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Tina McElroy Ansa, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange and the christio-conjure literary tradition

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ABSTRACT

ENGLISH

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TINA MCELROY ANSA, GLORIA NAYLOR, NTOZAKE SHANGE
AND THE CHRISTIO-CONJURE LITERARY TRADITION

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The Christio-Conjure paradigm, a product of both Christianity and Conjuring, historically has provided an alternate set of ideologies for African Americans. As an ontological archetype, the Christio-Conjure paradigm is centered around a set of metaphysical phenomenon featuring various conventions such as religious/moral guidance, natural healing, and contact with spirits. To a large extent, the Christio-Conjure paradigm functions within a matriarchal network designed to extol the African American woman as the life force and mother of humanity.

A corpus of African American women writers have exhibited a critical interest in the Christio-Conjure paradigm because of its cultural link with the past and because of the Afrofemcentric allure associated with this ancient, yet ever-active, African American tradition. Tina McElroy Ansa, Gloria Naylor, and Ntozake Shange are three authors who contribute to the matrix of African American women's writing via their novels, Baby of the Family (1988), Mama Day (1989), and Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo (1982) respectively; each author functions as a literary Christio-Conjure woman, fashioning worlds of women richly impacted by the power of conjure.
TINA MCCELODY ANSA, GLORIA NAYLOR, NTOZAKE SHANGE
AND THE CHRISTIO-CONJURE LITERARY TRADITION

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION ........................................ 1
2. MYSTERIES OF THE BIRTH CAUL ...................... 18
3. CRISIS IN COCOA'S WORLD .......................... 29
4. THREE CHRISTIO-CONJURING SPIRITS ............... 42
5. CONCLUSION ........................................... 61

WORKS CITED ........................................... 69
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Literature mirrors the culture which produces it and African American literature is no exception. The Conjure paradigm, rooted in West African culture, has historically provided an alternate set of ideologies for African Americans, contrasting sharply with the Christian ideals of the American ruling class. Over time, however, various elements of these two seemingly theoretically opposing archetypes have merged to produce an autonomous archetype within African American culture—identified here as the "Christio-Conjuring" ideological design. This paradigm is employed by various African American women writers because, on the subconscious level, it occurs as a natural result of African American women's art imitating the culture. On a second and conscious more level, however, African American women writers employ the tenets of Christio-Conjuring within their writing because they are particularly fascinated with the Conjuring elements of the paradigm which have traditionally operated within a matriarchal network designed to extol the African American woman as the life force and mother of humanity. A corpus of African American women have, thus, displayed a critical interest in the Christio-Conjuring paradigm not only because of its cultural link with the past, but also because of the
Afrofemcentric allure associated with various tenets of this ancient, yet ever active, African American tradition. Via their novels, Baby of the Family (1989), Mama Day (1988), and Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo (1982), Tina McElroy Ansa, Gloria Naylor, and Ntozake Shange, respectively, contribute to the matrix of African American women's writing as literary Christio-Conjure women, fashioning worlds of women richly impacted by the power of Christio-Conjure. Tracing the development of the Christio-Conjure paradigm, the transplanted African population was first introduced to Christianity on the southern plantations in North America. As enslaved members of the community, African Americans were not permitted to practice their indigenous African religions, which were denounced by the European ruling class. LeRoi Jones, in Blues People (1963), describes the conditions which resulted in groups of African Americans willfully converting to Christianity:

Christianity was adopted by Negroes before the great attempts by missionaries and evangelists in the early part of the nineteenth century to convert them. The reasons for this grasping of the white man's religion by the North American Negro are fairly simple. First, his own religion was prohibited in this country. In some parts of the South, 'conjuring'...was punishable by death or, at the very least, whipping. Also, the African has always had a traditional respect for the for his conqueror's gods. Not that they are always worshiped, but they are at least recognized as powerful and placed in the hierarchy of conquered tribe's gods. (Jones 32-33)
Indeed, many African Americans recognized valid aspects of the Christian doctrine which historically served as the religion of an oppressed people. Jones argues that one of the very reasons that Christianity proved so popular was that it was "the religion, according to the older Biblical tradition, of an oppressed people" (39). Jones further suggests the struggles of the Jews and their long-sought "Promised Land" proved a strong analogy for the black slaves (39). Eugene Genovese, in Roll Jordan Roll (1976), further substantiates Jones' theory by asserting that

...Christianity offered to the oppressed and the despised the image of God crucified by power, greed, and malice and yet in the end resurrected, triumphant, and redeeming and faithful. However much Christianity taught submission to slavery, it also carried a message of foreboding to the master class and of resistance to the enslaved. (Genovese 165)

As an instrument of control, plantation owners attempted to shape the religious life of African Americans who "overtly, covertly, and even intuitively fought to shape it themselves" (162). The church, in fact, says LeRoi Jones,

...was the only place the slave had for any kind of vaguely human activity...During the time of slavery, the black churches had almost no competition for the Negro’s time. After he had worked in the fields, their was no place to go for any semblance of social intercourse except the praise houses. The Negro church, as it was begun, was the only place where the Negro could release emotions that slavery would naturally tend to curtail. The Negro
went to church, literally, to be free, and to prepare himself for his freedom in the Promised Land. (Jones 48)

But even as Christians, it was impossible for most African Americans to abandon completely their African ideological belief system. Thus, elements of the African belief system appear in the Christian rituals practiced by African Americans. LeRoi Jones reports that "Christianity was a Western form, but the actual practice of it by the American Negro was totally strange to the West...Africa and its religious and secular traditions could not be completely shaken off" (Jones 42).

Delineating the theoretical amalgamation of the Christian and Conjure paradigms, Genovese declares that Christianity, like other religions, grew out of and based its strength upon the collective. In early tribal religions, African as well as European, God is at once a supreme member of the family...and an independent force above the family who embodies its ideal life and symbolizes its unity. The essentially tribal idea of God, however modified, never wholly departs from the sophisticated religions of civilized society. Afro-American slaves, drawing on both Euro-Christianity and their own African past, combined the two and in the process created a religion of their own while contributing to the shape of Christianity as a whole. (Genovese 168)

Because Africans came from an intensely religious culture, in which religion was practiced daily and not relegated to a once-a-week service, they sought other methods of worshiping their gods when the plantation owners declared that they could no longer worship in the
traditional ways. Leroi Jones says that

The immediate reaction, of course, was to try to worship in secret. The more impressive rites had to be discarded unless they could be performed clandestinely; the daily rituals, however, continued. The common day-to-day stance of the African toward his gods could not be erased overnight. In fact, many 'superstitions' of the Negroes that the white thought 'charming' were holdovers from the African religions. Even today in many Southern rural areas, ...mixtures of voodoo, or other primarily African ...religions, and Christianity exist. (Jones 34)

The plantation owners' efforts to stamp out completely any semblance of African religion practiced on the plantation was virtually impossible although the "circumstance of slavery did relegate religious practice to a much smaller area of his life" (Jones 36). The newly transplanted Africans, however, psychologically could not have endured the brutal conditions of plantation life had they abandoned completely every aspect of their African belief system. Thus, despite harsh restrictions and cruel penalties, they continued to invoke conjures, herb doctors, root healers, cult priests and sorcerers—"the mystical forces...[they] thought controlled the world." (Jones 36)

The Conjure portion of the Christio-Conjure equation, transmitted to African American culture via the trans-Atlantic slave trade, is rooted in ancient West African culture, and according to Zora Neale Hurston's biographer, Robert E. Hemenway, it "has historically
produced an access to power for a powerless people, and
many of its traditions are ancient. It is an alternative
mode of perceiving reality, contrasting sharply with what
is perceived as the white man's excessive rationality" (Hemenway 119). Michael Laguerre, in *Voodoo Heritage*
(1980), traces the ancient African origins of conjure to
a set of religious practices of the Yoruba people of West
Africa. Furthermore, Houston A. Baker, in his article
"Workings of the Spirit: Conjure and the Space of Black
Women's Creativity," delineates the origins of conjure,
tracing its development in West Africa, leading to its
emergence here in the United States:

The name voodoo derives from Vodun, the name
of the principal deity of these Yoruba rites. Vodun rituals feature both a priest and a
priestess, with the priestess as the central
figure—the person who is oracle to the spirit
of Vodun...Combining with French colonial
Catholicism, voodoo became the dominant
religion of the masses in Haiti and a powerful
and pervasive force among the African
population of New Orleans (especially Algiers,
the city called "hoodoo town," across the
river from New Orleans) and the southern Black
Belt. The influence and effects of voodoo as
a diasporic African religious practice can be
traced to the early eighteenth century. And
voodoo, or conjure, has been an active
presence since that time until the present.
(Baker 80)

Within an historical framework, literary critic,
W.E.B. DuBois, describes traditional African American
conjurers as bards, physicians, judges, and priests and
further suggests that the complex role of the conjurer
was performed by visionary men and women of knowledge
(7). During slavery, the conjurer in the African American community served as a powerful and influential figure and conjuring was often linked to slave resistance. In 1853, J.D.B. DeBow declared that on "almost every large plantation there is one or more negroes, who are ambitious of being considered in the character of conjurers, in order to gain influence, and to make others fear and obey them" (DeBow 321). Conjurers viewed themselves, and were viewed by others, as invulnerable and represented a form of African American resistance to slavery grounded in ancient West African rituals and beliefs.

W.E.B. DuBois reports that many conjurers were highly spiritual men and women who functioned as authority figures, manipulating "one of the few sources of power open to Africans in a slave society: superhuman resources that could only be tapped by the possession of secrets bound to priestly titles" (DuBois 216). Therefore, their charisma and sense of power and authority elevated them to virtual god-like status in the African American community.

