Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's Mama Day
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"There are just too many sides to the whole story,"
Cocoa tells George near the conclusion of Gloria Naylor’s 1988 novel Mama Day (311). The truth of this remark is reinforced by the structure of the novel itself—by the fact that Cocoa’s words are spoken in a time which has not arrived (1999) and addressed to a person who has been many years dead. Indeed, this very “speakerly” novel has gathered together many voices, past and present, living and dead, individual and collective; and while the oral quality of this work may not trouble readers and critics, certainly the brand of realism that had come to define Naylor’s work in The Women of Brewster Place and Linden Hills had suddenly, it seemed, become contaminated with ingredients of magic and fantasy. One reviewer complained that “the reader is never sure what is imagined and what is authentic, what is to be believed and what is unbelievable” (“Magical’ Powers” C3), and another objected that “what is meant to be mystical too often ends up mystifying” (“Mama Day a Victim” G8).

What may be the source of such negative commentary is not so much Naylor’s ambivalence about whether she is writing a realistic novel or a fantasy so much as it is subject matter which, because of its reliance on African magico-religious views of the world, asks for a different narrative mode as well as a different kind of response from readers. For example, the collective voice, which introduces the reader to the community of Willow Springs, concludes with a critique of ethnography and its methodologies. The failure of the ethnographer is due to his inability to hear and to ask the right questions, a failing that, the voice seems to warn us, may be our own: “. . . he coulda listened to them,” the voice explains, “the way you been listening to us right now. Think about it: ain’t nobody really talking to you” (10). The reader, feeling as if she has been caught eavesdropping, may find herself confronted by this kind of trickery, or she may accept the truth of the narrator’s words and take the discourses on their own terms, problematic as they may be.

The problem, of course, has to do with the fact that Mama Day is a novel chock full of conjurers—Ruby, Dr. Buzzard, the maternal ancestor Sapphira Wade—in addition to Mama Day herself, and the reader may be at a loss about how to treat the subject, since the conjurer, and especially the conjure woman, has existed mostly on the margins of folklore and ethnography and is therefore barely credible. Clearly Naylor is taking some risks with
the subject, yet I want to argue that conjure addresses the undervaluation of African medicinal practices and belief systems, even as it comments on the subject of the power—not only in relation to medicine, but also to ancestry, religion, and finally to language and signifying practices.

Not surprisingly perhaps, stories about conjuration have found their most congenial home within the parameters of the folktale, where the conjure woman, whether she is represented as comic or demonic, remains difficult to see. Nowhere is this situation better illustrated than in the 1899 book by Charles W. Chesnutt that bears her name. Chesnutt saw himself and The Conjure Woman as marking the beginning of African American fiction, and the fact that he was writing at a time when the post-Reconstruction South was becoming increasingly repressive, and blacks increasingly disenfranchised, suggests that his subject matter may have been, at least in part, dictated by political as well as aesthetic reasons. Rather like the wily grandfather of Ellison’s invisible man, Chesnutt, in a journal entry dated 1880, envisions racism as a “garrison” that “cannot be stormed and taken by assault,” but whose “position must be mined” instead (qtd. in Helen Chesnutt 21). One way of mining enemy territory was through the writing of a literature that would attempt to teach whites about racism in ways subtle enough to escape notice. Thus it appears that Chesnutt found the female figure of the conjure woman useful for her trickster capacities. Less a novel than a collection of seven folktales, The Conjure Woman contains four conjurers—two men and two women. Their mere number would suggest that conjure is a crucial subject, yet while Chesnutt uses the conjure woman for interesting and effective strategic purposes, I think he does her a disservice. Chesnutt’s own comments, along with recent critical readings, suggest that, while the practice of conjuration operates as a pervasive metaphor within and outside the text, the actual workers of conjure, especially the conjure woman of the title (Aunt Peggy), operate for the most part behind the scenes. Thus, Chesnutt’s conjure woman is denied a textual presence of any serious import.¹

When we turn to the book itself, we find that both Chesnutt and his critics have seen conjure, as Chesnutt represents it here, as mostly related to the manipulative strategies of Uncle Julius, whose stories are themselves embedded in a frame narrated by a white Northerner, John. Critics have also seen Chesnutt himself as the real conjurer, “‘wu’kin his roots’ on an unperceiving audience” (Britt 271). The book’s structure allows the frame narrative—the presumably dominant discourse of the cultivated but insensitive and racist white narrator—to be undercut by the tales of the servile yet wily ex-slave Julius, who uses “goophering” content to change his employer’s mind about matters which have an effect on him or his people. This prompts critic Melvin Dixon to go so far as to argue that the trickster qualities of Julius overcome the black slave’s usual emasculation at the hands of his white master, and enable Julius to effect a “symbolic seduction” of the narrator’s wife Annie; John’s impotency, Dixon continues, is also reflected in “the vocabulary of John’s tradition,” while Julius’s language possesses both vitality and sensuality (193-94). Although these discussions are interesting and illuminating, they appear to ignore or transcend the conjure woman herself, even as Chesnutt subsumes her in a struggle between two males and transmutes her practices in the name of masculine power.

