Duality of the Post-Civil War Conjure Woman in Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Balm: A Novel*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the duality of the Black woman conjurer in Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Balm: A Novel* (2015) and shows how the protagonist's migration from the South to post-Emancipation Chicago reshapes her identity and practice. Drawing on Black feminist literary criticism and the cultural history of Hoodoo, the analysis demonstrates how the novel portrays the conjurer as both a bearer of African-based spiritual tradition and a modern figure navigating dislocation and transformation. While the narrative affirms Hoodoo's historical adaptability, it distinguishes Madge from both traditional "swampers," who strictly preserve the old ways, and urban exploiters associated with the snake-oil industry. Madge retains the spiritual core of conjure while modifying its practice to suit new cultural demands, such as addressing the psychological health of post–Civil War victims. Her dual positioning reflects a reconstruction of the conjure woman as a progressive figure who embodies cultural memory, mobility, and autonomy within a changing post-Civil War landscape.

Keywords: African American literature; conjure; healing tradition; African American women writers; Black feminist criticism; Hoodoo

INTRODUCTION

Despite the oppressive conditions on slave plantations, conjure emerged as a vital spiritual tradition that sustained the well-being of enslaved Africans. It offered protection against physical and psychological violence and functioned as a means of everyday resistance (Martin, 2023, p. 52; Mellis, 2019, p. 3). Africans from different tribal backgrounds turned to conjure as a collective strategy for survival and relied on ritual knowledge and spiritual authority within their communities. The belief in its power gave many the strength to pursue escape, rebellion, and sabotage (Chireau, 2008, p. 4). Conjurers—respected Hoodoo practitioners—held positions as spiritual leaders and healers. After Emancipation, however, their status declined due to Eurocentric narratives that aimed to discredit them. Historical and ethnographic accounts often distorted the conjurer figure, especially women, and reduced them to "sinister, but almost always baffling" caricatures (Tucker, 1994, p. 175). These misrepresentations worked to strip conjurers of legitimacy, and African American writers later responded by reclaiming and reshaping the figure through literature.

Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman and Other Tales* responds to the denigration of conjurers and has inspired later fictional portrayals, particularly by women writers. While Chesnutt sometimes shows conjure backfiring on its users, his stories often employ "Afrocentric modalities

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of signification" to counter Eurocentric ideology (Hanshaw, 2008, p. 49). His approach contrasts with that of writers in the early 1980s, whose work focuses on "positive representations of conjure women [that] appeared in the black literary canon" (Saber, 2018, p. 380). Authors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, and Arthur Flowers shifted toward more affirming portrayals, honouring female conjurers as former community leaders in slave societies. Rather than revisiting historical figures like Marie Laveau and Tituba, Black women writers began creating conjurers of their own (Saber, 2018, p. 380). This shift reflects a trend in 1970s African American writing to adapt "material and expressive forms of folklore to transgress boundaries and devise an aesthetic" (Billingslea-Brown, 1999, p. 2), including reimagining conjure figures and their healing power.

The reimagining of the conjure woman in fiction is strongly supported by Black feminist literary criticism, which views African-based spirituality as central to African American women's cultural and intellectual expression. Toni Morrison, for instance, sees her work as emerging from this heritage, shaped by ancestral memory and collective history (Morrison, 2008, pp. 56–64). Within this framework, the conjure woman is often portrayed as a vessel of embodied knowledge, grounded in lived experience and ancestral wisdom that resists reductive or stereotypical portrayals. Kameelah L. Brooks, Martin, and Simmons (2021) argue that these figures belong to a wider tradition of Black women's knowledge, passed through generations of rootworkers, midwives, and healers. As Martin (2025) notes, "one sees the dissemination of knowledge about a range of women's work, childrearing, and cultural intelligence between women's acts of telling," including practices such as healing wounds, caring for gestating bodies, and understanding spiritual or supernatural forces (p. 225). Following this, critics have shown that African American fiction uses conjuring to contrast African and Western worldviews and to illustrate the fluid, dynamic subjectivity of Black women. Through the theory of conjure feminism, Martin argues that writers like Pauline Hopkins, Toni Cade Bambara, and Toni Morrison reassert this lineage (p.244). In their work, conjuring functions as a mode of reclaiming Black women's subjectivity beyond tropes such as the wicked conjure woman, the mammy, or the jezebel.