Paradoxically, however, conjure and conjurers were (and to a great extent, still are) regarded by the white community and orthodox members of the black church as agents of evil, if not completely dismissed as utterly nonsensical. The conjure paradigm has long suffered the
scrutiny of the Christianized Anglo-American culture which generally deem the beliefs and practices associated with the conjure tradition as primitive, superstitious enterprises exercised by culturally and religiously uncultivated African Americans. On the contrary, however, reports contained in slave narratives as well as other written documents suggest that conjuring in the United States maintained a close relation to West African religion in its methods of healing and making medicines. Moreover, David H. Brown asserts that conjure maintained an essential, complementary position with respect to Black Christianity for many people, serving a set of day-to-day needs that the latter either could not or declined to serve (Brown 4). Conjure, in fact, has traditionally provided an intricate network of support for African Americans including divine guidance, moral guidance, and cultural preservation; moreover, it was employed by early African Americans as "effective instrumental power against oppression during slavery" (5).

Within the African American community, the cultural data/evidence suggests that Christianity and Conjure were never irreconcilable. Exploring the relationship between Christianity and the literature of African American women, Trudier Harris contends that, "Although Christianity has historically been the form of religion most frequently practiced in black communities, it is not
the guiding force for contemporary black writers" (Harris 153). Harris' assessment is accurate to the extent that Christianity, indeed, does not serve as the guiding force of African American women's writing; it functions, instead, as an operative force which, balanced by the Conjure tradition, occurs in and influences a large percentage of the texts. Norman Whitten, in African American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives, proposes, in fact, that the African American sense of reality/perception often shifts between two frames of reference. James Haskins, in Witchcraft, Magic, and Mysticism in the Black World (1974), substantiates this theory with the following explanation:

...it is necessary to point out that, in Africa even today, religion and magic are not separated as they are in Europe and America...In our society, which is Western society, religion and magic, religion and mysticism, religion and belief in the supernatural are separated. In Africa, they were not. Although Americans and Europeans certainly did practice witchcraft and mysticism, they did not believe such practices would affect God. In fact, most religious Americans and Europeans believed such practices to be against religion and against God. Africans believed that magic and witchcraft were powerful ways to affect their spirits and gods, as well as to affect each other...Unlike Europeans, who tended to see life in terms of good or bad, black or white, Africans understood that there was really no absolute good or absolute evil and that both good and evil resided in everything. Nothing was so good that it could not cause inconvenience to someone; nothing was so bad that someone somewhere could not benefit from it. In many ways this complete realism would help those Africans who were brought to the New World, to
survive slavery. (Haskins 12-21)

Since the orthodox black church, with its European-based doctrine, did not solve the day-to-day interpersonal problems encountered by members of the African American community during slavery, quite logically, then, the church and conjure were used as complimentary systems of belief--thus, the dawn of Christio-Conjuring.

Regarding the merger of Christian and Conjure ideologies, and the influence of women within this paradigm, Robert Tallant, in an excerpt from Roll Jordan Roll, reports that:

voodoo arose with the arrival of slaves from Africa and the West Indies, who adapted their "snake cults" to new surroundings; but it did not spread. The slave holders associated it with rebellion as well as heathenism and suppressed it ruthlessly. The influx of West Indian slaves after the American annexation broke the dikes. Thereafter the authorities in New Orleans tried various measures to defeat it, including sponsorship of black dances in Congo Square. They remained convinced that the voodoo priests were stirring up hatred for whites, although this fear may have arisen more from the secretiveness of the ceremonies than from overt acts. Moreover, free Negroes and women notably predominated in the leadership of the cult. This set it off from the various manifestations of black Christianity that swept through the South. Voodoo, itself, however, fuses with Christian beliefs and probably reached its height in the 1850's. (Genovese 220)

In Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition (1985) editors Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers develop the notion of conjuring within a
literary context, thus offering a framework for the critical assessment of African American women's literature. In her introduction, Pryse contends that nineteenth century women writers "preserved biological lineage and connection by telling their stories as autobiographies or slave narratives" and further suggests that these early writers "made fiction writing possible for black women" (3). Depicting the connection between African American women’s fiction and the conjure tradition, noted author Alice Walker says that she "sees folk magic as art and fiction as a form of conjuring" (Pryse and Spillers 2).

Providing a backdrop for her literary theory, Pryse traces the history of African American women’s literature by exploring the salient contradiction of "connection within a heritage of separation" (3). She extols the African American literary tradition which produced a number of women who achieved literacy despite the restrictions of slavery and began making their voices heard long before emancipation. Pryse further explicates African American women’s literature within the context of oral translation, noting the reoccurring theme of the conjure tradition. The notion of fiction as a form of conjuring is certainly applicable to a sizable portion of literature produced by African American women writers. Pryse asserts that, "women’s magic, the origins of which
are as old as women themselves...has long included literary tradition" (2). Drawing upon their cultural experiences, rich in the Christio-Conjure tradition, many African American women writers, through their literature, contribute to the ancient ritual of women's magic.

The work of Ansa, Naylor, and Shange, whose three novels, respectively, are constructed primarily upon the Christio-Conjure tradition, contribute to the well established, yet ever growing, body of African American women's writing. The Christio-Conjuring tradition in African American women's literature includes early twentieth century women dramatists such as Georgia Douglas Johnson creator of Plumes (1927), Marita Bonner creator of The Purple Flower (1927), and May Miller creator of Christophe's Daughter's. Each of these playwrights included in their plays various aspects of the conjure tradition such as reading coffee beans and evoking spirits. Noted literary figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston, not only incorporates elements of the supernatural into her novels, but also produces a complete collection of folktales, The Sanctified Church, based entirely upon the conjure tradition, in addition to Moses, Man of the Mountain, Tell My Horse , and Mules and Men. Toni Morrison, decades later during the nineteen seventies and eighties, resurrects the conjure tradition in three of her novels:
Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), and Tar Baby (1981)

To further support this theory, there exists evidence which suggests that for African Americans "the signification of...'good' or 'evil'...may have been multi-layered...‘Devil' used by some blacks historically, especially with respect to conjure, might have also signified 'trickster'" (Hurston 411). Shrewd African Americans, in the role of the trickster, often employed the Christian doctrine in an effort to combat the abuses they encountered under the system of slavery, which was, then, interpreted as sacrilegious by Euro-Americans.

One such example is recapitulated in the story of James Hay, a field hand who frequently suffered severe punishment for not completing his daily tasks. According to the story, one morning, following a severe whipping, a church-going Christian woman visited him, assuring that God would help him to complete his designated work that day. As on the previous days, however, James found it humanly impossible to complete his task and was severely punished, as was the routine. Soon after, he was asked by some professors of religion...if he was not tired of serving the devil, [they] told him that the Lord...had helped many of his people, and would help all who asked Him and then take them home to heaven. Jim said that if the Lord would not do half an acre of his task for him when he depended on him, he did not think that he could trust him, and Jim never became a Christian. (Brown 11)
Hay’s trickster-like reaction not only challenges the dominant framework of good and evil, God and the Devil, but also challenges its underlying value system. Hay rejects the exploitive application of the Christian doctrine of salvation after death, aimed at gaining his acceptance of life as a slave. As the trickster, Hay’s perception relies heavily on African American religious orientation which seeks God’s assistance in this world rather than in the afterlife. Hay’s story, lucidly demonstrates the kind of questioning, deconstructing, and dismantling of Christian doctrine which has fostered the development of the Christio-Conjuring tradition within the African American community.

Christio-Conjuring, as an alternative ideological paradigm offered enslaved African Americans an alternate mode of perceiving reality, one which aided in their psychological survival and greatly contrasted with that of master class. Historian John Blassingame asserts that:

In addition to these activities [religious and recreational], several other customs prevented the slaves from identifying with the ideals of the masters. Because of their superstitions and beliefs in fortune tellers, witches, magic, and conjurers, many of the slaves constructed a psychological defense against total dependence on and submission to their masters. Whatever his power, the master was a puny man compared to the supernatural. Often the most powerful and significant individual on the plantation was the conjurer. (Blassingame 45)
While conjuring was employed as a form of resistance in slavery, it functions in a parallel capacity in African American women’s writing. Conjuring in the latter, however, is multi-dimensional and highly complex. In African American women’s writing the female characters commonly subscribe to Christio-Conjuring as a form of resistance against White male patriarchy and oppression in general—particularly effective because conjure is founded, to a large extent, on matriarchal principles. Furthermore, the actual writers employ Christio-Conjuring elements in their texts as a reaffirmation of their cultural past and as affirmation of their sense of womanhood. Additionally, for these writers, Christio-Conjuring, as a literary theory, functions as a form of resistance which counters traditional literary theories which permeate the American literary canon and which customarily marginalizes African American women writers.

Christio-Conjuring characters found in African American women’s writing represent actual individuals who existed (and still do) in the African American community such as conjurers who would advise when to plant gardens and crops, predict weather patterns, and administer medical attention throughout his or her community. Reflecting the culture, various elements of the conjure tradition continuously resurface throughout African American literature. Wise, powerful, demi-god characters
emerge in the literature based on actual members of the community. Brown explains that,

Conjure doctors often claimed to be a seventh son (of a seventh son) and to have been born with a caul, or double caul. Ritually, preserved for later magical use, the single caul enabled one to see spirits, a double caul to converse with them. (Brown 8)

These kinds of characters, with extremely similar or identical attributes exist as literary tropes in the Christio-Conjuring literary tradition.