Possibly as a result of this kind of representation, Naylor seems to see the conjure woman as being in need of textual restitution. Not only does her

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¹ Naylor does not mention this in her essay, which appears in AFRICAN AMERICAN REVIEW ¹:271.
The earliest and most exhaustive study done of folk beliefs in the American South, including long chapters on conjuration and voodoo, was Newbell Niles Puckett’s *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926). It was also one of the most biased. Viewing conjuration, indeed all black religion, as fetishistic and therefore primitive, conjurers—root-doctors and hoodoo men—appear to him only as practitioners of witchcraft. Puckett makes little mention of women, although he does say that they are “not entirely excluded” from the practice (311).

Another scholar, Norman E. Whitten, describes the conjurer a bit more objectively as a “professional diviner, curer, agent finder, and general controller of the occult arts” (315-16); Whitten adds that they can be “Negro or white, male or female” (317). While the main focus of Whitten’s study is the practice of “malign occultism” in North Carolina, he also devotes a lot of space to conjurers from South Carolina, who appear more interesting, perhaps even more authentic to him. He separates practitioners into part-time workers and professionals and goes on to observe, almost admiringly, that “the real professional South Carolina conjurers know not only what to do but also why they do it” (318).

Certainly the most well-known women practitioners were the great voodoo queens of New Orleans—in particular Santitè Dédé, who, as a free quadroon from Santo Domingo, practiced in the 1820s and 1830s, and Marie Saloppé, a native Congolese, who also practiced in the 1820s and whose specialty was the removing of hexes. Perhaps the most famous was Marie Leveau, who was also free-born and believed to have psychic powers, and who remained the reigning head of voodoo for forty years (Mulira 49-51). In his lengthy discussion of voodoo, Puckett pays little attention to Leveau, viewing her mostly as a sham. However, as a genuine voodoo

Title render the conjure woman as a concrete presence, but she thereby suggests Miranda Day’s connection to the history, legend, and myth that constitute the collective imagination of Willow Springs. Naylor’s employment of a communal voice allows her to establish Mama Day’s rootedness in the place, since this voice not only gathers up the many voices of the community, past and present, but allows the consciousness of Mama Day to come through when it is important to do so. Thus the communal voice succeeds in demolishing the boundaries between omniscient and limited-omniscient points of view, even as the novel’s subject matter demystifies the boundaries between the mimetic and the magical.

But Mama Day is more than a vehicle; she appears as a careful representation of a figure often willfully misunderstood and undervalued in historical and ethnographic studies of conjurers, many of whom have been observed not only in the Caribbean and in New Orleans, but in the Carolinas as well. In such texts we often find figures who are sometimes sinister, but almost always baffling as well. Indeed, early discourses on the subject are self-evidently distorted by European ethnocentrism—not to mention Christianity—but even more recent studies betray a white patronization, and it is not until Zora Neale Hurston’s work appears on the scene that we get anything close to a positive (or an insider’s) view of the conjure woman. For example, several master narratives on Caribbean, especially Jamaican, history maintained that conjurers were crafty, even diabolical, and these studies made the telling observation that practitioners of obeah were usually African, by which the authors appear to mean persons newly arrived to the Americas and still in possession of an African knowledge.
priestess (and superb show woman), she is best remembered through Hurston’s recording of her grandson Luke Turner, who recounts ritual practices before her altar in which she dances with a snake and calls for the great trickster Legba to appear (Mules and Men 200-04).

Other early studies done by white anthropologists and folklorists also succumb to racist stereotyping. For example, a 1895 study by Leonora Herron and Alice M. Bacon describes conjure doctors as “agents of vengeance,” the only recourse to justice possessed by the Negro who, “brought up in ignorance, and trained in superstition,” invoked “secret and supernatural powers to redress his wrongs” (360). Herron and Bacon also report the consensus that conjurers “are usually tall and very dark; and a distinguishing mark seems to be extreme redness of the eyes”; they are also said to be “‘singular and queer . . . always looking at some distant object’” (361). A 1930 study of “Mojo” retains much of the same bias, and like Herron and Bacon’s work dwells on perceived oddities: One conjurer is described as “tall and dark with grave eyes,” while others are catalogued respectively as “undersized,” a “dwarfed mulatto,” as “almost an albino, with green eyes and a cunning little face” (Bass 381). Yet Bass seems to change her attitude when she speaks about a special conjure woman:

...the most powerful conjurer I know today is a tall, dark[2] woman. Her straight-backed, small-breasted figure seems in some strange way to suggest unusual strength. Her eyes are grave and wise, terribly wise in the ways of ghosts and devils and mojo, as well as in the practice of medicine. (381)

A less sensationalized picture of the conjure woman appears in Leonard Barrett’s study of a Jamaican healing center—called a balmyard—which two healers—a mother and a daughter—have operated in an impoverished district of Jamaica since 1871. The mother, herself the daughter of an African slave mother, from whom she learned extensively of herbal medicine, nonetheless received some call to heal and underwent special initiation experiences. When she died in 1929, her daughter, known to the community as Mother Rita and already a medium and skilled in the knowledge of herbal medicine, took her place (Barrett 287-89). In one of the most recent and thorough studies of the Sea Island slave religions, Margaret Washington Creel emphasizes the relationship of conjurers—whom she calls “diviners” or “medicine specialists” (56-58)—to the priests and priestesses of African initiation societies, arguing that on the Sea Islands the Gullah elders are very similar to these ancient religious practitioners in their influence on their communities.6