Drawing on these insights from Black feminist literary criticism, this article examines Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Balm: A Novel* (2015; henceforth *Balm*) as a further development in the literary portrayal of the Black female conjurer. While the novel extends the repertoire of the author in historical fiction of the South, it more significantly aligns her with writers of conjuring fiction who challenge the marginalisation of African-based healing practices and honour its practitioners, healers and conjurers alike. The narrative, however, adopts a different strategy than previous stories by situating the youngest black female in this family of conjurers as a central character, who is caught between the shifting dynamics of the post-Emancipation South and the historic migration to the northern part of the United States. As this conjurer journeys North, she distances herself from her conjuring family and community in Tennessee. This sense of uprootedness causes the strength of the conjurer revival project in *Balm* to wane, with her triumphs in the healing practice overshadowed by her strained relationship with her family.

As a healer from Tennessee, Madge reflects the continuation of Hoodoo after the Civil War, but her disconnection from family and her relocation during the migration period complicate this role. Her portrayal raises questions about her identity as a conjure woman: Does she reflect the revivalist spirit found in earlier portrayals by African American women writers? Can she be considered a conjurer without the communal validation typically associated with spiritual leadership? While her separation from cultural roots might appear to weaken the novel's alignment with past literary depictions, such a view overlooks the broader historical contexts in which conjure evolved. *Balm* does not simply reproduce earlier representations; instead, it redefines the conjure

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woman's role. Although relocation limits her regional functions, it extends her significance nationally. Unlike figures such as Naylor's Mama Day or the more ominous conjurer in Kara Walker's *Night Conjure* (2001), Madge does not possess communal authority or access to the Southern landscape. Still, she remains committed to Hoodoo spirituality and adopts ingredients from contemporary sources. Her methods respond to post-war psychological trauma and place her between traditional and modern spheres. This article argues that Madge's dual role challenges stereotype and avoids reductive categorisation.

This article focuses on Madge, the protagonist of the novel, who inherits her conjuring knowledge from her maternal aunts, Southern conjure women who are also the source of her alienation and emotional pain. The novel opens with a recounting of Madge's origins in Tennessee, where she is born out of wedlock and rejected by her maternal relatives. Her aunts, bitter over their sister Sarah Lou's relationship with a freedman, Frederick Kingsley, reject both him and Madge. They do not offer care or affection but instead treat Madge with hostility because of their resentment toward men. After arriving in Chicago, Madge performs magic tricks to earn money before working as a maid for a white spiritualist named Sadie. Despite her traumatic past and separation from her Southern roots, Madge continues to develop her conjuring skills on her own. Life in Chicago threatens the survival of her practice, but her belief, skill, and adaptability allow her to persevere.

Given this context, *Balm* does not depict the protagonist as merely an ordinary healer, nor does the novel distort the image of the conjurer despite the loss of communal reverence and purpose. Instead, she retains both fundamental knowledge of the tradition and a connection to supernatural forces, while also reshaping her healing practice to suit the urban environment. Informed by Black feminist literary criticism, particularly its treatment of conjure figures as culturally significant and intellectually complex, this article examines how *Balm* repositions the figure of the conjure woman within a narrative shaped by migration, familial detachment, and the shifting cultural realities of the post-Emancipation era. It argues that *Balm* presents a progressive view of the conjurer trope that sets her apart from literary predecessors. This distinction does not imply a break from the African American women's literary canon, nor does it suggest a complete departure from cultural tradition. Rather, it highlights *Balm* as a literary project that captures the duality of the female conjurer, who remains rooted in tradition while also shaped by historical change. In this sense, the conjurer's adaptability becomes the "conjuring moment" that Martin identifies in African American women's writing – a moment where spiritual knowledge is preserved through creative expression (p. 243).

LITERATURE REVIEW

CONJURERS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Earlier scholars often viewed African American slave narratives as portraying conjure unfavourably. However, more recent studies highlight subtle forms of resistance through African religious elements embedded in these texts. Scholars have paid particular attention to Charles Chesnutt's plantation fiction as a site where this strategy appears. Christopher Lewis (2018) offers a two-part argument, showing how *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* occasionally "waver in their investments in [religious] normativity" (p. 115). In these moments, "nostalgic affirmations of African religious expressions" surface, even though both authors explicitly "disavowed" such traditions (p. 115). While rare,

these affirmations remain "palpable and powerful" and illustrate how conjure disrupts the texts' dominant "vision of freedom," shaped by white religious expectations, patriarchy, and normative sexuality (p. 117).

Chesnutt's fiction and the scholarship surrounding it provide various insights that establish dynamic conversations about the representation of the conjure women. Some might argue that Chesnutt's treatment of the conjure women denies the conjurers in his stories a "textual presence of any serious import" (Tucker, 1994, p. 174). However, others would counter that *The Conjure Women* grants "a safe space for the conjure woman and oral conjure tales to exist in the print culture of African Americans in a more reverent, valued, and culturally specific creative form" (Martin, 2012, p. 66). It is not surprising that opinions about *The Conjure Women* are divided, the fiction reflects both reverence and scepticism towards the figure. In some cases, the ambiguity of their portrayal lies in the dual nature of their power – both strong and limited. Ian Green (2022) highlights this in his work, which notes that Aunt Peggy and Tenie are significant conjure figures who represent "both full of potential resistance and laden with tragic limitation" (Green, 2022, p. 99).