Christio-Conjuring in African American women’s writing validates Pryse’s literary theory and is confirmed by the work of more recently published authors like Tina McElroy Ansa, Gloria Naylor, and Ntozake Shange who continue the legacy. Their novels, Baby of the Family (1989), Mama Day (1988), and Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo (1982) speak to the notion of religion coupled with the supernatural--its place and its importance--as preserved in the African American community. To a great extent, their novels are based upon the Christio-Conjure tradition: from spirits both helpful and harmful, to cultural foremothers who can read natural elements, heal the sick, interpret dreams, and recreate/reverse the effects of biblical myths--these are the metaphysical elements which Ansa, Naylor, and Shange incorporate in their texts as they continue to preserve the Christio-Conjure tradition as a critical element in the African American culture. Each of the three novels embodies the
shared experiences and cultural antecedents of both Christianity and Conjuring which serve as the matrix of African American women's writing.
Throughout her novel, *Baby of the Family*, Tina McElroy Ansa employs various elements of the Christio-Conjure paradigm as she unravels the tale of Lena McPherson, Nellie and Jonah McPherson's third child and only daughter. Set in Mulberry, Georgia, the novel opens in 1949 with the birth of Lena. Nellie is fascinated by her baby girl who is born with a caul over her face, giving her a "ghostly appearance" (Ansa 3). The others in the delivery room—the nurses and Dr. Williams—are also fascinated by the newborn who "arriving with a veil over her face...brought with her a touch of the supernatural to a place that owed so much to the scientific" (3). Later, Nurse Bloom attempts to emphasize the significance of Lena's birth by explaining to Nellie:

That caul she was born with over her face was more than a piece of skin, you know. That caul was a sign that your little girl got a link with all kinds of things, all kinds of powers that the rest of us ordinary people don't have. (27)

Eugene Genovese delineates the cultural significance of being born with a caul in the African American community as follows:

Ex-slaves often identified the conjurers as
having been African-born, but possibly those African-born slaves who still remained in late antebellum times came to be thought of as natural conjurers. The blacks believed that only blacks, especially those born with a caul, had the secret power and that it was somehow a gift of their African heritage. (Genovese 218)

Nurse Bloom, who functions as a conjure character throughout the text, makes the necessary preparations to ensure that the special child will be protected. She preserves the caul and prepares a tea—a ritual she has performed time and time again in the rural country where she was known as Mother Bloom.

Nellie, however, is a modern mother and steadfast Catholic who burns the baby's caul and throws out the protective tea, for the tenets of Catholicism, constructed within a western ideological framework, flagrantly dismiss any notion of ancient West African Conjuring. Despite her mother's disregard for the instructions offered by Nurse Bloom, Lena grows up in a loving and prosperous family. Although her family members tease her about her uncommon abilities, they never actually acknowledge the validity of any of the phenomenon associated with Lena's supernatural powers. The first time Lena tells her family that she has seen a ghost (which, according to the Conjure paradigm, is manifestation of the metaphysical phenomenon experienced by those born with caul), she suffers convulsions and learns to keep her ghostly visions a secret. As Lena
grows older, she begins to doubt her sanity and becomes more and more isolated from her family and peers. She is labeled an outcast at school because, one day, a voice speaks through her, causing her to "tattle on" one of her classmates. Consequently, her classmates disassociate themselves from her, believing that Lena has intentionally caused trouble. Ostracized from her peers at school, this period represents a particularly difficult episode in Lena's life.

As devout Catholics, Lena's parents insist she attend a private Catholic school; thus, at Church, at school, and at home, Lena is continuously exposed to Christian ideals. Ironically, however, "because Lena was born with a veil over her face, she was indeed touched by the supernatural" (175). She finds it impossible to ignore the metaphysical encounters associated with the Conjure paradigm which she periodically experiences. Thus, a complex dichotomy between Christianity and Conjuring exists within her life. Depicting the strong influence of Catholicism in the McPherson home, the narrator says,

The McPherson family at the dinner table reminded Lena of the priest, alter boys, and communicants at Mass. Jonah, at the head of the table, sat in the largest chair with arms...even the fabric her mother had chosen to cover the chairs' seat cushions--alternating stirps of maroon satin and beige satin separated by ridges of gold--reminded Lena of the priest's vestments of gold, purple, green, red, and white. (102)
Genovese observes that because of ideological similarities between African religions and Catholicism, conversion to Catholicism for some groups of African Americans was more plausible than conversion to the other Christian persuasions. He explains that

The West African belief in a pantheon of gods passed to drastically different political settings in the New World. Without doubt it syncretized much better with Catholic than with Protestant Christianity. West Africans generally believed in a Supreme God who presided in some ultimate sense over human morality, but they also believed in a large body of specific gods. One normally reached the Supreme God through an appeal through the intercession of a lesser god, much as Catholics reach God by an appeal for the intercession of the saints or the Virgin Mary. (Genovese 210)

Miss Lizzie, Lena’s grandmother, indirectly declares her status as a devout Christian by denouncing the system of beliefs associated with the Conjure tradition, as she reminisces about her late husband’s fondness for the city of New Orleans:

All you had to do was mention New Orleans to get him to grinning...He even liked the idea of Marie Leveau and all her voodoo stuff. Tried to get me to go to one of those all-night rituals while we were there. But I said no thank you. I got enough since not to be messing around with the spirit world, ‘specially when I was happy as could be and didn’t need no potion to keep my man. (Naylor 104)

Leroi Jones delineates this inclination by some groups of African Americans—as portrayed by Naylor via the character of Miss Lizzie—to not only abandon but
also to denounce any vestige of African religious tradition represented in the religious beliefs of African Americans:

The house Negroes, who spent their lives finding new facets of the white culture that they could imitate, were the first to adopt Christianity. And their descendants, even today, practice the most European or American forms of Christianity...after a few decades the new African slaves were ridiculed by their 'American' brothers because they were African!...That is, the slaves who had come to America only a few years earlier began to apply what they thought were the white man's standards to their own behavior as well as to that of their newly arrived brothers. (Jones 33-34)

Despite Miss Lizzie discouraging what she deems as superstitious beliefs, at the age of seven Lena experiences direct contact with the spirit world when her family travels to the Georgia coast for summer vacation. There, the ghost of a slave woman named Rachel sits beside Lena on the shore and shares a story which Lena finds frightening and confusing at the time, but years later learns to appreciate as a valuable lesson. Rachel describes the horrors of slavery and explains how she takes her freedom by drowning herself in the ocean. Lena is confused by Rachel's statement because her grandmother has continuously insisted that "...colored folks don't belong on the beach" (167). Her comments simply mirror the racist sentiments, pervasive particularly in the South, which restricted African Americans from enjoying the beaches which were reserved for Whites only. Rachel,
however, provides an entirely different perspective by explaining:

There was something about the ocean that just kept drawing me there...It sung songs of what I coulda been if I warn't no slave...to be a slave on the ocean, I could not bear it...I was glad to be going. I was going to the ocean and couldn't nobody ever stop me from going there again...I'm always here...This is where I wanted to be, this is where I choose to be, and this is where I is. (157-166)

The spirit of Rachel, acting as foremother in the Conjure tradition, functions in the capacity of storyteller and griot. She, like Miss Lizzie and Nurse Bloom, represents a critical link with the past. This link is an essential element in African American women's history because it provides a means of preserving a history which is largely dependent upon oral transmission.

In an article entitled "What is Your Nation?: Reconnecting Africa and her Diaspora through Paule Marshall's Praise Song for the Widow," Abena P. Busia delineates the connection between African American women's writing and the African American oral storytelling tradition as follows:

novels by black women throughout Africa and the African diaspora...tackle questions about women reclaiming their stories in a context in which storytelling becomes part of a larger project of self-revalidation...Storytelling is...one of a wealth of nonwritten cultural forms that must be reinvested with meaning. (Busia 196)

Clearly, Ansa employs the ancient medium of storytelling
in *Baby of the Family* via the spirit of Rachel, who emphatically insists that Lena learn of her suffering and ultimate liberation. Through her interaction with the spirit of Rachel, Lena is able to absorb a portion of her cultural past from the personal account given by the legendary spirit of Rachel (functioning as cultural foremother) who refused to be governed by the ideologies and conventions of the oppressive, dominant culture. Through the message transmitted by her cultural foremother, Lena is presented with an alternate system of ideology which rejects the confines of racism and asserts that Lena, and the entire African American collective, are free to exist wherever they choose, on the seashore or elsewhere.

The concept of the ghost story is one component of the African American oral storytelling tradition which surfaces throughout African American women's writing, and is also included by Ansa in *Baby of the Family*. The ghost story possesses a vibrant literary history and, because the metaphysical element of human contact with the spirit world is incorporated in the ghost story, its link with the Conjure tradition is clear. Geraldine Smith-Wright, in her article "In Spite of the Klan: Ghosts in the Fiction of Black Women Writers," articulates the historical significance of the ghost story in African American culture and literature:
While the ghost tale in recent African-American literature has its deepest roots in West African culture, the genre's more immediate development is traceable to the era of slavery in the American South. Ghost stories, along with staged ghostly encounters, were an important part of the stock-in-trade that slave owners used to discourage Blacks from moving around at night, unsupervised. Yet Black folklorists subsequently commandeered and altered these ghost stories in ways that reconciled African beliefs about the supernatural with their experiences as slaves. Folktales involving the supernatural, extended the rich African oral tradition and became fixed in the African-American literary canon. (Smith-Wright 142)

The precious lesson shared by Rachel's ghost does not become valuable to Lena until eleven years later, after the death and reappearance of her grandmother, Miss Lizzie. When a baby owl enters the house via the chimney, Lena and her grandmother try frantically to kill the bird; a bird inside the home, according to her grandmother, is a sign of death. Noteworthy here is the fact that Miss Lizzie, the self-declared devout Catholic, subscribes (apparently unconsciously) in this scene to a notion derived from the Conjure tradition which she so openly detests. In her attempt to rid the house of the evil omen, Miss Lizzie accidentally destroys her beautiful wedding china and knocks over the urn containing the ashes of her late husband. Finally, the owl crashes though the huge picture window in the dining room. Miss Lizzie insists they quickly clear up the mess and concludes she can have the window replaced before
anyone notices the damage. That night, however, Miss Lizzie dies in her sleep. Lena is stricken with grief, believing that had she told someone about the evil omen of the owl, Miss Lizzie's death could have been prevented. Employing the image of the bird, Ansa incorporates yet another symbol associated with the conjure tradition. Within the context of this tradition, according to Miss Lizzie, birds are regarded as harbingers of evil and their unexpected appearances are used to predict on-coming natural disasters, or as in her personal case, are used to foreshadow death.