A composite picture of the conjure woman emerges from these somewhat disparate studies. One important feature involves ancestry: Conjurers are said to be closer to their African roots than other, more acculturated African slaves. Also, conjure abilities are found to run in families; the conjure man or woman inherits his/her aptitude and the mantle of power, along with an expertise in herbal medicines. Conjure women often carry the name Mother and hold considerable power within their communities, and conjurers are, almost without exception, especially gifted with psychic abilities, or are known to have second sight. Often they are spoken of as being “two-headed.”

When we look more closely at the practices of conjure, as described in ethnographic studies, we once again encounter some problematic discrepancies that suggest a less than objective examination of a different culture. Even Chesnutt’s own studies evidence some discomfiture over the material and an internalization of
While many students of African religious practices have held views similar to Chesnutt's, the sheer volume of research on the practice of conjuration suggests that it is a subject which cannot easily be dismissed. Before elaborating on attitudes regarding conjure, I think it important to suggest the complexity of these practices and their differences. While conjure appears synonymous with witchcraft, rootwork, and voodoo, it may be useful to begin by noting that these terms are linked to the locales where they are practiced, so that Haitian voodoo and Cuban santeria differ from the obeah practiced in the Caribbean. In Roger D. Abrahams' view, the former are "religious systems with rituals and ceremonies" that include "spiritual healing and exorcising" practices, whereas the latter involves a client and a worker (221).

When faced with the task of defining conjure, scholars often create divisions which, while useful, tend to oversimplify the subject and almost always reflect an ethnocentric bias. To associate conjure with sorcery, witchcraft, or necromancy is to further align it with occult practices which in Western traditions have been perceived to be opposed to Christianity and are, therefore, the work of the devil. One critic prefers to view conjure as being comprised of practices which are natural—using plants to cure—and unnatural—using spells and charms. Yet while many conjurers practiced one or the other of these, a number of them practiced both, and the term unnatural seems especially problematic. It may be helpful to con-
sider conjure as treating three types of illnesses: (1) natural illnesses for which a knowledge of roots, herbs, barks, and teas is applied; (2) so-called occult, or spiritually connected, illnesses which require spell casting and charms; and (3) illnesses which include both personal and collective calamities that are not the result of malevolent practices.

Using these categories tentatively, we might find the subject of herbal medicine to be fairly straightforward, and the least controversial—although such practices among slaves and their descendants have always been misunderstood, and hence undervalued. Yet as one scholar points out, healing aptitudes in “people close to the soil who grew up in the cultural milieu of herbal lore,” and who also had an acquaintance “with the names of these ‘medicines’” and their locations, should not really surprise us (Barrett 295).

If we turn to Naylor’s depiction of conjure in *Mama Day* we can see that she is intent on representing Miranda’s skills as those of a root doctor, a practitioner of herbal medicine. To remove any ambiguity regarding Miranda’s expertise, Naylor sets her practices against those of Dr. Smithfield, the off-island “m.d.,” and Dr. Buzzard’s hoodoo medicine. When Bernice takes the fertility drug Perganal and becomes seriously ill, it is Miranda who makes the correct diagnosis of ovarian inflammation, although she summons Smithfield anyway because she knows that her knowledge does not extend to chemically constructed drugs. Administering a chokecherry bark mixture to reduce the pain, Miranda waits for Smithfield’s arrival, after which they have the following exchange:

“You give her anything for the pain?”
“A smidge of choke-cherry bark.”
“T’m not familiar with that one.”
“The way I gave it to her, it knocked her out. Slows down the pulse.” . . .

“I have a feeling I’m going to find myself a sweet little case of ovarian cysts in there. Just hope there’s no liver damage.”
“There ain’t—I checked her eyes.” (85)

It is clear to both the reader and the doctor, that Miranda’s competence and knowledge are equal to Smithfield’s own. His anecdote about the midwife who, to “cut the pain” of childbirth, puts a kitchen knife under the bed, is the kind of commentary that would only be acceptable between colleagues, and clearly Smithfield expects Miranda to find this medical approach amusing. We are also given further information about Miranda’s abilities by way of Smithfield’s memories of two instances when Miranda has actually performed surgery, has “picked up a knife”—

… once when Parris got bit by a water moccasin, and then the time when Reema’s oldest boy was about to kill ’em both by coming out hind parts first. Brian Smithfield looked at Miranda a little different after that birth. Them stitches on Reema’s stomach was neat as a pin and she never set up a fever. (84)

Her subsequent cure of Carman Rae’s baby is just as professional and just as successful.