In 1970s and 1980s African American fiction, the conjure woman is not only accepted but celebrated as a symbol of agency and resistance in the works of prominent writers like Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Cade Bambara. Lindsay Tucker (1994) argues that Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) attempts to revive the image of conjure women, who have historically existed "on the margins of folklore and ethnography" (p. 174) by placing greater emphasis on the significance of Miranda Day, thus repositions the figure within the narrative to the centre. The elements of the story ensure that "the consciousness of Mama Day comes through when it is important to do so" (Tucker, 1994, p. 175). In addition, Daphne Lamothe (2005) also acknowledges that Naylor uses the conjuring figure, Sapphira Wade, to articulate the influence of conjurers in the preservation of African heritage and the resistance of modernity (Lamothe, 2005). More recently, Kameelah L. Martin's seminal work, *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and Other Such Hoodoo* (2012), assumes significant importance in highlighting works that integrate conjure as an expression of resistance. When invoked, Martin (2012) argues, the works revive their status as a spiritual leader and thus, challenges "the dominant culture's ideas of what women immersed in supernatural acts should look like" (p. 71). She argues that the presence of the conjure woman in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Arthur Flower's *Another Good Loving Blues*, and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, though at times seem elusive, counters negative stereotypical and one-dimensional African womanhood of female conjurers (p.71).

Contemporary scholars continue to explore a more nuanced perspective that reveals the subjectivity of a conjure woman in fiction either through resistance or in political defiance. Highlighting the poisoning trope, Yomna Saber (2018) argues that Ruby's expertise in poisoning and "harming" practices challenge the binary of good versus evil. Saber (2018) views these actions "as a creative act" that enables the conjurer to be perceived as a figure who "responds to and challenges stereotypes" (p. 382) that might otherwise reduce her to a ridiculed portrayal. Meanwhile, Lindsey Stewart (2021) argues that, as part of the larger conjuring community, granny midwives' refusal to give up their conjure-based practices and adopt state-approved methods has broader political implications that extend beyond the usual forms of resistance seen on slave plantations. Stewart emphasises that the refusal to conform to state-sanctioned practices in midwifery and medicine reflects a broader rejection of cultural assimilation into the dominant narrative. Drawing on Toni Morrison's Paradise, she notes, "Lone's embrace of rootwork in her

midwifery practices refuses Consolata's abjection of rootwork (and diasporic blackness, given Consolata's Brazilian heritage) as evil and sinful" (Stewart, 2021, p. 477).

Much of the critical focus has centred on either the suppression and partial recovery of African spiritual traditions or on celebrating conjure women as figures of resistance and cultural memory. This article builds on those foundations by turning to Perkins-Valdez's *Balm*, which portrays a conjure woman shaped not just by ancestral ties but also by personal detachment and historical change. By examining this duality, *Balm* expands the literary tradition of the conjure woman to account for modern expressions of survival, dislocation, and spiritual reinvention.

METHODOLOGY

This article examines the dual role of the female conjurer by combining Black feminist literary criticism with cultural histories of African American conjuring traditions. Black feminist criticism offers a framework for understanding how African spiritual practices, such as conjure, inform representations of subjectivity, resistance, and cultural memory in African American women's fiction. Cultural history, particularly works on Hoodoo and post-Emancipation healing practices, provides insight into the evolution of conjurers and the shifting meanings of their roles. This methodological approach supports a qualitative, interpretive analysis of *Balm*, focusing on the protagonist, Madge. Close readings of key scenes reveal how she adapts the conjuring tradition to her new environment, while maintaining a connection to ancestral knowledge. The analysis also considers Madge's relationship with her aunts and the white spiritualist, Sadie, to establish her elevated spiritual role. Additionally, her encounter with the apothecarist is examined as evidence of her deliberate approach to healing, which distinguishes her from commercialised urban practitioners.

BLACK FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM AND AFRICAN-BASED SPIRITUAL TRADITION

This article adopts an interpretive approach grounded in Black feminist literary criticism, particularly its recognition of African spiritual traditions, as central to African American women's fiction. Black feminist scholars have long argued that these traditions, such as Hoodoo and ancestral cosmologies, shape how Black women writers express resistance to Western epistemologies. For example, Barbara Christian (1999) proposes that African cosmology itself can serve as a critical framework, stating that "it would seem logical for us to consider how African belief systems might illuminate" works like Beloved (p. 8). In addition, La Vinia Delois Jennings (2008) supports this, arguing that Toni Morrison's fiction "dusts off the survivals of West and Central African civilizations" (p. 2). These scholars collectively demonstrate that African American women's fiction encodes African spiritual knowledge as a way of reclaiming identity, resisting cultural erasure, and redefining literary tradition.