Following her death, Miss Lizzie returns in the form of an apparition to offer Lena a sense of comfort. As a member of the other world, Miss Lizzie now recognizes and understands the special gift with which her granddaughter has been bestowed. She denounces Nellie for ignoring the instructions Nurse Bloom provided at Lena's birth:

When you were born...Nurse Bloom...did right by you...she gave Nellie two things. One was a bottle of tea made from your birth caul. The other was the actual thing, the caul...Your mama poured out one, and the other, your caul, she burned...She disrupted two rituals, Lena, that you were lucky to be connected with...If you had drunk that tea,...it would of weakened those scary spirits. Instead, you been scared of what you should have understood. (262)

Thus, as a member of the spirit world, Miss Lizzie, who has represented the devout Christian throughout the novel, ultimately discovers the value and confirms the
effectiveness of the Christio-Conjure paradigm.

Lena, finally able to speak to someone about her special and unique condition, sobs, feeling a sense of relief. At one point, Lena resolves that as an adult, she will seek psychiatric counseling to help her contend with what she personally perceives as insanity. She confides in her grandmother’s spirit that she has always questioned her own sanity. Miss Lizzie’s spirit, recapitulating the encouraging thoughts expressed by the spirit of Rachel, substantiates the notion of the Christio-Conjure paradigm which functions as a source of preservation and protection for the collective female spirit. Miss Lizzie comforts and reassures Lena by reasoning:

For God’s sake, baby, just ‘cause you see a few ghosts and such, you think you crazy? What you think the rest of us—those that come before you, those that’s living now—done been through? Don’t you think we ‘bout crazy too? All us colored women in this here country crazy as betsy bugs. Life done made us that way. Crazy ain’t all bad, child. Sometimes its the only thing that protects you. (262)

As the story closes, the two religious prototypes, Christianity and Conjuring, fuse within the text to form one new paradigm, Christio-Conjuring. Miss Lizzie, representing the devout Christian character throughout the novel, paradoxically at the novel’s end, assumes the role Lena’s conjuring mentor, guiding her toward a new sense of understanding regarding the metaphysical powers
with which she is endowed. Ultimately, then, the spirit of Miss Lizzie symbolizes the archetypal Christio-Conjure character. She discovers the validity of the Christio-Conjuring paradigm as one which offers African American women spiritually healing communities which promote their psychological survival as members/victims of the racist and sexist dominant culture. In the novel’s final passages, the spirit of Miss Lizzie continues to foster a sense of connection through the past by urging Lena to visit Nurse Bloom. Ansa, essentially, bases her entire novel upon the importance of the female bonding and the significance of cultural ties among African American women despite the torn relations and disjointed past fostered by American slavery. Throughout the novel Ansa weaves connections between the female characters and, via Lena, the central character, all the women in the story—Nellie, Nurse Bloom, Lizzie, and Rachel—are interconnected with and influenced by the Christio-Conjure tradition.
CHAPTER 3

MAMA DAY:
CRISIS IN COCOA’S WORLD

Like Ansa, Gloria Naylor underscores the importance of the contemporary and historical bonds between African American women through Christo-Conjuring, understanding that connection to the past fosters a connection in the present. Naylor’s novel, Mama Day, is set in Willow Springs, a small island off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Legend suggests that the island originally belonged to a Norwegian land owner named Bascombe Wade. Wade marries Sapphira, an enslaved African of pure stock, a true conjure woman known for "delving in witchcraft" (Naylor 2). Sapphira bears seven sons, persuades her husband to leave all his holdings to his slaves, and then she kills him. Her descendant, Miranda, known on the island as Mama Day, is the first daughter of the seventh son of a seventh son; she is Cocoa’s great-aunt and is the matriarch of Willow Springs. James R. Saunders describes Mama Day accordingly:

At eighty-five years of age, Mama Day can ‘still stand so quiet, she becomes part of a tree.’ The local doctor has to admit that her herbal cures are just as good as what he himself can accomplish with years of medical training. All of Willow Springs knows that she has a gift... (Saunders 9)
Here, Naylor manipulates the notion of the second generation seventh son legacy which is so pervasive in the Conjure paradigm. Naylor’s version includes the daughter of the second generation seventh son, the powerful Mama Day, endowed with all the metaphysical capabilities and expertise associated in the Conjure tradition with such a legacy. The legacy of Mama Day is one of the many which has been passed from generation to generation on the island.

Another island legacy is Candle Walk night. Mama Day traces its history on the island as follows:

...old Reverend Hooper couldn’t stop Candle Walk night. He ain’t been the first to try...talking about folks should call it Christmas...that ain’t never caught on too much here...Looking from beyond the bridge, you might believe some of the more far-fetched stories about Willow Springs: The island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. ‘Leave’em hear, Lord,’ she said. ‘I ain’t got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light.’...Over here nobody knows why every December twenty-second folks take to the road--strolling, laughing, and talking--holding some kind of light in their hands. It’s been that way since before they were born...Use to be when Willow Springs was mostly cotton and farming...and with a whole heap of children to feed and clothe, winter could be mighty tight for some. And them being short on cash and long on pride, Candle Walk was a way of getting help without feeling obliged. Since everybody said, ‘Come my way, Candle Walk,’ sort of as a season’s greeting, and expected a little something, them that needed a little more got it quiet like from their
neighbors...It all got accepted with the same grace, a lift of the candle and a parting whisper, 'Lead on with light.'...In her [Miranda's] young days Candle Walk was different... After going around and leaving what was needed, folks met in the main road and linked arms. They'd hum some lost and ancient song, and then there'd be a string of lights moving through the east woods out to the bluff over the ocean. They'd all raise them candles, facing east and say, 'Lead on with light, Great Mother. Lead on with light.' Say you'd hear talk then of a slave woman who came to Willow Springs, and when she left, she left in a ball of fire to journey back home east over the ocean. And Miranda says that her daddy, John-Paul, said that in his time Candle Walk was different still. Said people kinda worshipped his grandmother, a slave woman who took her freedom in 1823. Left behind seven sons and a dead master as she walked down the main road. Folks in John-Paul's time would line the main road with candles, food, slivers of ginger to help her spirit along... (108-111)

The annual Candle Walk ritual in Willow Springs epitomizes a tradition based upon Christio-Conjuring precepts. Held on December twenty-second, Candle Walk, on one hand, draws upon the Christian holiday tradition of Christmas, during which gifts are exchanged in the spirit of giving. On the surface, then, this ritual closely resembles the ritual celebrated by Christians on December twenty-fifth. Over the years, in fact, Candle Walk has been mistaken as a Christmas/Christian celebration by those less familiar with the traditions practiced on the islands.

Conversely, however, Candle Walk, draws upon the conjure tradition, as a holiday honoring the legacy of an
African conjure woman--Sapphira Wade, original matriarch of Willow Springs--worshipped by previous generations as goddess. Thus, the Candle Walk celebration typifies the extent to which the Christian and the Conjure traditions merge in Mama Day, giving rise to a Christio-Conjure paradigm which more completely fulfills the spiritual material needs of the inhabitants of Willow Springs as a community influenced by dual religious ideologies.

Away from her sea island home, in New York City, Mama Day’s grand-niece, Ophelia (nicknamed Cocoa), struggles to maintain her cultural heritage inherited as a member of Willow Springs. She finds it extremely difficult, however, to "enact the conjuror role of Sapphira Wade’s heir" (Simon 17) in New York City. Abandoning her cultural role, she thinks, would be the same as abandoning her history. Cocoa, like her transplanted African ancestors on the American plantations, fears possible amalgamation with the White culture; she fears the loss of her identity. When George, her future husband, asks her out on their second date, Cocoa thinks to herself, "Surely he jests," (Naylor 64). Here, her use of a Shakespearean quotation causes her to wonder and worry about the degree to which she has assimilated into the White culture while away from Willow Springs. Like her transplanted African ancestors who struggled to keep their cultural identity intact, Cocoa
follows their example by rejecting the western literary ideal set by Shakespeare. She recognizes it as one which does not affirm her cultural heritage and declares that

Shakespeare didn't have a bit of soul—I don't care if he did write about Othello and Cleopatra, and some slave on a Caribbean island. If he had been in touch with our culture, he would have written somewhere, 'Nigger, are you out of your mind?' (64)

Mama Day has taught Cocoa ways of life which nurture her belief in Black rural superiority. Cocoa's perceptions of New York City are closely aligned with Mama Day's perceptions of life in urban environments.

After four years of marriage on the mainland, Cocoa and her husband, George, visit Willow Springs for summer vacation. George is an urban professional who suffers from a mild heart condition. In Willow Springs, he is introduced to Mama Day who functions in a number of roles. Like Lena's grandmother in Baby of the Family, she is a quilt-maker. Regarding the traditional African American art of quilt-making, poet Nikki Giovanni observes that, "Quilters teach there is no such thing as waste, only that for which we currently see no purpose" (Collins 89). Furthermore, Alice Walker, upon viewing a quilt created by an anonymous black woman, notes that as an artist, the woman "brings together the theme of the black woman's creativity, her transformation, despite oppression, of the bits and pieces allowed to her by society into a work of functional beauty" (89). In her
article, "Quilting in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Linda Wagner-Martin reveals that

As Naylor focuses on the quilt-making episode...the reader has no doubt that it is important. Ophelia's request for a double-ring quilt on the occasion of her marriage (a complicated pattern, "from edges to center the patterns had to twine around each other") prompts Mama Day to reflect that such a quilt incorporates all the women's lives in the family. Bits of cloth from Abigail's lace slip, Hope's graduation dress, and Grace's gloves combine in the curves of color. Thus the image of the aged Mama Day, "almost knee deep in bags of colored rags, sorted together by shades," taking so seriously the composition of this gift as she works alone into the night, is moving...Mama Day as creator, soothsayer, conjurer, revitalizing her name and bringing day through the brilliant colors of her composition; this is the pervasive image of Naylor's novel. (Martin 6-7)