In contrast to Miranda, Dr. Buzzard represents the world of occult medicine and is clearly the hoodoo doctor described in so many studies. With his outlandish hat with its red feathers, his bone necklace, and the business he does with his charms of “genuine graveyard dust and three penny nails in a red flannel bag,” he is almost a caricature. The distance between him and Miranda is highlighted when the newly arrived George repeats to Miranda what Buzzard has said of their “professional rivalry” (196). Miranda’s anger at the comparison is articulated when, upset to hear that Frances is practicing counterconjure against Ruby, she comments to her sister,
The mind is everything. She can dig all the holes she wants around Ruby’s door. Put in all the bits of glass and black pepper, every silver pin and lodestone she’ll find some fool to sell her. Make as many trips to the graveyard she wants with his hair, her hair, his pee, her pee. Walk naked in the moonlight stinking with Van-Van oil—and it won’t do a bit of good. ‘Cause the mind is everything. (90)

Nevertheless, as we see during Cocoa’s illness, Dr. Buzzard is not only fully aware that his work and Miranda’s are different, but he also willingly serves as an intermediary between Miranda and the unbelieving George.

Ruby, on the other hand, is not only an herbal specialist but a practitioner of the kind of magic described above. Her knowledge of herbal medicine appears to equal Miranda’s, but she is associated more with killing than healing—indeed has been implicated in at least two murders by poisoning. But Ruby’s brand of conjure is both medicinal and symbolic. The bag she buries under Miranda’s porch, containing salt, verbena, and graveyard dust, is dangerous in terms of content (salt burns and corrodes; graveyard dust is considered to carry disease) but is also a sign that Miranda reads. She knows the verbena included in the bag is also known as the “herb of grace,” and that therefore it represents Cocoa—the literal child of Grace and her engulfment in destructive substances.

Ruby’s poisoning of Cocoa is straight conjure. The use of nightshade and snakeroot involves nothing mystifying—both are well-known and proven poisons in the hands of the experienced conjurer—nor does the graveyard dust involve magic. Indeed, Hurston has noted that graveyard dirt is poisonous, and that studies have shown it to contain bacteria from yellow fever, scarlatina, typhoid, and other infectious diseases many years after burial. “. . . it appears,” Hurston concludes, “that instead of being a harmless superstition of the ignorant, the African men of magic . . . discovered that the earth surrounding a corpse that had sufficient time to thoroughly decay was impregnated with deadly power” (Tell 238). Other illnesses—the welts, Cocoa’s “hallucinations” which are not quite that, the strange appearances of the worms—are common symptoms of conjure told many times in many places yet never quite believed. Nor are they explained away by Naylor, who allows some of the more mysterious events to coexist with the more “natural” ones in this text of many stories.

While Miranda’s own powers go beyond her medicinal practices, she nonetheless views sympathetic magic as “a little dose of nothing but motherwit with a lot of hocus-pocus” (97). For example, Miranda has Bernice plant black and gold seeds to aid and abet her fertility and to drive away the influences of her mother-in-law for psychological reasons, and as ritual actions they are clearly of some benefit to Bernice. But there is nothing magical about her prescription.

While Naylor goes out of her way to de-mystify conjuration, there remains a grouping of phenomena that would seem to involve what we perceive to be magic. In order to discuss these aspects of the novel, it is useful to consider a feature that is of some importance to this topic but which I have yet to comment on—namely, Willow Springs itself. Located on the border between Georgia and South Carolina, it is represented (rather like Faulkner’s fictional county) as a place not charted on any map, nor is it actually a part of any state. In every other way, however, Willow Springs has the features of the coastal Sea Islands that stretch from Pawleys Island off the South Carolina city of Georgetown, south beyond Savannah.
to Amelia Island on the border of Florida. Naylor’s choice of location has obviously been dictated by the historical relationship of the islands to the perpetuation of African culture, for these Sea Islands are, with the exception of New Orleans, the most African of places in America. Always important to the slave trade routes because of their easy access from the ocean as well as their proximity to rivers traveling inland, they also became the place where the least acculturated Africans remained. The distinctive Gullah heritage, that is both social and cultural, makes of the Sea Islands an actual and symbolic African presence, one rich with magico-religious beliefs that ultimately serve as signifying systems. Born from the previously submerged portions of the continental coast after the retreat of the oceans, the islands suggest a place of myth, as well as a new land, even as they share many of its climactic and topographical characteristics with the coast of western Africa.

Furthermore, the dominant ethnic groups that have comprised what is known as the Gullah language and culture of the Sea Island region have been from the Kongo-Angolan area (the term Gullah is thought to have derived from this latter group) and from the Windward coast. Such groups are important historically and symbolically because they were considered the most rebellious, a fact that cannot have been lost on Naylor.

Also important to Naylor’s novel are Gullah beliefs about the spirit world, beliefs that have their origins in African religion. The island represents a world view in which boundaries between animate and inanimate, secular and sacred—even living and dead—are blurred. For African, and especially BaKongo groups, the afterlife was a reality; death was a journey to the spirit world, which, nonetheless, did not constitute a break with life on earth. Therefore, although their world was peopled by both bad and good spirits, ancestral spirits were especially important in the New World and served as guardians of the living.