Shifting from a broader view of conjure as a cultural and spiritual system, recent scholarship has turned its attention specifically to the figure of the conjure woman and her literary and political significance within Black womanhood. Kameelah L. Martin (2012) offers a focused study on conjure women that highlights their capacity to express subjectivity, cultural memory, and resistance. She defines the conjurer as "an umbrella term that encompasses the individual vocations of root worker, fortune-teller, midwife, herbalist, two-head doctor, spiritual medium, persons born with second sight, and others who are gifted with verbal and/or visual communication

with the invisible world" (p. 2). More importantly, Martin positions the conjure woman as a literary archetype with agency, describing her as "one of the most adept agents of mobility, resistance, and self-determination in the realm of African American womanhood, thereby expanding the narrow view of African American women and African-based spirituality in the academy" (p. 2). This framing is crucial for understanding how *Balm* recasts Madge not only as a healer, but as a mobile and autonomous figure navigating a rapidly changing post-Emancipation world.

The term duality, as used in this article, is not drawn directly from conjure feminism or Black feminist theory but arises from the text's portrayal of the protagonist. It is particularly useful in describing her role as both a spiritual healer and a professional figure in an urban setting, reflecting a practice that integrates ancestral root work with a modern medicinal approach. This dual role presents her as both traditional and progressive, a reading that aligns with Black feminist thought, which views Black women's identities as fluid, negotiated, and shaped by layered histories. Duality, in this context, helps distinguish the protagonist's public function as a conjurer from the complexity of her personal experiences, including familial tensions and romantic longing.

THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CONJURERS AND CONJURING TRADITION

Given that Black feminist literary criticism recognises African spiritual traditions as central to African American women's fiction, this article treats Hoodoo not merely as symbolism, but as a living, adaptive system of belief. Within this system, conjure functions as an embodied form of healing and spiritual knowledge – one that African American writers often foreground to represent cultural continuity. In *Balm*, the conjurer reflects this evolving tradition in the context of post-Emancipation migration to the urban North. Therefore, Katrina Hazzard-Donald's *Mojo Workin'* (2012) offers a vital cultural history of this transformation, tracing Hoodoo's lineage from African cosmologies through Southern plantations to Northern cities. This evolution, she argues, occurred gradually and deliberately, with practitioners modifying rituals and healing practices while preserving core spiritual values (p. 45). *Mojo Workin'* is also useful for the analysis because it documents the different roles the conjurer has held throughout history. These include spiritual leader, healer, psychological guide, and cultural authority, all of which evolved in response to the shifting social and geographical conditions from slavery to post-Emancipation migration.

Hazzard-Donald's work not only outlines the traditional role of conjure on slave plantations but also traces its transformation in response to geographical and cultural shifts after Emancipation. As conjurers relocated to urban centres in the North, Hoodoo practices adapted gradually across generations, shaped by new environmental and social realities (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 45). These changes affected core aspects of healing, including access to materials, shifts in spiritual emphasis, and the emergence of commercial suppliers. From this process, two dominant conjure types emerged—one grounded in inherited tradition, the other shaped by modern demands. Reading *Balm* through this cultural history reveals that its conjurer does not fit neatly into either category but instead reflects a hybrid form that blends ancestral knowledge with adaptive strategies for survival in a new context.

Firstly, recognising the conjurer's role in addressing psychological and emotional trauma is key to understanding her broader cultural significance. In *Balm*, Madge's healing balm for emotional wounds after the Civil War reflects this enduring function. Historically, conjurers have served as both physical healers and sources of emotional support. Mbiti (1970) describes medicine-men as "friends, pastors, psychiatrists, and doctors" (p. 223), while Hazzard-Donald (2012) refers to the conjurer as a "comforter, spiritual leader, [and] protector," who offers hope beyond the

master's control (p. 59). Charles Long (2014) highlights their sensitivity to emotional dynamics (p. 44), while Wood-House (2021) emphasises their role in providing psychological guidance and coping strategies (p. 140). This continuity reinforces Madge's role in the novel as a modern conjurer who preserves this psychosocial dimension while navigating the changing conditions of a post-Emancipation society.