In the African American women's community, quilt-making is a time-honored tradition characterized by the piecing together of various scraps of cloth--pieces of garments which generally hold sentimental value within a family--to form a highly artistic yet functional item, the quilt itself. Additionally, however, since the quilt usually consists of pieces of garments which once belonged to various family members, it often functions as a story-telling device, preserving the family lineage from generation to generation. Thus, the quilt-makers, themselves, like Miss Lizzie in *Baby of the Family* and Mama Day in the novel entitled the same, function as historians, connecting present generations with those of
Like the character of Nurse Bloom in Ansa's novel, Mama Day serves as the midwife and healing conjure woman of Willow Springs. While visiting, Cocoa's husband, the ever-rational George finds himself fascinated by the island and even dreams of Mama Day's reported mystical powers. In his dream, he envisions himself drowning off the coast of the island. He recounts the dream to Cocoa as follows:

In my struggles, I saw Mama Day leaning over the bridge. Her voice came like thunder: No, Get Up and Walk. She's a crazy old woman, I thought as I kept swimming harder toward the receding shore...Get Up And Walk. I was fiercely angry at her for not helping...With my last bit of strength I pushed my shoulders out of the water to scream in her face, You're a crazy old woman! And I found myself standing up in the middle of the sound. (184)

In this passage, Naylor employs an element in African American tradition which is based upon the phenomenal power invested in words. In his dream, George experiences a sampling of Mama Day's extraordinary ability which she potently issued in the form of speech: she commands him walk on water, similar to the Christian notion of Christ walking on water. The belief in the power of words, however, is yet another mystical concept grounded in ancient West African culture. Explaining this concept within the context of the ancient tradition, John S. Mbiti suggests that,

There is mystical power in words, especially
those of a senior person to a junior one... The words of parents, for example, carry power when spoken to children: they cause good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrows or blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis... (Mbiti 275-58)

Eventually, George must decide whether or not he believes in the healing forces of Mama Day because during their visit, Cocoa falls victim to evil the conjuring of Ruby and becomes deathly ill. James Haskins describes the concept of the evil conjurer rooted in West African culture as follows:

The conjurer or witch doctor, used his knowledge and powers more often for harmful than for beneficial purposes. He was sought out by those who wished to harm or destroy others...the conjurer was hated and feared. He was usually blamed for whatever was wrong in the village... (Haskins 24)

Indeed, Naylor fashions the character of Ruby based upon this model; she is the evil conjure woman. Fearing her love interest is attracted to Cocoa, Ruby decides to eliminate Cocoa as her prospective competition.

Meanwhile, a hurricane destroys the bridge to the mainland and, with Cocoa on her death bed, no doctor can be reached. The turning point in the story comes when, George--the purely rational thinker--is asked to believe in and act upon the power of Mama Day as the only possible means of saving Cocoa. Early during the visit, as she and George walk through the woods, Mama Day, in an attempt to convey the potency effectiveness of her power, describes the natural methods she employs in creating her
healing remedies:

She tells him what part of the forest she uses in the fall, summer, or spring. Differences in the leaves of trees, barks of trees, roots. The tonics she makes up, poultices, the healing teas...in her hands she could make the same medicine he uses for his heart. (207)

Mama Day's role as medicine woman is yet another Christio-Conjuring element which Naylor incorporates into the text. Illustrating the historical relationship shared between medicine and religion in African American culture, W.E.B. DuBois describes

the loss of African traditional religion among the slaves as a 'terrific revolution.' But some traces did remain...The chief remaining institution was the Priest or Medicine Man. He early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people. (DuBois 144)

Furthermore, Eugene Genovese suggests that,

The deeper meaning of the widespread use of folk medicine by the slaves lay...in its function as an agency for the transmission of black religious sensibility into a defense against the psychological assaults of slavery and racial oppression. (Genovese 220)

Even as the powerful Christio-Conjuring medicine woman, however, Mama Day recognizes that she cannot save Cocoa without the aid of George. She posits that since "Baby Girl done tied up her mind and her flesh with George" (Naylor 265), ultimately, he must save her. Mama Day, staring past her dried herbs,...past the
mother who ended her life in the Sound, on to the Mother who began the Days. She sees one woman leave by wind. Another leave by water. She smells the blood from the broken hearts of the men who they cursed for not letting them go...She finally turns to face her sister,...It's gonna take a man to bring her peace--and all they had was that boy...but she needs that belief buried in George...so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before...So they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over. (Naylor 263-85)

Given the desperate circumstances surrounding Cocoa's fatal illness, George cannot continue his disbelief; to do so would signify the death of Cocoa. He must, in short, develop a full and complete faith in the healing power of Mama Day, which eventually he does. Ultimately, like Lena in Baby of the Family, George learns the importance of accepting mystery which is a crucial element within the Christio-Conjuring paradigm.

Tied in with this notion of accepting mystery within the Christio-Conjure paradigm is belief in the power of faith. Mama Day reveals the power of faith as it relates to her role as Conjure/Medicine woman as explains to her sister:

The mind is a funny thing, Abigail--and a powerful thing at that. Bernice is gonna believe they are what I tell her they are--magic seeds. And the only magic is that what she believes they are, they're gonna become. (96)

Additionally, Cocoa echoes similar sentiments regarding the power of faith as she describes her childhood visits to the "other place" where Mama Day conducted/performed
much of her conjuring activity. She explains to George,

...from a little girl I had been taught that you don’t waste your time telling people things you know they won’t believe. I had seen Mama Day do a lot of things out at the other place, and when I told the kids at school they called me a liar. I got into some awful fights that way, coming home crying...But if I could just bring them here and let them see, I’d say. Folks see what they want to see, she told me. And for them to see what’s really happening here, they gotta be ready to believe. (97)

Thus, early in the novel, Cocoa foreshadows George’s impending indoctrination into the Christio-Conjuring tradition. Like Miss Lizzie in Baby of the Family, George, too, transforms into the archetypal Christio-Conjure character as circumstances force him to re-evaluate and ultimately alter his Western-based perceptions of reality. In order to save Cocoa, George must embrace the validity of and develop an absolute faith in the power of Christio-Conjuring.

Interviewer, Donna Perry, investigates the subject of faith, magic, and conjuring in Mama Day. She asks Naylor, "What about the magic in that book? Are we supposed to believe the extraordinary events--like Ruby’s spell--or not?" Naylor Replies:

Well, you get a hint with the opening of the novel. I moved from the most universally accepted forms of magic into those things that we’re more resistant to accepting. You’re first made aware...that the act of reading itself, is an act of magic...And then the reader should go, ‘Oh, of course: the magic of the imagination!’...I move from that into having a man like George and a woman like
Cocoa...meet and fall in love...we accept the magic of love. And then, from there, I take you to the last frontier. That's when there are indeed women who can work with nature and create things which have not been documented by institutions of science, but which still do happen. So the book's an exploration of magic. (Perry 233)

Larry R. Andrews, encapsulates the general theme which runs throughout Naylor's Mama Day, in the following excerpt:

...female community becomes empowered by natural forces and religious tradition in the coastal community of Willow Springs...Most important is the historical connection that runs from the legendary free spirit who founded the community, Sapphira Wade, through Miranda (Mama Day) to Miranda's great-niece Ophelia. This connection among women is related to nature through Miranda's extraordinary powers of intuition, magic, and fertility as well as through the cyclical sense of time that pervades the island community. (Andrews 1492)

While the portion of the narrative featuring George and Cocoa is that of a love story, there clearly exists a dichotomy in the text. Naylor, in fact, devotes the remaining half of the novel to the experiences of the women of Willow Springs, whose lives are greatly influenced by the power of Christio-Conjuring. The very inception of the island community formed by the union of Bascombe Wade (plantation owner) and Sapphira Wade (enslaved African conjure woman/goddess), reflects the mixed heritage upon which the island community is established. The divergent cultures (European and African) fuse in the island community, as various
cultural traditions, including religious ideologies, combine to create an entirely new cultural offspring—Christio-Conjuring. As Naylor spins a tale characterized by female bonding and a healing community of women in *Mama Day*, she subscribes to the Christio-Conjure paradigm which has traditionally functioned as a matriarchal archetype, serving as the source of spiritual preservation for women and promoting their general empowerment.
CHAPTER 4

SASSAFRASS, CYPRESS & INDIGO:
THREE CHRISTIO-CONJURING SPIRITS

Ntozake Shange has constructed a novel, Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo, which, like Baby of the Family and Mama Day, is also based upon the mystery and magic associated with the Christio-Conjure tradition as it manifests itself in the African American female community. Set in Charleston, South Carolina, the novel features three sisters whose mother, Hilda Effania, has given the girls the names of three trees—Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo; each tree is used in dying cloth and the roots of each possess healing powers. Because Hilda Effania is a weaver who cherishes her profession, these names symbolize a special bonding between the mother and her daughters. As the girls grow up in Charleston, each learns to dye, wrap, and weave; thus, each is able to witness a physical manifestation of her name in the cloth with which she works. The cloth, then, for each girl, represents something useful and esthetic, something through which each connects personally with the world. The roots and bark of the three trees—Sassafras, Cypress, and Indigo—have traditionally held healing powers and ultimately, each girl becomes a healing force as she connects with others. Jean Strandness, commenting
on the girls’ cosmic connection as personifications of
healing trees, asserts that,

with its branches reaching into the sky and
its roots into the earth, the tree is a
universal symbol of a cosmic connection
between heaven and earth...in giving her
daughters the names Sassafrass, Cypress, and
Indigo, Hilda Effania identifies their
potential germ of connection with her, the
material world, other people, and other
worldly realms. (Strandness 12)

Sassafrass, Hilda Effania’s first daughter, falls in
love with Mitch, "the cosmic lover and wonder of wonders"
(Shange 78) when she moves away from her mother’s home.
She, as Strandness says, directs all of her creative
energy toward him--cooking for him, creating macrame wall
hangings of black heroes for their house, bolstering his
ego, loving him (Strandness 12). As Sassafrass becomes
consumed with pleasing him, she becomes more and more
sequestered from the vital link with herself and the
traditions of her past.