In dealing with the spirit world in Mama Day, Naylor is careful to differentiate between ghost fear, characterized by the “haint” stories that are so frequently the subject of folktales, and Miranda’s acute listening powers. Miranda’s trickery of Dr. Buzzard, which consists in playing on his ghost fears, is one way of suggesting these different beliefs.

When Miranda’s nighttime search for a narcotic for Bernice brings her close to Dr. Buzzard’s still, offering her “just too good a chance to pass up” (81), she throws her voice into the woods, thereby terrifying Buzzard, who takes up his shotgun against the “haints.”

On the other hand, Miranda’s communication with ancestral voices seems genuine and usually occurs during her solitary walks in the woods or during her clearing of the graves in the family cemetery, activities that reflect with some accuracy African and also Gullah beliefs about the dead. For example, as is customary among BaKongo peoples as well as
Sea Islanders, the dead are buried in the woods. Miranda’s family graves are also in the woods, and are arranged in groups of seven, “old graves, and a little ways off, seven older again. All circled by them live oaks and hanging moss . . .”; the narrator tells us (10). Oaks are also important features of BaKongo beliefs; trees were planted directly on graves in order to guide the spirits on their journeys into the earth. In any event, the burial site is a place of connections to Miranda. While ghost lore has it that spirits make their presence known by way of warm air, Miranda’s connection to the movement of air has more to do with her unusual perception and her ability to listen.

Indeed, this extraordinary ability to see and hear is not always shrouded in mystery. Miranda’s lifelong acquaintance with the woods is, to a large extent, responsible for her impressive knowledge since, when “younger, the whole island was her playground; she’d walk through in a dry winter without snapping a single twig, disappear into the shadow of a summer cottonwood . . .”; so comfortable is she in the woods that “. . . folks started believing John-Paul’s little girl became a spirit in the woods” (79).

Indeed, Miranda’s “reading” ability brings us to the important concept of divination—the ability to read signs—which is not only an important component of African belief systems but is also crucial to the construction of the novel. Naylor suggests that what is often denoted as second sight or precognition is actually an acute awareness of the behavior of plant and animal life. For example, Miranda knows of the coming hurricane, not because of supernatural ability, but because she reads actual signs: the more rapid movement of the waves, the hills the crayfish have made, the nests built further up from the water, the deeper borrows of rabbits, the chickens with their backs to the wind (227).

While Miranda appears to have foreknowledge about arrivals, these abilities are set within a larger context of divination, a practice of great importance to African American religion and textuality.

Henry Louis Gates has made us aware of the pervasive influence on these practices of the West African trickster known in Yoruban culture as Esu Elegbara (5-10). Like the many manifestations of the tricksters in the world, Esu is an archaic and still powerful deity known mostly for his double nature (animal and human, male and female). Associated with roads, especially crossroads, he moves between supposedly opposite worlds, upper and lower, sacred and secular. And, as Hurston puts it, “the way of all things is in his hands” (Tell 128). His phallic character also symbolizes his connectedness, his ubiquitous presence as a mediating figure. His survival of the horrors of the Middle Passage guaranteed the survival of African culture in the New World, albeit in a form in which African discourses would be passed on—in ways not obvious to the oppressor culture.

As Gates demonstrates, the Yoruban Esu is, in his mediating capacity, also closely related to the processes of creation, because it is Esu who reads the language of the gods and translates the language for the people. The Yoruban praise poems, and especially the sacred texts known as Odu Ifa—divination poems—carry within them “the myths of origin of the universe,” but in a coded form which is “lushly metaphorical, ambiguous, and enigmatic” (Gates 10).

Such texts are not written, but have been passed from one generation to the next orally; hence, the divination process is undertaken by means of the configurations of a tray of sixteen palm nuts which are read by Esu and then translated. Gates also makes the interesting point that the Yorubans regard actual written texts as inferior,
being derivative and shadowy when compared to the oral textuality of the Ifa.

Keeping in mind the notion of Esu as the reader or interpreter of the divine text, I would like to suggest some connections among Esu, tricksterism, conjuration, and the activities of Miranda, who also functions as a trickster figure. Indeed, the relationship of Jonah Day and her father John Paul to Esu is suggested by the fact that like Esu—the original seventh son—both Jonah and John Paul are seventh sons and fated to be conjurers. A number of studies attest to lore regarding the seventh son (Bass 381; Herron and Bacon 360), and Naylor makes abundant use of number seven in the novel. Willow Springs occupies 49 square miles, for example, but seven is especially related to the activities of the Days. They own 4,900 acres and have a #7 for their post office box; Cocoa has lived in New York for seven years and has written 77 letters home, etc. Clearly, Miranda has inherited the mantle of tricksterism, as we can see by her constant movement along the roads, by her connection to "the other place," and also by her ability to read signs of the elements. She has also served as the mediating figure of the community, the bridge between the everyday world and the sacred world of her African foremother. We see her mediating qualities especially clearly in her relationship with George—who, as an outsider, has temporarily "crossed over."