Moreover, Madge's role in *Balm* reflects a strong connection to a higher power, a trait often linked to conjurers and spiritual leaders in traditional African religions. Before Emancipation, conjurers were revered in African societies as "embodied spiritual power" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 59), and healing was inseparable from belief in the spirit world. Their religious worldview saw healing and spirituality as "thoroughly comingled," where the most skilled healers were often also spiritual leaders (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 51). Only those with such spiritual authority could prepare an authentic mojo bag and instruct clients in its use (p. 107). Their ability to restore order without violence made them "heroic" figures (Saber, 2018, p. 377). After Emancipation, however, many conjurers became distanced from the supernatural as their communal role declined. This marked a shift, but not an erasure, of the practice.

In addition, understanding Madge's relationship with her maternal aunts means recognising the conjure woman as a cultural bearer whose historical role has shaped her depiction in African American fiction. Conjurers, particularly women, played a vital role in preserving and sustaining Hoodoo. Conjure was often passed down through families as a way to protect spiritual knowledge and maintain its integrity. Lindsay Tucker (1994) explains that "the conjure man or woman inherits his/her aptitude and the mantle of power, along with an expertise in herbal medicines" (p. 176). These practitioners also safeguarded the transmission of the tradition to future generations, ensuring that its spiritual essence remained intact (Hazzard-Donald, 2012). In the United States, conjure women frequently held revered positions in their communities, often known as "Mother," and were described as possessing psychic abilities or "second sight" (Tucker, 1994, p. 176).

Although rooted in preservation, conjure has long relied on transformation to survive across changing environments. On slave plantations, conjurers had the authority to adapt "Hoodoo procedures, paraphernalia, ritual objects, ceremonial content, and decorum" to meet the needs of enslaved life (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 62). These changes were often guided by "rational decision using age-old principles to modify religious conventions" (p. 49). Hoodoo endured the Middle Passage and slavery due to its "high level of adaptability" (p. 54), evolving to meet physical, emotional, and spiritual needs (Fett, 2002, p. 85). This adaptability continued during migration to urban centres such as Chicago and Detroit, where Black cultural knowledge was carried and exchanged (Mitchem, 2007, p. 54). These movements enabled "regional cultural variations" to "cross-fertilize" and spread "locally potent customs" across a newly emancipated population (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, pp. 84–85). Yet, some practitioners resisted modernisation. Elder conjurers, or "swampers," refused to rely on commercial substitutes and continued to gather their own materials, guarding the tradition against exploitation by the "snake-oil" industry (p. 103). Regardless of this effort, the traditional practice was at certain points compromised, as the "true keepers and practitioners" from the rural South "were overwhelmed in the deluge of oppositional and undermining forces" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 98). As more practitioners emerged in these cities, they found it increasingly difficult to obtain the same ingredients that had successfully sustained the tradition in the South. Some of the practitioners sought for modern suppliers and began to use "commercially produced supplies" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 98). However, the primary threat of the tradition in the cities came from exploiters and imitators that produced "quasi

rendering of the tradition" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 110), a problem spurred by using commercial supplies that contributed to the rise of the "snake-oil" industry, thus, devoid of the spiritual powers embedded within the traditional practice.

This cultural history is essential to the reading of *Balm* because it highlights how the novel positions Madge between two contrasting figures within the conjure tradition: the swampers and the snake-oil practitioners. Unlike swampers, who strictly preserved traditional methods and resisted the use of commercial ingredients, Madge modifies her healing practice to meet the needs of her new urban environment. At the same time, she does not align with the exploitative figures of the snake-oil industry, who diluted Hoodoo for profit and stripped it of its spiritual meaning. Instead, Madge draws from ancestral knowledge while adapting it thoughtfully and purposefully. Her practice reflects a balance between innovation and integrity, suggesting that transformation does not have to result in loss.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

MAPPING THE CONJURER'S CONNECTION TO TRADITIONAL HOODOO RELIGION

Against the intricate historical and cultural backdrop of Black conjure in the United States, *Balm* suggests that its continuation is not contingent on a conjurer's connection to their original community. Rather, it relies on her ability to adapt and ensure the survival and relevance of conjuring in the urban North. The novel evokes a period of significant demographic change, where cities like Chicago became sites of cultural convergence. This context encouraged not only the cross-fertilisation of herbal knowledge but also exposed conjure to commercial exploitation. As Hazzard-Donald (2012) notes, the rise of the "snake-oil Hoodoo industry" promoted inauthentic practices that commodified and distorted traditional conjure (p. 103). This exploitation threatened the survival of the authentic Hoodoo practices and made them vulnerable to negative stereotypes and public disapproval. By situating Madge within this context, the novel presents her as a conjure woman who becomes an agent of transformation in the face of factors that threaten to obliterate the old forms and structures of this tradition. In doing so, she adopts a methodology distinct from those exploited by the snake-oil industry.