Although Mitch urges Sassafrass to write, the
negative effects of his chauvinistic sense of ownership
seriously impede Sassafrass’ creative instincts.
Furthermore, Mitch devalues Sassafrass’ weaving. He
criticizes a sequin and feather, vagina-shaped wall-
hanging Sassafrass has made in honor of Josephine Baker,
insisting that "it wasn’t proper for a new Afrikan woman
to make things of such a sexual nature" (78).
Ultimately, however, it is through her weaving, the craft
passed down from her mother, that Sassafrass finally taps her creativity as a writer. This moment represents a pivotal point for Sassafrass. Despite Mitch's efforts to devalue her art, she recognizes weaving as an "essential" (91) element in her life which links her with her heritage—"her mama had done it, and her mama before that" (92). Sassafrass, reaches for her artistic foremothers in an effort to liberate herself from confining forces. Through her art, Sassafrass returns to her ancestral roots as weaver's daughter. She reaffirms her artistic inheritance by professing:

i am sassafrass/a weaver's daughter
the moon's daughter made cloth
the gold array of the sun
...i have inherited fingers that change fleece
to tender garments
mama
didn't ya show me how...
to pattern stars into cotton homespun...
didn't ya name me for yr favorite natural dye
Sassafrass...
so good with deep fertile greens. (Shange 91)

Reaching within to her ancestral roots, Sassafrass conjures up her mother's power in her life. She recalls the process of artistic creation that her mother has passed on to her and "reflecting upon her mother's teachings, the dynamic process by which she learned to weave, Sassafrass combats...men's reductive definition of her" (Steinitz 285). It is here that Sassafrass subscribes to the matrilineal component of the Christio-Conjure paradigm by reclaiming and reaffirming her
artistic heritage which has been passed down to her by previous generations of weavers. Strandness says that for Sassafrass, "weaving and word-making are interrelated" (Strandness 13). Thus, as a participant in the weaving process, Sassafrass is able to develop a sense of wholeness which nourishes her artistic ability to create, mold, and shape language.

Sassafrass leaves Mitch to live with her sister, Cypress. In Cypress' home, Sassafrass reads about ancient cultures and begins to cultivate her writing. During this period, Sassafrass experiences psychic visions of Billie Holiday and Mammie Smith, famous blues singers, who encourage her creative endeavors:

\[\text{It's the blues, Sassafrass that's keepin' you from your writing, and the spirits sent me because I know all about blues...that's who I am...Don't ya know we is all sad ladies because we got the blues, and joyful women because we got our songs? Make you a song, Sassafrass, and bring it out so high all us spirits can hold it and be in your tune. We need you, Sassafrass we need you to sing best as you can; that's our nourishment, that's how we live.} \](81)

In chapter four entitled "Afro-Christian Music and Religion," of LeRoi Jones' *Blues People*, he discusses the power of song as it manifests itself within African American religion. He cites an old African dictum which states, "The spirit will not descend without song," and contends this dictum became a crucial component "incorporated into Afro-Christian religion," which, for
the purposes of this paper, has been labeled Christio-
Conjuring. Thus, Sassafrass receives encouragement and
support from the spirits of her cultural foremothers. In
her article "In Spite of the Klan: Ghosts in the Fiction
of Black Women Writers," Geraldine Smith-Wright
delineates the significance connecting with the past via
the spirit world within the context of African American
culture as follows:

In the transplanted African community, among
the most important traditions was slaves' strong conviction that the spirit world was an
integral part of the life force. In African
traditions regarding the supernatural, the
living and the dead are intimately connected
...the family...consists of the living, the
dead, and the still unborn. It is not only
the living. Consequently, these ancestors,
though dead, are still believed to be
concerned with and involved in the affairs of
the living...ancestors depend on the well-
being of the living. The reverence for
ancestral spirits is one facet of a pervasive
sense of a host of spirit beings, both good
and evil, that monitor the activities of the
living. (Smith-Wright 144-145)

In the novel, Billie Holiday and Mammie Smith
function as Sassafrass' spiritual foremothers/ancestors.
But despite the encouragement offered by her spiritual
ancestors, and the nurturing environment provided by
Cypress, Sassafrass returns to Mitch. The two move to a
Creole Voudoun spiritual community in Baton Rouge,
Louisiana, where Mitch is unable to bond with the
community. Instead, he curses the deities and abuses
drugs. Sassafrass, however, is an active participant in
the community life. She wants "to heal, to bring love and beauty" (215) by becoming a priestess of Oshun. Thus, Sassafrass seeks to become a true Christio-Conjure woman within the Creole Voudoun tradition which exists as the cultural offspring of the union between Christian and West African religious ideologies.

During a group ritual, honoring her patron goddess, Shango, Sassafrass prays to have a child. She is warned that the child will be cursed if she does not renounce the father. Possessed by the goddess Oshun, Sassafrass grabs a jar of honey and, literally, pours it into the bell of Mitch's saxophone, and all over the horn until he finally becomes silent. Thus, Sassafrass, acting as Christio-Conjure woman, begins the process of self-healing and empowerment by silencing, Mitch, her silencer.

The following morning, Sassafrass envisions her mother "lying on a bed of oranges, surrounded by burning yellow candles, eating honey" (218). She returns home to her mother "to find the rest of" herself (220). Strandness delineates the completion of Sassafrass' emotional/spiritual cycle as follows:

...by drawing on the psychological strength she gains from her weaving as a catalyst, the encouraging visions of Billie Holiday and Mammie Smith, the wrath of the archetypal goddess Oshun, and the sustained support of her mother...Sassafrass comes into her own power. (Strandness 13)
Like her sister, Indigo, Sassafrass establishes links with female ancestors in order to overcome the restrictions imposed upon her existence by the larger culture.

As a young girl, Sassafrass predicts her future role as she says to the old folks, "i'ma be a conjuh." The folks' respond, "you awready a geechee/how much more magic you want?" She answers, "as much as it takes to move into a new now" (Shange 109). Sassafrass--calling upon the spiritual strength she gathers from an encouraging and supportive community of women--ultimately summons her creative energy and unleashes it in a frenzy of healing activity through which she unearths her craft as a weaver. She unequivocally rejects her former perceptions of reality which have allowed her to tolerate physical, psychological, and emotional humiliation and abuse. Subscribing to a new ideology, Christio-Conjuring, Sassafrass assumes the role of conjurer and performs the spiritual task of self-healing which, for her, would be impossible in the absence of the reassuring female collective:

she wrote songs of love and vindication for all the african & indian deities disgraced by the coming of the white man/& loss of land/& cities reflectin' respect for livin' things 'i am sassafrass/my fingers behold you i call upon you with my song you teach me in my sleep/i am not a besieger of yr
In the self-appointed role of conjure woman, Sassafrass, employing the Christio-Conjuring paradigm (a product of the synthesized African and European worldview), seeks to establish a new aesthetic based on a shared set of experiences and past traditions designed to foster a healthy existence, both physically and spiritually, for the African American female collective.

Sassafrass' sister, Cypress, Hilda Effania's second daughter is a dancer who "early in her life she knew that dancing was in her blood" (Shange 153). For Cypress, dancing is a sensual experience which links her with the rest of the world; a dancer is "someone whose body interpreted the world" (185). Additionally, Cypress understands that dancing links her and her African American viewing audience with their ancestral past. Within the Christio-Conjuring paradigm, the notion of dance clearly exists as the result of African influence. Thomas Merton in his study of the reform of the Roman Catholic liturgy observes, "One thing that is certain to
come out of Africa is the revival of the ancient liturgical art of the dance, traditionally a problem to Western Christianity" (Merton 248).

Cypress' goal, regarding dance, is theoretically structured much like the Christio-Conjuring paradigm because it draws upon both European and African cultural traditions, in an effort to produce a new convention which reflects the experiences and speaks to the needs of the African American collective. Cypress' ambition is "to dance as good as white folks and find out the truth about colored people's movements" (135). She would like to master, according to Houston Baker, "the aesthetics of the best that has been danced in Western ballet and...convert her mastery into a unique practice of black dance" (Baker 190).

Cypress moves from Los Angeles to New York where she "becomes part of a woman's collective" (Strandness 14). While her older sister, Sassafrass, and her younger sister, Indigo, summon their female ancestors to seek revitalization, Cypress initially turns to women of her own generation. In New York, Cypress feels a sense of connection to women which she has never experienced with any man. She meets and falls in love with Idrina who "seemed to move right in and slay the dragons Cypress had...simply by looking at her. Holding her" (149).

Eventually, however, Cypress falls in love with
Leroy, a jazz musician. Like Cypress, Leroy also wants to combine the best of European and African musical forms, ultimately creating a new musical form—much like the blending of European and African religious traditions which have lead to the formation of the Christio-Conjuring paradigm. As a product of both African and European cultural traditions, Leroy masters Western concert music, but outside of that, he seeks to create music that is a "force" (159). Leroy wants the "blood of...[African American] culture, the songs folk sing, how they move, what they look at, the rhythms of their speech; that was the blood Leroy was after. Blackening up American" (189).

Functioning within similar artistic realms, Cypress and Leroy make arrangements to marry in her "mama's house" (211). Love making between them is described as a sensual dance:

the original aboriginal dance of all time/challenge the contradiction of perfected pirouette with the sly knowing of hips that do-right/stretch till all the stars n sands of all our lands abandon/mingle in the wet heat/sweat & grow warm/must be she the original dancin girl. (158)

For Cypress, dance produces emotional exhilaration as she journeys toward emotional liberation. She channels the energy of her ancestors in an effort to free herself: "Her dance, like her people before her, adapted to the contours of her new land. She choreographed for the
wilderness..." (196). Steinitz suggests that Cypress employs the Christio-Conjure model by "Drawing on the powers of her ancestors to find freedom...uses her body to achieve not only physical agility but emotional liberation as well" (Steinitz 287).

As an artist, a dancer, all of Cypress' healing is effected through dance. The dance, however, is not only restorative and revitalizing for her personal spirit, it also functions as a therapeutic device for others, her viewing audience, which lives vicariously through her dance. Thus, Cypress acts as the healing conjure woman, connecting with historical dance troops and ancient African dance societies, as well as with her modern viewing audience, she bridges past generations with those of the present. Like Sassafrass, Cypress assumes the role of artistic conjure woman as a means of achieving both emotional and spiritual liberation for both herself and others.

