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

ABSTRACT

Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Balm: A Novel* (2015) narrates the life of a conjure woman who moves from the South to Chicago after Emancipation. In this new location, she losses the communal connection that is central to her identity and practice as a conjurer. This article examines the duality of the Black woman conjurer during post-Civil War America in Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Balm:A Novel*, which negates the stereotypical images of conjure women. This article establishes that the character diverges from the conventional traits often attributed to African American conjurers as she migrates to the North and argues that this strategy reconstructs her identity as a conjurer within a broader context in the North. This article draws on the historical evolution of African religious tradition into Hoodoo tradition in the United States and the role of the conjurers in its transformation post-Emancipation. It argues that while the depiction aligns with historical accounts of the practice's transformative and adaptive nature, the conjurer retains and commits to the spiritual aspects of Hoodoo tradition. Hence, this cultural retention distinguishes the conjurer from other urban conjurers who exploited the healing tradition and consequently, forms her duality. Through this strategy, the article contends that *Balm* portrays the conjurer's dual nature to highlight a more progressive conjurer – one who navigates between modern and traditional spheres and transforms the African-based tradition within the context of post-Civil War America.

Keywords: African American literature; conjure; healing tradition; African American women writers; Hoodoo.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the oppressive environment on slave plantations, conjure became a key part of spiritual traditions that support the survival of the slave community in the plantations. Enslaved Africans specifically used the practice to survive and resist oppression, as well as to withstand both physical and psychological violence (Martin, 2023, p. 52; Mellis, 2019, p. 3). Enslaved Africans from various tribes strengthened their survival efforts in practising traditional healing tradition by relying on conjuring and conjurers. Recognising that their effective holistic well-being mechanisms could endure white dominance "gave many slaves the courage and determination to engage in acts they otherwise would have difficulty committing, including escape, rebellion, and sabotage" (Chireau, 2008, p. 4). Those who led this resistance were knowledgeable practitioners of the Hoodoo religion, known as conjurers or "Hoodooists," and were revered as spiritual healers and leaders.

However, this high standing of conjurers receded after Emancipation as they faced Eurocentric discourses aim at corrupting their image as effective primary healers and as communal leaders. The "historical and ethnographic studies of conjurers" often distort and devalue the figure of the conjurer by reproducing negative stereotypical images of the female conjurers. In white texts, Black woman conjurers are reduced to caricatures – "sinister, but almost always baffling," (Tucker, 1994, p. 175) portrayal is influenced by European ethnocentrism aims to diminish their true power and

significance. This deliberate attempt to undermine the figure with derogatory images sparked reactions from early and later African American writers.

In particular, Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Women and Other Tales* respond to the denigration of conjurer and has inspired other transformative fictional portrayals, particularly by women writers. While Chesnutt occasionally highlights how conjure can backfire on its adherents, his short stories often illustrate the use of "Afrocentric modalities of signification" to counter Eurocentric ideology (Hanshaw, 2008, p. 49). Chesnutt's approach differs from that of writers in the beginning of 1980s; whose work particularly focuses on "positive representations of conjure women appeared in the black literary canon" (Saber, 2018, p. 380). Authors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, and Arthur Flowers shifted their focus by portraying female conjurers from a more favourable perspective to honour for those who had once been community leaders in the slave societies. The works of these writers show an evolution from earlier efforts to reinterpret the stories of renowned conjure women in Black history, such as Marie Laveau and Tituba. Black female writers have since begun creating their "own conjurers" (Saber, 2018, p. 380). This transition is not unusual for African American writers, who in the 1980s became known for adapting "material and expressive forms of folklore to transgress boundaries and devise an aesthetic," (Billingslea-Brown, 1999, p. 2) including changing the identity of its conjurer from their images and their healing ability. As a result of the collective effort, conjurers have been defended and raised in representations in various ways primarily in African American literature.

Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Balm: A Novel* (2015, henceforth "*Balm*") extends the repertoire of the author in historical fiction of the South, but more so, the novel aligns her with other 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 the conjurer journeys North, she detaches 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. This portrayal offers a new image of the conjure woman, which signals another literary shift in the representation of conjure women.

The premise of this article is the shift in consciousness of African American women writers remains evident in Perkins-Valdez's *Balm*, though the novel posits challenges in aligning the female protagonist with other conjure women. As a healer from Tennessee, her role alludes to the continuation of Hoodoo religion after the Civil War, however, her disconnection from her family and her relocation during the migratory period complicate this position. It raises several important questions pertaining to her identity as a conjure woman: Does this portrayal exemplify the revivalist spirit that previous African American women writers set out to achieve? How can the female character be upheld as a conjurer when her representation lacks the qualities of a spiritual leader in her community? The disconnection from the original culture could have deprived the novel from the reputation earned by earlier novels written by African American women writers where a conjurer's status is often tied to a community that validates her spiritual influence and prowess. But arguing that this loss of cultural connection demotes *Balm*'s conjuring depiction is overly simplistic because it overlooks the historical and cultural contexts in which conjuring continued to thrive.