Madge's alienation by her Southern family diminishes her communal role in the South but as the narrative develops, other qualities emerge and elevate her to the status of a community healer in Chicago. While the South would have rendered her invisible and denied her of recognition for her expertise, being in Chicago emphasises her devotion to the Great Spirit and the spirit world, enhances her diagnostic skills, and her ability to merge traditional methods with modern supplies to adapt the healing practice into the postwar environment. These opposing elements – tradition and innovation – work together to portray a conjurer who is not merely as an agent of cultural transfer, but more so, a progressive healer committed to transforming the African traditional healing practices without compromising the authenticity of conjure. As a believer to a higher power, Madge is attuned to the relationship between the spirit world and healing plants. Her refusal to compromise this principle is evident in her faith in the presence of spirits but can also be seen in her resistance to communicate with the dead, which she views as a violation of her understanding in the supernatural world. Yet she also recognises the value of modern supplies in creating a new healing balm for postwar ailments. Unlike urban marketeers who exploit such traditions for profits, her innovation remains rooted in her genuine commitment to preserve Hoodoo principles of healing and spirituality. This part of the complex history of conjure tradition

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in the North and distinguishes traditional conjurers from their urban counterparts. In particular, the threat posed by imitators further delineates Madge's authenticity and shapes the duality of the conjurer in *Balm*. These nuances are crucial in characterising Madge as a progressive healer who defies easy categorisations.

The novel invokes the Great Spirit as a higher spiritual influence and the image of the three sisters to highlight the contrast between ordinary healers and a skilled conjurer, like Madge. This juxtaposition is important because it enhances Madge's identity as a conjurer with a connection to the spirit world, a principle encapsulated in Hoodoo tradition. This distinction foreshadows her potential to evolve into a "two-headed doctor," a role that aptly characterises Madge since "the Great Spirit itself anointed her with the knowledge tucked inside her head..." (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 44). Meanwhile, the three sisters resist such a role and refuse "to tread more determinedly into God's realm and declare themselves two-headed doctors" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 27). As a result, they are not able "to see the invisible" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 45), which includes diagnosing internal imbalances. Thus, the sisters lack qualities of spiritual leaders, though they uphold the core principle of Hoodoo tradition in safeguarding the tradition by passing down their knowledge to Madge.

Furthermore, the three sisters do not have the vision nor possess the skills to adapt healing methods with ingredients. They are, in fact, ordinary healers who replicate rather than innovate. After the sisters lost their mother, they earned acknowledgment and respect for their expertise within their small community for their ability to heal physical ailments, yet they depend on memorised formulas rather than diagnostic insight. Although their "teas and poultices, tonics and ointments had value," they "struggled with pronouncements" and were treated "like shamans around town" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 27). The use of "pronouncements" here refers not only to the act of diagnosing illness but also gestures toward a deeper spiritual or intuitive authority that the sisters lack. Their inability to make pronouncements symbolises their disconnection from the spiritual depth and interpretive skill traditionally associated with conjure women. It positions them as passive custodians of fixed knowledge rather than dynamic interpreters of evolving needs. Their reliance on rote memory, while effective in treating familiar conditions, suggests a reluctance to confront the new afflictions and emotional traumas that surfaced in the post-Civil War era.

On the contrary, Madge demonstrates a far more advanced level of conjuring knowledge, proficiency, and assertion, as a result of her embracing the opportunity to deeply learn about conjure. Madge's diagnostic skills further distinguish her from the three sisters as she can confidently "pronounce" the nature of diseases once identified—whether "malaria, dysentery, miasmatic or otherwise" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 44). This ability was never fully realised in Tennessee, as the sisters prevented her from doing pronouncements. Without the constraints of the three sisters, Madge can exercise her diagnostic skills and pronounce freely in Chicago. This ability includes recognising physical pain as a symptom of spiritual disruptions, demonstrated in her examination of Sadie, the white spiritualist's skin, which "puckered into a lump, red in the center and ringed white at the edges" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 45). Madge closely scrutinises the boil and discovers a discernible spark which prompts her to intuit that the underlying cause of the ailment is Sadie's connection with a deceased spirit. She also easily identifies a disease affecting an apothecarist's toenail by examining his hand and promptly prescribes him a bottle of "pungent oil" to effectively heal this problem. Madge's confidence in diagnosing and connecting physical symptoms to internal diseases demonstrates her strong command of conjure, which further defines and foreshadows the revival of her status as a communal healer in the urban North.