Although George is immediately responsive to Willow Springs and can see himself "'staying [t]here forever'" (220), he is also distressed when the bridge is destroyed, and, unable to escape the island, he is forced to deal with the consequences of conjure—although there is no evidence he is even aware of the term. When Dr. Buzzard approaches him after the funeral of Bernice's child, telling him "...we got us a bridge to build" (269), we understand that there is metaphorical bridge building that is needed, between the scientific and the intuitive, the rational and non-rational, the secular and the sacred.

Miranda's need of George is determined by the past events in the lives of the Days, by losses that have been endured, the suffering of the other Day men with broken hearts, and the problem of the binding and releasing of the women, beginning with the ancestral matriarch Sapphira. Despite George's inability to "read" his environment, which gives to his portions of the narrative great dramatic irony, Miranda depends on George's belief in himself, his ability to work with his hands, his resolve to hold on to what he loves, to never let Cocoa go. But George also desires to "hold on to what was real" (291) and craves to feel "those oars between [his] hands" as he fantasizes about rowing Cocoa across the Sound (282-83). Miranda knows that to help Cocoa George must hand over his belief to her ("Of his own accord he had to hand it over to her. She needs his hand in hers—his very hand—so she can connect it up to all the believing that had gone before. ... So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over" [285]).

By placing his hand in Miranda's, by joining the secular with the sacred, the real with the magical, they can save Cocoa. Like many another initiate, he is asked to perform certain tasks which appear to him as the irrational demands of an old woman. Armed only with Miranda's walking stick (a symbol of power) and the ancient ledger which contains within it the partially erased bill of sale (history and knowledge), he is to go to the nest of the brooding hen—the object he most fears—and bring back to Miranda "whatever [he] find[s]" (295). George fails Miranda's riddling test be-
cause his fear and disbelief get the better of him, although, as he battles the enraged hen, he glimpses something of Miranda’s meaning: “Could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands?” (300). While he does save Cocoa because he intuits something about the connection between speech and act, asserting that “. . . these were my hands, and there was no way I was going to let you go” (301), he is unable to make a genuine surrender of belief to Miranda, and hence loses his life.

To understand Miranda’s enigmatic request better, we should perhaps consider the relationship of language to conjure. The Oxford English Dictionary defines conjure in part as follows:

I. to swear together, to conspire . . .
II. to constrain by oath . . .
III. to invoke by supernatural power, to effect by magic or jugglery . . . to call up, constrain (a devil or spirit) to appear or do one’s bidding by the invocation of some sacred name or the use of some spell.

As the above definitions suggest, conjure is never far from oaths, entreaties, invocations—from calling up and spell casting. Nor is language, especially the language of the gods, as the myths of Esu Elegbara show, ever far from “making,” from creation. Thus, the intertextuality that so characterizes not only Naylor’s novel but African American discourse in general is crucially involved in making—difficult enough in and of itself, but in an alien world not to be accomplished without special “signifyin(g)” power.14

The stories needed for survival were dependent on a knowledge not only of African traditions but also of New World discourses, against which the African American, through the metaphor of Esu the trickster, could acquire knowledge and power. For the violently displaced African who arrived in the New World without family, kinship system, or cultural group, survival depended on the trickster who had accompanied them on the Middle Passage and could supply the stories that could re-create their world.

Thus, within Mama Day are a number of texts that are incomplete, like the bill of sale, or other texts which depend on signifyin(g) practices to subvert the discourses of the oppressor. For example, we as readers are offered more textual information than Miranda herself is privy to regarding Sapphira’s bill of sale. We know her name. We know that she was sold at age 20 to Bascombe Wade in 1819. We are told that she was “inflicted with sullenness,” that she “resisted under reasonable chastisement the performance of field or domestic labor,” and that she delved “in[to] witchcraft.” We can also infer that she was sold because, like other powerful Africans, she had successfully resisted enslavement. The citizens of Willow Springs lack this bill of sale and her name, but what they do have is the date on which Bascombe Wade ceded the land to Sapphira, the land which in turn became their own. That year—1823—replaces her name but circulates within the signifying practices of the island as a power-making word. Thus when the islanders speak of girls with their “18 and 23’s coming down,” or boys breathing “18 & 23” or the ability of some to “18 and 23” outsiders, they are speaking conjure power.15

Besides the incomplete bill of sale and the dated deeds belonging to the residents of Willow Springs, we are offered yet another text—the genealogy of the Days. This tracing of the generations is particularly suggestive because of the text it signifies against, appropriating and transforming the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and Shakespeare as well.

Especially notable in terms of conjure power are the names of the Days. The first generation is named after figures in the Old Testament.16 It is interesting to note that, historically, once slaves became familiar with Bible narratives they preferred only certain
names—names of leaders such as Moses, or names of kings such as David. Clearly the slaves saw a relationship between the name and the destiny of their offspring, for they never named a son Samson or a daughter Bathsheba (Cody 588-89). However, the names of the first generation of Day men are neither leaders nor kings, but prophets: Elisha, Elijah, Amos, Joel, Joshua, and Jonah, suggesting instead of kingship their connection to conjure. The second generation of Days were given the names of the New Testament apostles.17