Thus, Perkins-Valdez's *Balm* does not merely replicate earlier portrayals of literary Black conjure women. Instead, while the relocation of the conjure woman diminishes her regional functions in the South, it broadens her significance across the nation. The novel departs from the common depiction of conjure women, such as the respected Mama Day in Gloria Naylor's novel or the more menacing figure in Kara Walker's *Night Conjure* (2001). Instead, it introduces a conjurer who lacks communal functions and is deprived of the resourceful Southern landscape typically associated with Hoodoo. She remains faithful to the Hoodoo spirituality, subsequently, forming a conjurer who straddles both traditional and modern worlds. As she combines traditional methods with ingredients from a more contemporary source, the figure occupies a space where old and new converge. Her remedies, particularly to heal psychological trauma that emerged after the Civil War, highlight her adaptation to a post-war context. Highlighting the conjurer's dual nature, this article also argues that the conjure woman in *Balm* resists stereotypical tendencies and avoids simplistic categorisation.

Consisting of her maternal aunts, who are known as the conjure women of the South, this family unit is the protagonist's source of traditional healing knowledge and her source of loss, alienation, and pain. The novel begins with the narrative recounting Madge's Southern origin and family history in Tennessee. Upon arriving in Chicago, she starts performing magic tricks to earn money but soon begins a new life as a maid to a white spiritualist, Sadie. During this time, the narrative continues to recount the trauma she experienced as a child born out of wedlock. The young woman grew up without the acceptance of her maternal figures. Instead of nurturing her with affection, the two older sisters hold a grudge against the relationship between their youngest sister, Sarah Lou, and a freed man, Frederick Kingsley, leading them to disavow any connections to Kingsley including Sarah Lou's daughter, Madge. Being the offspring of this couple, Madge is mistreated by her aunts and even her own mother due to the animosity the women in the family harbour against men. Faced with familial indifference, the protagonist, Madge, decides to leave the household and seeks ways to continue practicing her conjure skills without her Southern roots. The experience in Chicago proves challenging and threatening to the survival of the practice, but Madge's firm belief, expertise, and creativity help her to persevere in the new region.

Given this context, *Balm* does not depict the protagonist as merely an ordinary healer, nor does the novel distort the image of the protagonist as a conjurer despite the loss of communal reverence and purposes. Instead, she retains both fundamental knowledge of the tradition and connection to supernatural forces in the spirit world, while also committing to transforming the healing practice to meet the needs of the urban environment. Thus, this paper argues that *Balm* presents a progressive view of the conjurer trope which sets her apart from her literary predecessors. This distinction does not also imply a break from the literary canon established by African American women writers nor does the portrayal intend to indicate a complete departure of the healing practitioner from her cultural tradition. Rather, it highlights *Balm* as a literary project that represents the duality of the female conjurer, which corresponds to the tradition's resilience in adapting to cultural and geographical shifts during the challenging period of industrialisation. It also argues that the novel depicts the survival of conjuring in the post-Emancipation era by a modern conjurer an individual historically often overlooked but deserving of recognition and respect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CONJURERS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Previous scholars have argued that early African American slave narratives often portray conjure unfavourably, however, recent scholarships on conjuring elements in these works highlight the subtle portrayal of resistance through African religious tradition using conjuring elements. More specifically, scholars continue to show deep interest in highlighting Charles Chesnutt's work as plantation fiction that showcases this strategy. Christopher Lewis (2018) presents a two-pronged argument that emphasises moments where both texts, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, "waver in their investments in [religious] normativity" (p. 115). It is in these moments that "nostalgic affirmations of African religious expressions" seem to surface, despite Douglass and Bibb having strongly "disavowed" African religious culture (Lewis, 2018, p. 115). Although the positive affirmations of conjure in these works are scarce, Lewis states that they remain "palpable and powerful" and consequently illustrates how conjure intervenes and destabilises the authors' singular "vision of freedom," which is informed by white expectations of religious practices, patriarchal structure, and sexuality (Lewis, 2018, 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* (1980), Arthur Flower's *Another Good Loving Blues* (1994) and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), though at times seem elusive, counters negative stereotypical and one-dimensional African womanhood of female conjurers (Martin, 2012).

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).