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As discussed earlier, the role of a conjurer, especially one serving as a spiritual leader, centres around addressing the emotional pains of patients. This is evident in Madge's approach to healing, where acknowledging the emotional weight of her patients' suffering is a crucial first step. Before diagnosing ailments, she listens to their complaints to ensure that their pain is validated and recognised. The narrative explains that her "she had to listen, allow them to tell of it, so they could be, in that moment, fully alive" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 43). By giving her patients, the space to be heard, Madge ensures that their suffering is not dismissed as imagined or trivial. She acknowledges the very real impact of their pain—whether it is preventing them from working or engaging in daily activities—before assuring them of her power to heal (Perkins-Valdez, 2015). In this way, Madge's role transcends mere physical healing and her main role as a conjurer includes ensuring the psychological safety of the patients. She also recognises the emotional pain of Hemp by touching his neck and feels a deep "grievance down deep in his gut" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 66). This dedication further elevates her position as a conjurer because this holistic treatment resembles the role of the spiritual leaders or priests in traditional African societies who would attend to the psychological health of the community.

SUBVERTING CONJURER CLASSIFICATIONS

Balm's conjurer appears paradoxical to the accustomed images of influential conjure women, but her adaptive skills serve to elevate her status as a progressive conjurer. While one could point to existing depictions, such as Maryse Condé's portrayal of Tituba, that illustrate a conjurer's ability to adapt their healing formula upon relocation, this perspective overlooks the unique significance of the portrayal in *Balm*. Gema Ortega (2014) discusses this ability in "The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé's Tituba", arguing that the portrayal is marked by her exposure to "sociocultural changes." In Condé's historical fiction, Tituba demonstrates several skills that include crossbreeding, "making substitutions, transforming, adapting" which she gains from the woman who adopted her, Mama Yaya (Ortega, 2014, p. 118). Ortega highlights that Tituba demonstrates this skill when "she is in New England and cannot find the same herbs due to different climate and terrain, she decides 'to make substitutions'" (Ortega, 2014, p. 118). This portrayal indicates Tituba's ability to change substances in medicine in a different geographical context. However, the migration of a Southern female conjurer and the survival of the healing practice in the industrialised Northern landscape are seldom the central theme of African American conjuring fiction.

Madge's refined experience and intuitive mastery is depicted to reflect the core principle of conjure, which requires the combination of skilful practice and understanding of the spirit world as crucial for a conjurer to adapt the practice to a new environment. This is evident in how Madge displays an innate ability to identify and utilise herbal plants, a skill that transcends basic sensory perception. Her expertise recalls the traditional Hoodoo practice of passing down knowledge "through apprenticeship" within families to preserve its spiritual potency. As Hazzard-Donald (2012) explains, this includes knowing "the scope and specifics of each plant's power" as well as the right way to handle them (p. 104). In *Balm*, Madge can tell the quality of a mixture by smelling the "scent of the brew" and tasting the "slurp of the sick" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 44). These descriptions show how her knowledge depends on close, physical attention and she uses her body as part of the healing process. The novel also describes her "knobby hands" at work: drying leaves, crumpling, grinding, and stirring, which emphasises her direct relationship with the materials. Most importantly, when she stands among the plants and sees them as part of a "natural

wonderland of spirit-growths," it shows how she sees healing as something sacred, not just practical. This moment suggests her understanding of the spirit world is active and alive, making her a true conjure woman who honours tradition but works in her own way. Furthermore, Madge is also interestingly positioned vis-à-vis a white spiritualist medium, which not only highlights the contrast between her holistic approach to healing and the medium's method of addressing trauma but ultimately reinforces her authenticity as a modern African American conjurer. In the harsh postwar environment, many people seek out Sadie, a white spiritualist medium, to communicate with deceased loved ones as a way of coping with loss and trauma. Madge was strongly advised against communicating with dead spirits by the three sisters because this practice had dangerous repercussions as illustrated in the medium's declining physical well-being. In contrast to the medium's method, Madge develops a new healing balm is created specifically because she has been listening and learning that "people need miracles" to help them "get over they grief" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 167). The miracle is the balm that enables them to heal and to move forward with life, rather than remain trapped in the past.

Despite the strong spiritual foundation of her conjure expertise, the revelation that she sells her concoctions and oils from may blur the distinction between her and traditional urban conjurers. Furthermore, her exchange of ingredients, pills, and other supplies with a white apothecarist renders her identity as an authentic conjurer increasingly dubious. This adjustment raises questions about her intentions and how much this change might affect the authenticity of her practice. It also signals that a gap now exists between her and the "swampers." The "swampers" were steadfast in preserving authenticity, though their determination eventually led to the decline of their practice (Hazzard-Donald, 2012). Could Madge be mistaken for one of the conjure imitators? While she does outsource from an alternative healing tradition, she is only driven by her need to earn a living rather than by the profit that encourages imitators to rely on bulk, commercialised supplies.

