was able to release all the pain to get to the joy. In honoring her memory and connection with George, when she sits down with her son, Cocoa tells him that George looks "just like love." In doing so, Cocoa shifts the narrative associated with George from sorrow (loss) to joy (love). By having that moment, Cocoa was able to reconnect with George, which has been healing for her. By having a relationship with George, Cocoa can heal because she sees George's death as a

transition rather than an ending. And years later, while sitting on the bridge, Cocoa is able to express her feelings and communicate these memories to George.

## Conclusion

Southern Conjure Women are the manifestors of Southern Black joy. These women are empowered by their practice of root work, which allows them to heal and empower themselves and their communities. Also, through their conjuring practices, they are able to create spaces for self-care and self-discovery. These modes of thinking have often been overlooked. However, conjure feminism makes these modes of knowledge visible. Conjure feminism validates the knowledge that Black women get from their grandmothers' kitchens, gardens, and homes. Conjure feminism emphasizes the significance of these spaces and how they are used as spiritual tools for empowerment. Conjure feminism gives a voice to Black women's lived experiences. I utilize conjure feminism to fully understand who the conjure woman is and her role in society. From my understanding, the conjure woman is a woman who utilizes her knowledge of root work and or conjure as a means of empowerment. I use this definition as a guide to uncover the characteristics of a Southern Conjure woman within the literary context. I define the archetype of the Southern Conjure woman as a woman in or from the South who utilizes conjure and root work as a means of empowerment.

To further understand this archetype, I turn to Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass Cypress & Indigo* and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. Within these texts, I discuss the lives of these women and how they utilize root work, spirit work, ancestor memory, and conjure as a means of empowerment. In the chapter "Where there is a woman, there is magic," I discuss the lives of Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo. Indigo, the youngest, has a different perspective on life. Indigo's dolls serve as her conduit to the spirit world. Through her dolls, Indigo is able to face life's changes. Indigo also has a strong connection to the moon, where she keeps rituals and remedies to help her deal with life's challenges. After Indigo experiences puberty, she is forced to put her dolls away.

However, this does not deter Indigo from keeping her intimate relationship with Spirit. After losing her dolls, Indigo turns to the violin as a means of connecting with Spirit. Through her violin, Indigo is able to connect with people in a more profound way. However, Indigo's biggest focus, however, was learning the ways of Aunt Haydee, who was a midwife. Eventually, Indigo finds her calling in midwifery, and she delivers Sassafrass's baby when she returns home. Sassafrass, the oldest, does not want to live her life in her mother's shadow, so she heads to Los Angeles to rediscover herself. On her quest to rediscover, Sassafrass comes into contact with Mitch, an alto saxist. Sassafrass's relationship with Mitch is nothing more than a distraction. Mitch is keeping Sassafrass from reaching her full potential. However, Sassafrass does not understand that because she is blinded by her love for him. Nonetheless, as time goes on, Sassafrass begins to see that her relationship with Mitch is costing her more than it is worth. Sassafrass and Mitch move to Baton Rouge and join "The New World Found Collective," and Sassafrass gets initiated into Santeria. Mitch is toxic to her and for her, and her elders warn her that her relationship with Mitch will cause her to fall from grace. Upon falling from grace, Sassafrass goes through the process of atonement, and she leaves Baton Rouge and heads back to Charleston with her unborn child. Sassafrass came to the realization that everything she was searching for was already inside her. Cypress, the middle sister, is a dancer who desires to one day be a part of a New York dance company. Cypress's dream takes her to San Francisco, where she performs with an underground dance theater. Cypress's talent took her all the way to New York. However, her experience in New York is not what she bargained for. While in New York, Cypress wonders endlessly between relationships and dance studios. Eventually, Cypress finds a familiar face, Leroy, who gives her the stability that she needs to focus and achieve her dream. In the end, Cypress discovers that her purpose is more than her talent for dance. She finds that her



purpose is to utilize her talent as a means for change, and she heads back to Charleston with the "Soil & Souls," a dance company dedicated to the cause of civil rights. Each of these women utilized some form of spiritual work to help them discover their purpose, and they all utilized the purpose as a means for empowerment and joy. In the chapter "A True Conjure Woman," I discuss Mama Day and how she utilizes her knowledge and expertise in root work to heal and empower people in her community. Mama Day is a significant figure within Willow Springs. She, like her great-grandmother, Sapphira Wade, is also a revered conjure woman. Mama Day continues the practices of her ancestors. Mama Day, as a midwife and spiritual worker, throughout the story can be seen helping cure ailments, performing rituals, and breaking curses. She also honors her ancestors by maintaining contact with them through her connection to the "other place" and tending to their graves. Mama Day honors her family's legacy by teaching and showing Cocoa their family's history and spiritual practices. In turn, Cocoa is able to continue their family legacy. In these chapters, I use these texts to show how each of these women utilizes root work as a means to empower, heal, bring about joy. I also illustrate how each of these women can be seen as Southern Conjure women.

To discuss the theoretical framework of my argument, I make use of the works of Black women, who discuss the importance and significance of root work, conjure, spiritual work, and healing. These works gave me the perspective that I needed to bridge my analysis with Lindsey Stewart's *The Politics of Black Joy*. It is my hope that through this analysis, readers understand the significance of Southern conjure women and the politics of Black Joy. Also, I wanted to highlight the significance of the Southern Conjure woman. The Southern Conjure Woman challenges our modes of thinking. She is able to utilize the knowledge and wisdom of her ancestors as a means of liberation. This type of liberation has benefited not only the Black

community but also society as a whole. These practices have been passed down through Black families for generations. As a Black Southern woman, I wanted to discuss the modes of thinking that I've learned from my grandmothers. These women although, their education was limited were able to teach me things that went beyond the academy. In studying the Southern Conjure woman, I wanted to show my appreciation for the women who came before me and did not get a chance to go into academy or to be recognized for the value that they have added to society. It is important to honor these women because their knowledge and wisdom have been utilized by many, yet they do not get the recognition that they deserve. I believe that the knowledge that these women hold are the keys to unlocking higher forms of knowledge. It is my hope that this paper adds to the understanding of Southern conjure women and Southern Black joy.

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