METHODOLOGY

THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CONJURERS AND CONJURING TRADITION

Balm closely mirrors the relocation and transformation of Hoodoo traditions in the industrialised North following Emancipation. In this regard, Katrina Hazzard-Donald's *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (2012) primarily proves indispensable in highlighting the duality of the female conjurer in *Balm*. Hazzard-Donald's work details not only the traditional form of conjure in slave plantations, but it also follows the evolution of conjure due to geographical movement and cultural shifts. In particular, the work highlights the movement of the conjurers from Africa to the American South and later, to the northern parts of the United States. Conjure after Emancipation inevitably transformed in the North as the cultural landscape shifted and forced the practitioners to adapt. This transformation of conjure practice in Hoodoo "occurred gradually, taking place over several generations, during which time cultural practices were continually adjusted and adapted" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 45). This process impacted the main aspects of the healing practice including the change in spirituality among conjure practitioners, cross-fertilisation of herbal plants, and the advent of modern suppliers for healing ingredients. This cultural history reveals that at least two dominant types of conjurers emerged from the evolution of conjure during the migration period. Examining *Balm* within the framework of this cultural history highlights that the novel's conjurer stands apart from the dichotomy of traditional and modern conjurers by embracing both methods.

Firstly, it is important to note a crucial dimension of the conjurer's traditional role that extends to treating psychological health. Conjurers not only helped maintain the physical health of the slave community but also earned reverence for the various ways they supported the mental health of enslaved Africans. In an earlier source, John

S. Mbiti (1970) explains that "[m]edicine-men are the friends, pastors, psychiatrists, and doctors of traditional African villages and communities" (p. 223). Conjurers became revered as heroes among the slaves because their deep knowledge and experience in African-derived rituals positioned them as "comforter, spiritual leader, protector, and earthly contact with the supernatural" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 61). They were known as "root doctor, or two-head," thus became "a living symbol signifying deep levels of hope as well as access to alternative sources of support and assistance beyond the slave master's control" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 59). Charles H. Long (2014) echoes this idea by stating that the "conjurer was also an adept social psychologist, able to read the moods of owners as well as the enslaved" (44). Nathan D. Wood-House (2021) similarly maintains the importance of conjure to the survival of enslaved Africans because it provides a range of practical functions "from consolatory advice for psychological or interpersonal issues, to ways one could ensure safety from the lash of an overzealous slave-driver" (Wood-House, 2021, p. 140). This psychological aspect reinforces the conjurer's continuation of her traditional role in *Balm* while incorporating a more progressive method of healing.

Moreover, *Balm*'s conjurer is also characterised by her strong connection to a higher power, a trait often associated with healers and leaders in traditional African religions. But after Emancipation, the changing environment made it difficult for some to remain tied to the supernatural aspects of African religions. Unlike their ancestors, many conjurers after Emancipation had distanced themselves from the spirit world and the higher power because they no longer served as spiritual leaders for a community. In contrast, the traditional African societies revered conjurers, and they held a high position because they were regarded as "embodied spiritual power" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 59). Their belief in a higher being and a spirit world is central to their religious philosophy that connects the spirit and the physical realms. This worldview encouraged the followers to see healing and spiritual beliefs as "thoroughly comingled"; and the success of healing is connected to the spirit world and the religiousity of the healers. Therefore, in this traditional society, "the most proficient healers were frequently spiritual leaders as well" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 51). With the knowledge and spiritual connection, they were the only ones who "could prepare an authentic, traditional, and effective mojo bag and instruct the client in its care and uses" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 107). Their multifaceted functions earned them a high status in society, and they were regarded as "heroic because they were able to put things in order through their uncanny powers without obvious violence" (Saber, 2018, p. 377). The disconnection of later conjurers from the spirit world was a significant shift, however, it did not erase the practice.

In addition, conjurers played an important role in the preservation and survival of Hoodoo through transformation. Conjure was often passed down through families to protect the knowledge. Lindsay Tucker (1994) states 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 conjurers also safeguarded the access and transmission of the tradition to the next generation to ensure the spiritual essence of the tradition remains intact (Hazzard-Donald, 2012). In the United States, conjure women frequently "carry the name Mother and hold considerable power within their communities" and they are "gifted with psychic abilities, or are known to have second sight" (Tucker, 1994, p. 176).