"Reading" the significance of the daughters is more problematic, but Miranda’s name (which means ‘worker of wonders’) suggests Shakespeare’s Tempest with a radical rewriting of the father-daughter relationship. Ophelia’s name also has Shakespearian associations, especially in view of the fact that the grandmother, also named Ophelia, has gone mad and committed suicide by drowning.18 On the other hand, Cocoa—named Ophelia—is the child of Grace and claims another etymological heritage, since Ophelia has as its root word ‘snake,’ emblem of the conjure power of Aaron and Moses and an image central to the religion of voudun as practiced in New Orleans and Haiti.19 Abigail’s name seems fitting for her more orthodox Protestantism, as do the names of her children—Peace, Grace, and Hope. Yet even these serve to designate conditions, destinies either lost or found—although for the generation after Abigail all have been lost, and “peace” has not yet been regained in the present generation. Loss occasioned by the death of Abigail’s sister Peace in infancy is not to be recovered by the offer of Abigail’s own child (in terms of name) to the spirit of her deceased mother, for the second Peace also perishes, as do Hope and Grace. While Grace also dies young, the child of Grace—Ophelia—becomes the hope of the Days and the bringer of peace.

But Naylor seems to have more in mind in her textual rendering of this universe with its echoes of the Bible, for besides the stories of prophets—those many men of conjure—there are other Biblical narratives important to the Days—namely, the Genesis creation myth and the story of Moses. There is little obvious evidence in the novel of this kind of mythic material; however, the enigmatic inscription found at the bottom of the genealogy chart, asterisked (to explain Jonah’s being given a last name) and placed within quotation marks reads, “ ‘God rested on the seventh day and so would she.’ ” This explanation of the family’s name doesn’t really clarify much. Certainly there is an echo of Genesis and a word play where “resting on the seventh day” comes to have a second meaning. Sapphira is likened, through this text, to the god who is a maker of creation in six days, but whereas the god of Genesis doesn’t use the seventh day for creation, Sapphira does, making out of the words seventh day another creative event—a special son, wrought of body and word. The "hoodoo" version of creation—"six days of magic spells and mighty words and the world with its elements above and below was made"—suggests the important role of conjure to the African version of the creation myth, especially since, according to Hurston, “the way we tell it, hoodoo started way back before everything” (Mules 193).

However, the hoodoo version doesn’t end with God’s making the world in six days, but includes stories of Moses, because, as Hurston puts it, “many a man thinks he is making something when he’s only changing things around. But God let Moses make” (Mules 194). While it is common knowledge that Moses, as liberator of the Israelites from Egypt, is an especially important figure for
African Americans, what is perhaps less known is the connection of Moses to hoodoo. Again, Hurston’s version of the story is important: While man was anxious “to catch God working with His hands” in order to find out his secrets, only Moses “learned God’s power-compelling words.”20 However, although Moses “could carry power” and was given “His rod for a present,” he needed the knowledge of Jethro, his father-in-law and a true hoodoo man (Mules 194). Important to these myths is the activity of making and the metonym of hands.

As previously mentioned, Miranda remarks frequently about hands and their power, not only in relation to the instructions that she gives to George, but in relation to her own gifts and those of all the Day men. However, the subject of hands also appears in the single fragment of myth we are given, the story of the origins of Willow Springs, which goes as follows:

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 here, Lord,” she said, “I ain’t got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light.” (110)

What is rendered as fanciful story here is acted out in the ritual of Candle Walk which, although half-forgotten and misunderstood, still carries on the Willow Springs text of creation. Observed on the 22nd of December, the time of the midwinter solstice, Candle Walk suggests a recognition of the fact that this longest night of the year also marks the beginning of the return of the sun from its lowest zenith, a rebirth that correlates with the rebirth of the terrestrial world. Thus, the ritual gestures that make up Candle Walk suggest a conjoining of cosmic and terrestrial: The candles car-
has been recalled and retold. Thus, when Miranda wonders if Cocoa will have a child to "keep the Days going," she seems to suggest that this "child of Grace" not only represents the line of the Days, but the very cosmos that is Willow Springs as it exists in both sacred and secular time (39).

For the African or African American story of origins, Esu performs an important mediating function. Although many trickster figures are only mediators within the secular world, Esu operates as a mediator between the secular and the sacred (Badejo 4). This trickster presence is a necessary one for Naylor's restitution of the text of conjure, not only because he adds another side to the story, but because he also adds another world, and hence a different kind of narrative. Thus Naylor's text, the story of the conjure woman, is also the story of "the beginning of the Days," a story that includes a goddess who must be recovered—as Sapphira will be recovered by Cocoa. It is also the story of the spirit of Africa that has traveled to the New World on wind and water. It affirms the staying power of the oral tradition, and although it is written down, it still must be "heard"; although listened to in the way the communal voice has demanded ("... listen. Really listen this time" [10]), it must also be "read" in Esu's way, must be accompanied by a knowledge that includes the ongoing processes of seeing, hearing, and making.

Notes

1. This point is debatable. In his recent discussion of women and conjure, Houston Baker argues that, while Chesnutt uses Aunt Peggy "to influence the economy of [Uncle Julius'] situation," the stories actually "project the veritable control of a plantation by the conjure woman's ministrations" (78).