The opening lines of Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo introduce the reader to the enchanted world of Indigo, Hilda Effania's youngest daughter which read as follows:

Where there is a woman there is magic. If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic, who can share or not share her powers. A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits. Indigo seldom spoke. There was a moon in her mouth... Sometimes when someone else was talking, Indigo excused herself--her dolls were calling for
her...There wasn't enough for Indigo in the world she'd been born to, so she made up what she needed.
Access to the moon.
The power to heal.
Daily visits with the spirits. (Shange 3-5)

As described above, Indigo assumes the role of the Christio-Conjure woman by creating rituals necessary for a healthy spiritual and psychological existence in a western-based culture which does not provide her and her people (African Americans) with adequate tools for spiritual and psychological survival.

"Wherever we find interest in folklore in novels by black women," Marjorie Pryse contends that, "we also find stages in the tradition's emerging perception that women have the ability to reclaim their 'ancient power" (Pryse and Spillers 20). Shange depicts Indigo as one closely linked with the moon and its powers. Indigo, in fact, creates rituals for spiritual journeys to the moon. Additionally, she creates dolls who talk to her, which according to Strandness, "seem to symbolize her latent potential for becoming a mid-wife" in the tradition of her Aunt Haydee (Strandness 14).

Shange saturates the text of Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo with ritualistic activity. When Indigo has her first period, Sister Mary Louise instructs her to bathe "in a hot tub filled with rose petals: white, red, and yellow floating around a new woman" (19). The Church Sister advises Indigo,
There in the garden you should spend these first few hours. Eve's curse threw us out of the garden. But like I told you, women tend to beauty and children. Now you can do both. Take your blessing and let your blood flow among the roses. (19)

Houston Baker suggests that the "curse" of Eve is literally washed (and spoken) away by Sister Mary Louise (Baker 174). Here, Sister Mary Louise, devout Christian, on one hand, acts as a conjurer woman on the other. By reversing the curse of Eve she reconstructs the biblical account, transforming it into a spiritually nourishing version of the garden scene. Here, Sister Mary Louise, like Miss Lizzie in Baby of the Family and George in Mama Day, personifies the Christio-Conjuring character. Her reconstruction/ transformation of the biblical scene typifies that which is characteristically accomplished by employing the Christio-Conjuring paradigm as a means of creating a comfortable spiritual space for the healthy existence of African Americans. The reconstruction of the biblical garden scene, and the transformation of Eve's curse is designed to celebrate Indigo's maturation which includes her potential for creating children as well for creating beauty. For Indigo, the role she plays in reversing the biblical cures, represents a moment "filled with grace" (Shange 19).

Operating as a healing force, Indigo uses all of her resources for the purposes of healing and protecting, including her musical talents. Uncle John, Aunt Haydee's
friend, gives Indigo a talking fiddle and delineates the origins of Christio-Conjuring among African Americans—a culturally displaced people existing in an alien culture who developed, Christio-Conjuring, a new ideological system as a means of survival:

Listen, now girl. I'ma tell ya some matters of the reality of the unreal...Them whites what owned slaves took everythin' was ourselves & didn't even keep it fo' they own selves. Just threw it on away, ya heah. Took them drums what they could, but they couldn't take our feet. Took them languages what we speak. Took off wit our spirits left us wit they Son. But the fiddle was the talkin' one. The fiddle be callin' our gods what left us/be givin back some devilment & hope in our bodies worn down and lonely over these fields and kitchen...you & me, we ain't the onliest ones be talkin' wit the unreal. What ya think music is, whatcha think the blues be, them get happy church musics is about, but talkin' wit the unreal what's mo real than most folks ever gonna know." (27)

Indigo makes rough, natural sounds with her fiddle, like those of birds and animals. When she is threatened by two young boys instead of fleeing, she stands before them and chants, "Falcon come in this fiddle. Leopard come in this fiddle. I'm on the prey. I'm on the prey" (37). The narrator remarks, "Indigo had a moon in her mouth after all" (40). Likewise, Strandness suggests that, "In the tradition of Creole Voudoun, Indigo has the ability to evoke the transpersonal protective powers of guardian spirits, or loa" (Strandness 15).

Employing her psychic powers, Indigo uses Uncle John's fiddle as a healing instrument:
...now she'd look at somebody. Say a brown-skinned man with a scar on his cheek, leathery hands and a tiredness in his eyes. Then she'd bring her soul all up in his till she'd ferreted out the most lovely moment in that man's life. & she'd play that. You could tell from looking that as Indigo let notes fly from the fiddle, that man's scar wasn't quite so ugly; his eyes filling with energy, a tenderness tapping from those fingers now, just music. (Shange 45)

By focusing intensely on the person she is playing for, Indigo is able to connect with them on a personal/intimate level; for those with weary and fatigued souls, Indigo functioning as a conjure woman, provides healing and rejuvenation.

Following the tradition set by Aunt Haydee, as well as Ansa's Nurse Bloom and Naylor's Mama Day, ultimately Indigo becomes a midwife--a service traditionally associated with conjure women--and continues to forge connection with the life force of various generations: the generation before her (Aunt Haydee), the current generation (pregnant women she services), the future generation (newborns she delivers). Working as Aunt Haydee's apprentice, she develops into a skilled midwife:

At first Aunt Haydee only allowed 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. Aunt Haydee was no fool. She watched Indigo playing the fiddle one evening as the tide came in. It'd been a long time since a colored woman on Difuskie moved the sea. Some say it was back in slavery time. Blue Sunday, that was her name, that was her name 'cause she was born on a Sunday & black as pitch. (222)
According to the legend, Blue Sunday was invincible and could never be overpowered by any man. When Master Fitzhugh attempts to penetrate Blue Sunday, she transforms into a crocodile and Master Fitzhugh loses a leg. Thereafter, she is never seen again by white people. African American women, however, would often hear her soothing songs when in labor. Strandness suggests that,

> When Indigo plays her fiddle for women in childbirth, she manifests the spirit, or loa, of Blue Sunday...Blue Sunday is fiercely virginal and the protectress of women in childbirth...she is linked with the power of the moon to move the sea. (Strandness 15)

When Aunt Haydee, who personifies the Christio-Conjure character in the novel, dies, she goes to the "Lord on a melody only Indigo or Blue Sunday could know" (Shange 233). Indigo preserves Aunt Haydee’s ashes in "a funny bluish jar Uncle John’d given her when she was small" (223). Within the context of Creole Voudoun, according to Strandness, this jar provides a place for Aunt Haydee’s spirit, or loa, whose power Indigo could continue to call forth. (Strandness 15). Strandness further explains that:

> Since the loa is not viewed as the spirit of an individual, but as an ancestral spirit which can pass from generation to generation, it is also conceivable that Aunt Haydee’s loa would transfer to Indigo, that Indigo would then manifest the spirit of the wise woman who had been her mentor. (15)

Shange’s depiction of Indigo counterbalances the history
of negative connotations long associated with such talents deeply rooted in the conjure tradition. Indigo, in the final analysis, reclaims her ancient power through her mentor, Aunt Haydee, and through the legendary Blue Sunday.

In "Shaping Interior Spaces: Ntozake Shange's Construction of the 'Room' for Art," Hilary Steinitz examines Indigo's aptitude for transforming the various restrictions imposed by American culture:

For Indigo...the world fails to reflect 'all that she came from'...Living in a society that dismisses her needs, Indigo fashions her own world. Literary historian Barbara Christian notes that Shange's language, derived 'from the healing aspects of African derived ritual/music and Afro-American women's culture...shape[s] a vision that overthrows the old white male elitist-centered view of the universe.' To be sure, Indigo draws upon the African-derived notion that spiritual power, expressed in 'woman-oriented magical practices,...can transform the life of a common woman.' Indigo ascends to the moon, to which she feels African American people need access, by means of a sensual embrace of self and of her ancestors' spirit. In her prescription for journeying to the moon, Indigo combines all the tools needed to carve out her own space in a world...she finds too narrow for her...she makes dolls that take on...power...In addition, she moves across temporal space by connecting...with her female ancestors; she transcends her earthly existence...by... linking past and present generations. (Steinitz 281-82)

As a Christio-Conjure woman, Indigo achieves all that is mentioned above. Influenced by the ideologies of two ancient spiritual paths--Christianity and Conjuring--Indigo, as a product of the Christio-Conjuring paradigm,
stamps out a new path designed to serve the spiritual needs of African Americans who maintain a mixed cultural heritage.

Shange's novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, like *Mama Day*, is based upon the tenets of matrilineage and is part of a growing body of literature--women writing about their heritage and constructing their female futures. The novels comprise the corpus of African American literature which embodies female connection with the past. Strandness illustrates this connection in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*:

Each of the principal female characters is strongly bonded to her natural mother and to a traditional women's profession (Sassafrass--weaving; Cypress--dancing; Indigo--psychic healing). Each is encouraged by the love and leadership of a mentor (Sassafrass--her mother; Cypress--Idrina; Indigo--Aunt Haydee). Each receives inspiration from legendary women of the past (Sassafrass--Billie Holiday, Mammie Smith, Josephine Baker; Cypress--the maternal ancestors of the Black Nile Dance; Indigo--Blue Sunday). Each manifests some aspect of the triple Goddess Oshun of Creole Voudoun mythology (Sassafrass--Wrath, the ability to destroy [her relationship with Mitch] in order to move forward; Cypress--Generous Love, the ability to relate intimately with other people; Indigo--Virginity, the ability to contain one's energy and concentrate and focus it in order to transform the world... Each character provides readers with positive alternatives to normative female modalities in today's society as well as connections with women's traditions and spiritual heritage. (Strandness 16)

In her writing, Shange attempts to construct literary arenas in which the American ideologies of
science and politics are called into question. As a literary Christio-Conjure woman, she fashions a world of characters who subscribe to an ideology which represents the amalgamation of the Christian and Conjure tradition. Literary critic, Chezia Thompson-Cager contends that "Understanding the cultural legacy of Europe is only part of deciphering an Afro-centric world view" (Thompson-Cager 37). Shange says:

i try to deal with black situations and i deal with the lives i am most familiar with/which are women’s lives/through women’s lives you can see the whole world. we raised all these people. these people pass by us from birth til death. if you look at a woman’s life/you can get an incredible panorama. (Shange 114)