Thus, Madge's meticulous approach to preparing ingredients is an important characteristic that challenges the above inference. Her systematic way of preparing her concoctions highlights her distinct methods from the typical peddlers of "snake oil." She carefully gathers and organises everything from jars of powders and dried leaves to herbs from her garden. Madge is also careful to avoid selecting produce that has not grown healthily, such as "bright green" tomatoes, "swollen and yellow" cabbage, or any plants she considers "would never do for working" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 63). The insufficiency of the ingredients in her garden does not make her immediately resort to commercialised supplies, rather, the situation compels Madge to explore beyond the city in search of herbs, tea leaves, and roots for her mixtures. Her commitment to the authenticity and efficiency of her medicine requires her to use a careful and discerning approach in selecting ingredients. The open forest of the North lacks the diverse plant life of the South and limits her resources. This environment poses significant threats to her conjure practice and Madge's hope to find "woods like the bottomland forest full of old cypresses in the valley around the Hatchie River" is thwarted because the prairie offers only "useless grass and flowers" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 65). Much like the "swampers," Madge recognises the limitations of the land and refuses to compromise the quality of her medicine with plants that lack living spirits. Yet, despite her efforts to adapt to her new environment, she still finds herself reliant on plants from the South, such as "snakeroot and collard leaves stashed in traveling sacks, seeds tucked into hair" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 70). The scarcity of local resources prompts Madge to innovate, and her combination of Southern and Northern plants represents the evolving nature of conjure tradition as it responds to migration and landscape change.

The meeting with the white apothecarist does not reference the use of commercialised modern supplies; instead, it represents the convergence of two different traditions. This interaction helps solidify Madge's identity as a northern conjurer while simultaneously distinguishing her from the imitators. The novel provides little evidence to suggest that this interaction with the white apothecarist alludes to her yielding to the influence of marketeers in promoting conjure because the decision rises from the shortage of her ingredients. The environment compels her to reconsider her usual practices and to explore new options with the apothecarist. Rather than associating Madge with the counterfeit conjure trend, this shift serves to mark her openness to modernising her medicine by exploring alternative healing traditions. The white apothecarist, in this context, represents a more contemporary approach. Specifically, Madge's approach to the sources provided by the apothecarist illustrates a swift yet careful transition to modern and hybrid methods. Such a transition is demonstrated by Madge's careful study of the apothecarist's assortment of bottles, which are "filled with white, brown, and black pills that looked like seeds" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 122) (Perkins-Valdez 122). She learns attentively from the apothecarist that each of these pills serves a specific purpose which likely contrasts with the remedies Madge has been using. She "poured a drop of something into her palm, touched the tip of her tongue to it" with the same curiosity and care she applies to her own concoctions (Perkins-Valdez, 2015). This brief scene is not dramatic but poignant, as it demonstrates her openness to the potential of these modern remedies rather than an outright rejection of them.

This moment signals Madge's transformation, as the ingredients from the apothecarist allow Madge to create a balm that heals both physical wounds and emotional trauma. This remedy marks the culmination of her journey in Chicago, where she emerges as a conjure woman who remains faithful to Hoodoo's spiritual roots while embracing necessary transformation. Her approach offers a holistic response to a community still scarred by war and displacement. Through this blend of tradition and innovation, Madge redefines the conjurer's role as both progressive and authentic in the fractured landscape of post–Civil War America.

CONCLUSION

Previous studies on conjurers in African American fiction often emphasise the role of communal networks in shaping their image and influence. In contrast, the portrayal of Madge in *Balm* shifts away from communal authority and toward individual adaptability. The novel presents the conjure woman and the practice of conjure itself as traditions open to innovation, a quality that ensures their continued relevance in a changing world. Madge's duality is expressed through her displacement, which ultimately reconstructs her cultural role. Her story challenges conventional portrayals and suggests that the conjure woman can not only survive but also assert spiritual authority in a new social landscape. By removing some of the conventional features of the conjurer, the novel introduces a figure who deliberately incorporates elements from other healing systems to develop a sustainable practice rooted in her specific context. Madge's encounter with the apothecarist exemplifies her capacity to integrate new knowledge while maintaining a strong foundation in Hoodoo, especially in her devotion to a higher spiritual force. Her evolution is not merely about acquiring new ingredients but about how she interprets and adapts them to heal a traumatised community. This reading draws on the insights of Black literary feminist criticism, which foregrounds African-based spirituality, cultural survival, and women's embodied knowledge as central to African American women's literature. Madge embodies these values while

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also extending them. She emerges as a conjurer who is both spiritually credible and actively engaged in the transformation of her tradition. Her duality is defined by three key traits: her unwavering faith in Hoodoo, her mastery of conjure, and her openness to adaptation. This shift from earlier depictions of conjure women not only reinforces the tradition's resilience in the face of displacement, but also presents a progressive image of the conjure woman who is capable of resisting cultural devaluation and asserting relevance in a new era.

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