2. See especially Zora Neale Hurston's 1935 work Mules and Men, which recounts her anthropological study of hoodoo, including her own initiations into its mysteries, undertaken with the grandson of Marie Laveau, Luke Turner.

3. Of these, the Report of the Lords of the Committee of the Council appointed for the consideration of all matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantation (1789), authored by Edward Long; The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies (1801), by the well-known historian of Jamaica Bryan Edwards; and John Stewart's A View of Jamaica (1832), all see the conjurer as pagan, evil, and often linked to slave rebellions.

4. Puckett mentions hearing that Laveau's funeral was attended by a "large number of superstitious Negroes," and recounts another source as saying she was afraid of snakes. He concludes that "so great has been the web of fancy woven around this unique character that an original painting of her, which an antique dealer could not sell for $2 just after death, is now worth over $250" (180).

5. The numerous references to the darkness of skin suggests, at least to me, that these conjurers may have been more recently arrived Africans or perhaps the least acculturated.

6. Creel mentions one early account in which the observer speaks of such an elder, "Maum Katie, an old African woman who remembers worshipping her own gods in Africa... . She is bright and talkative, a great 'spiritual mother,' a fortune-teller, or rather prophetess, and a woman of tremendous influence over her spiritual children" (291).

7. This and other remarks like his disparagement of Wheatley's accomplishments as a writer suggest Chesnutt's tendency to link inferiority not only to what is African, but also to what is female.

8. The most notable of these is Harry Middleton Hyatt's Hoodoo—Conjuration—Witchcraft—Rootwork, a five-volume compendium of field work on conjurers, spells, and cures.

9. It has been argued that, in the case of New Orleans voodoo practitioners, the great voodoo queens of the nineteenth century who practiced a religion were replaced by male hoodoo doctors, suggesting that the loss of the religion resulted in the loss of power for women, while "male dominance of the world of hoodoo" was secured by the 1940s (Mulira 56).

10. Although in 1798 the Georgia Constitution prohibited slave importation (the United States followed in 1808), slaves from Africa continued to arrive on the Sea Islands well into the 1850s. Since
the mainland had less use for slaves at this point, and preferred the more acculturated blacks anyway, many of these late arrivals remained on the islands (Jones-Jackson 9).

11. BaKongo cosmology was complex and represented existence in terms of "four moments of the sun" which, in turn, correlated with the life cycles of beings on Earth. These were, according to Creel, birth, ascendance, setting (death and transformation), and fourth, "Midnight, indicating existence in the other world and eventual rebirth" (Creel 52-53).

12. Jones-Jackson observes that, even when islanders die away from the islands, their relatives make every effort to have them returned for burial, reflecting a view that is held among the Igbo, Yoruba, and other Nigerians, who "believe without question that the dead are dependent on their ancestors for spiritual nourishment and thus must be buried among them to find peace" (26).

13. Deeply wooded areas are thought by the Gullahs to be sacred because the spirits of the ancestors reside there (Jones-Jackson 27).

14. Gates argues that signify(in)g is the "black trope of tropes," suggesting a double-voiced speech act in which black signification is forced to operate within the signifying practices of white discourse acts, in Bakhtin's words, by "inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has—and retains—its own orientation." Signify(in)g is then, "repetition with a . . . difference," and the (g) represents the trace of black difference (50-51).

15. Naylor's choice of year is interesting. The number 23 is magical, but perhaps an historical event, namely the Denmark Vesey slave revolt which occurred in the Carolinas in 1822, had some bearing on her choice of year. Vesey, a free and literate black, was influenced, like other leaders of revolts (Turner and Gabriel, for example), by the telling analogues of the Bible, but unlike other leaders, Vesey did not disparage the usefulness of black folk beliefs and had, as his second-in-command, a man named Gullah Jack, an Angola-born Sea Islander and conjure man (Levine 75-77). Although the revolt was suppressed and Vesey killed, we could infer that Sapphira's own 1823 victory over Basecombe Wade was influenced by these events. In any case, 1823 may mark, for some Sea Islanders, a new beginning.

16. Cody notes that slave names did not reflect Biblical influences until the 1830s, when efforts to convert slaves were initiated (589).

17. John-Paul's name is the only doubled one. He has taken on the name of a brother who died. However, Hurston notes an association of John the Baptist with Esu (Tell 129).

18. Erickson argues that, instead of a "newly empowered Caliban, . . . Naylor's subversive strategy is to create a black female equivalent to Prospero" (141), thereby breaking the literary linkage to Shakespeare and his creation of subservient daughters.

19. Hurston, in an attempt to demystify Haitian serpent worship, argues that the serpent is a "signature" of the deity Damballah (another name for Moses) whose rod was serpent-like and symbolized conjure power.

20. Hurston says that hoodoo lore has it that it was the snake living "in a hole right under God's foot-rest" that told Moses "God's fire-making words" (Mules 194).

21. Hurston records a similar candle ceremony in Jamaica associated the Pocomania rituals. Essentially lighted candles are "to attract the spirits" (Tell 4). Hyatt also mentions that the white candles stand for peace (2:799).