Shange’s Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo, existing as a component in the matrix of African American women’s writing, functions as a cultural looking glass and serves to inform the reader that Christio-Conjuring exists as an active, critical ingredient in African American women’s culture and is valued particularly as a source of nourishment, protection, and preservation of the female spirit.
African American women writers--represented here by Ansa, Naylor, and Shange--struggle collectively, via their written craft, to produce 'workings of the spirit' which signify women's ability to govern the course of their individual lives in a culture which is patriarchal and oppressive. Summarizing Toni Morrison's views regarding African American women's literature as it exists within a broad, patriarchal social structure, Andrea Stuart remarks:

I think you [Morrison] summed up the appeal of black women writers when you said that white men, quite naturally, wrote about themselves and their world; white women tended to write about white men because they were so close to them as their husbands, lovers and sons; and black men wrote about white men as the oppressor or the yardstick against which they measured themselves. Only black women writers were not interested in writing about white men and therefore they freed literature to take on other concerns. (Henderson 37)

African American women writers demonstrate, instead, a desire to construct their futures by connecting with their cultural past, so intrinsically infused with elements of the Christio-Conjuring. Regarding the fusion of African and European religious ideologies which produced the Christio-Conjuring paradigm, Eugene Genovese contends that

The religion of Afro-American slaves, like all
religion, grew as a way of ordering the world and providing a vantage point from which to judge it. Like all religion it laid down the basis for moral conduct and an explanation for the existence of evil and injustice. The religion of the slaves manifested many African "traits" and exhibited greater continuity with African ideas than has generally been appreciated. But it reflected a different reality in a vastly different land and in the end emerged as something new. If black religion in America today still echoes Africa and expresses something of the common fate of black people on four continents, it has remained nonetheless a distinct product of the American slave experience. It could not have been other. But the religion of the slaves became Christian and unfolded as a special chapter in the general history of Christianity. (Genovese 162)

Exploring the degree of compatibility between Christian and Conjure paradigms, Genovese maintains that

Belief in conjuring, voodoo, Obeah, and witchcraft among rural and urban southern blacks has not proven incompatible with a fervid commitment to Christianity. In some areas ministers themselves have openly shared the attitudes of their congregations, much as the poor parish priests in traditional Catholic countries have often shared their congregations' belief in magic. Southern black "superstition," on closer inspection, takes on the attributes of a slave religion, which has not in its manifold forms been limited to New Orleans or the Sea Islands. If in those areas of strongest continuing African presence they appear in more disciplined and structured form, elsewhere they have persisted under various guises. (217)

Among African Americans, the Christio-Conjure tradition has functioned as a survival mechanism (psychologically, physically, and spiritually) for the oppressed black masses. In the following excerpt, John S. Mbiti delineates the tenets of the conjure tradition
as they exist within the context of the West African worldview:

African traditional societies and their religions found or invented magic and witchcraft to explain human experiences of pain and suffering and sorrow. They also discovered or invented medicine to cure and protect themselves against these forms of evil and to promote health and welfare. These discoveries or inventions are the fruit of many...long experiences of life throughout the centuries. They satisfied people's search for explanations and solutions of their problems. They are still valid for many people... (Mbiti 174)

Variations of the conjure motif are so widespread in African American literature that David H. Brown argues it should be considered as a sub-genre of the larger body of literature:

Given the frequency and elaborateness of conjure references in the ex-slave, African survivals, and folklore literature--references that are often developed into poignant stories--it is fair to suggest that the conjure story be considered a sub-genre of African American...literature. (Brown 2)

The work of literary conjure women such as Ansa, Naylor, and Shange is a testimony to the tenets of the Christio-Conjure tradition as it exists within the African American female community. Zora Neale Hurston--cultural/literary foremother of Ansa, Naylor, and Shange--recognizes and celebrates the matriarchal nature of voodoo, or conjure, which she describes as "the old, old mysticism of the world in African terms" (Hurston 137). The Afrofemcentric power of this African/African American
convention is encapsulated this opening account which Hurston features in *Tell My Horse*:

'http is the truth?' Dr. Holly asked me, and knowing that I could not answer him he answered himself through a Voodoo ceremony in which the Mambo, that is the priestess, richly dressed, is asked this question ritualistically. She replies by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs. The ceremony means that this is the infinite, the ultimate truth. There is no mystery beyond the mysterious sources of human life. *(137)*

The priestess' and conjure women who assume such positions in the African American community are highly respected and virtually worshiped by some segments of the community. In order to serve in these positions of power, it is imperative that these women

...be 'strong in de head'--that is, of great strength of will--the most important characteristic of a 'conjurer' or 'voodoo.' Never mind what you mix--blood, bones, feathers, grave-dust, herbs, saliva, or hair--it will be powerful or feeble in proportion to the dauntless spirit infused by you, the... priestess, at the time you represent the god. *(Baker 81)*

Noting the sense of mystery and secrecy with surrounds the Christio-Conjure tradition, Baker observes:

The poetry of conjure as an image resides in the secrecy and mysteriousness of its sources of power, in its connection to ancient African sources syncretized by a community of diasporic believers with Christian scriptures, and in the masterful improvisational skills of its most dramatic practitioners. *(89)*

The legendary Marie Leveau, often labeled as the "Queen of Conjure" is, actually, the historical Queen of "Christio-Conjure." The following excerpt suggests why
she serves as an archetype of this religious tradition. Luke Turner, describing Leveau's first appearance, gives a sense of the "majesty of a poetic conjure in the folk imagination" (89). Referring to the annual feast conducted by Leveau on the Eve of St. John, Turner reports:

But nobody see Marie Leveau for nine days before the feast. But when the great crowd of people at the feast call upon her, she would rise out of the waters of the lake with a great communion candle burning upon her head and another in each one of her hands. She walked upon the waters of the shore. As a little boy I saw her myself. When the feast was over, she went back into the lake, and nobody saw her for nine days again. (89)

As they administer physical and spiritual healing, Christio-Conjure women find it compulsory to connect with the spirits/ghosts of the past in an effort to gain guidance, knowledge, wisdom, and affirmation. Thus, the emergence of the ghost tale in African American literature filtered through traditions of the culture at large. Ansa, Naylor, and Shange each, as literary conjure women, cultivate the notion of the cyclical nature of human existence with mortal characters who interact with spirits/ghosts from beyond the realm of the living. Smith-Wright explicates the cultural significance of the ghost story in African American literature as it is manifested in Baby of the Family, Mama Day, and Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo:

...these ghost tales...share a contrapuntal
relation, together they are linked through their implicit assertion that one area of kinship between African and American Blacks is the belief that the living and the dead are intimately connected. Encounters between human and ghost characters show that all phases of the life cycle exist in an unbroken circle of being; rather than abdicate, the dead participate actively in temporal experience...In the American setting...ghosts offer the proposition that African Americans can achieve justice, autonomy, and racial pride in an environment that from slavery exacted their submission and fear...an overall similitude between African and African American views of the supernatural suggests that empowerment for African Americans depends on the sense of connection with their rich African past. (Smith-Wright 164)

The relationship between the ghost story and African American women's writing does, indeed, reflect West African religious belief system which was transferred to America. Explicating this connection, Eugene Genovese contends that

The two interrelated features of West African religion especially bear on the black experience in America. First, West Africans practiced what was dubiously called "ancestor worship"; second, they believed in a kind of reincarnation...West African religion affirmed life and linked concern for the deceased and belief in rebirth not with suffering but with the celebration of existence. (Genovese 213)

The powers of Christio-Conjure to provide instruction, regulation, motivation, and amelioration for the African American community have extended from ancient Africa. Houston Baker notes that, "Without the outlaw religion of conjure and its powers to cure and ensure bonding, there could be no tales" (Baker 94). In an
examination of *Tell My Horse*, Baker casts Zora Neale Hurston in the role of the literary conjure woman, and explains that "by inhabiting the image of the conjure...the narrator assumes not merely a power to 'change things around' through storytelling, but an ability to 'make' an emergent nation of Africans in America" (94). Additionally, he notes that Hurston, also demonstrates in powerfully poetic terms...that their lore and lives ...are subject to the severe codes of conjure. And that conjure--both historically and in the narrative frames of her corpus--is most fully defined by women. (94)

In *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English write:

Women have always been healers. They were the unlicensed doctors and anatomists....They were pharmacists, cultivating healing herbs and exchanging secrets of their uses. They were midwives, travelling from home to home and village to village. For centuries women were doctors without degrees...They were called wise women by the people, witches or charlatans by the authorities. (Ehrenreich and English 3)

For almost a century, African American women writers have relied upon the Christio-Conjure paradigm as a means of communicating and relating their cultural experiences. Editor Marjorie Pryse suggests that we employ the conjure paradigm as a method of exploring the concept of African American women writers as literary conjure women. She asserts that,

...Black women novelists have become literary conjure women...who make it possible for their
readers and for each other to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, rootworkers, and women who wrote autobiographies)...By their combined recognition and mutual naming, based on magic, oral inheritance, and the need to struggle against oppression, black women writers enlarge our assumption about the nature and function of literary tradition. (Pryse and Spillers 5)

In *Baby of the Family, Mama Day, and Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Ansa, Naylor, and Shange continue this legacy by, again, fostering a sense of connection within a heritage of separation. In the decade of the eighties, they join the community of African American women writers dedicated to the preservation of the Christio-Conjure tradition as a critical element in the African American culture. Ansa, Naylor, and Shange represent a continuum of literary Christio-Conjure women who offer readers formulas for spiritual healing by calling upon their personal/spiritual strength as well as their African and African American female ancestors/foremothers (literary and otherwise), summoning their creative energies to produce artistic pieces which draw upon the cultural lessons of the past. By employing the Christio-Conjuring paradigm in their literature, writers like Ansa, Naylor, and Shange serve as advocates for the mental, physical, and spiritual survival of African American women.
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