Despite the protective principle, conjure also depends on transformation to survive a new environment. Slave plantation conjurers often acted as the authority who sanctioned "the transformations in Hoodoo procedures, paraphernalia, ritual objects, ceremonial content, and decorum necessitated by American slave life" (Hazzard-

Donald, 2012, p. 62). While some adaptations were forced, the main methodology was done "through rational decision by using age-old principles to modify the religious conventions" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 49). Conjure has survived various environments such as the Atlantic crossings and the hostile environment of the slave plantation. Thus, it is acknowledged that Hoodoo's growth and survival relied on "its high level of adaptability" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 54). The slaves were known to specifically alter their practices to adapt to the contexts, and became healers who helped slaves with health problems, "internal conflicts," and resistance (Fett, 2002, p. 85). Transformation of conjure continued to occur during migration and made possible because Black cultural referents "were carried from one environment to another" throughout metropoles with growing black populations such as Chicago, Detroit, and Gary (Mitchem, 2007, p. 54). These movements provided "the social backdrop from which regional cultural variations would cross-fertilize one another" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 84). The gradual process "would disperse locally potent customs, traditions, and knowledge throughout the newly emancipated African American nation" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, p. 85) and gave birth to new forms of conjure practice. Adaptation was necessary; in some cases, it happened with the continuation of its original principles. For example, some of the practitioners were adamant in preserving the traditional forms from being compromised with commercial ingredients. This is an important principle that protected the tradition from the exploitation of the "snake-oil" industry. These conjurers were mostly the older practitioners, also known as "swampers". They continued their search and gathered "their own roots, herbs, and other supplies themselves" (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, 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.

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's historical and cultural contexts of this novel allude to the challenges faced by traditional conjurers at this juncture. The historical backdrop evokes a metropolitan city undergoing significant demographic shifts, which encouraged cross-fertilisation of herbal ingredients in Hoodoo healing practices. Historically, conjure practices were transformed not only through cross-fertilisation of ingredients but also by the "snake-oil Hoodoo industry's exploitation of old plantation Hoodoo," a phenomenon promoted by imitators and marketeers (Hazzard-Donald, 2012, 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 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, but they struggled with "pronouncements," a term used to describe the detailed diagnosis of an illness. The townspeople acknowledged that their "teas and poultices, tonics and ointments had value, and the sisters were treated like shamans around town" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 27). However, they relied solely on the memorisation of the knowledge passed down to them. This reliance on memory ensures the efficacy of their cure for a certain period but it also suggests their reluctance to

experiment with healing methods. Due to their lack of motivation and ambition, they are unlikely to develop cures for the new diseases that emerged during the post-Civil war period.

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.

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 bu 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 utilize 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 process involved not only “proper procedures for harvesting, processing, and working certain roots” but also a deep understanding of “the scope and specifics of each plant’s power” (p. 104). She can also sense the presence of spirits in those plants to verify quality ingredients for her medicinal mixture. Back in Tennessee, she was accustomed to exploring "the woods for just the right leaf" and she can skilfully search for suitable ingredients like bark and roots. She possesses a deep knowledge of identifying and preparing these herbs for medicinal use by inspecting the "(s)cent of the brew” and tasting the “slurp of the sick" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 44). Her skill includes personally preparing the raw ingredients using her "knobby hands” and "drying leaves, crumpling, mashing in a mortar, roasting, grinding, stirring seeds into lard" (Perkins-Valdez, 2015, p. 44). More importantly, Madge’s acknowledgment of “a natural wonderland of spirit-growths" while standing amongst those plants implies her understanding on the relationship between conjure and the spirit world (Perkins-Valdez, 2015).

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 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). In the end, the scarcity of local resources drives Madge to combine both familiar Southern herbs and new plants in the creation of her concoctions.

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. The ingredients from the apothecarist help Madge to combine ingredients and finally create balm that heals not just the body but also the emotional trauma. It symbolises a culmination of Madge's journey and experience in Chicago as an uprooted African

American healer who remains true to the principles of Hoodoo religion while embracing the aspects that require transformation. Her innovative approach to healing is revolutionary, as it offers a holistic remedy tailored to the needs of a community wounded by the war. Thus, Madge's status as a progressive yet authentic, urban conjurer is elevated by her ability to address psychological trauma of the society in a time still marked by the lingering effects of the Civil War and slavery.

CONCLUSION

Previous studies on conjurers in African American fiction often emphasise the role of communal networks in shaping their image and distinguish their influence. In contrast, the portrayal of Madge in *Balm* diminishes this central power. However, the novel portrays the conjure woman and conjure as elements in the tradition that are receptive to innovation and this combination ensures their continued relevance in an ever-changing world. *Balm* highlights her duality through her displacement that serves to reconstruct her cultural significance. Thus, Madge's story challenges conventional portrayals and highlights that the conjure woman can endure and even thrive in a new societal context while also claiming the revered status in her own sense. By removing the conventional features of the conjurer, the portrayal introduces a figure who proactively incorporates another element from a different tradition to create a sustainable healing practice designed to her specific context. Madge's encounter with the apothecarist exemplifies her ability to integrate new knowledge while remaining grounded in her Hoodoo tradition, especially reflected in her devotion to the higher spiritual being. Her experience goes beyond acquiring new ingredients; it is also about how she processes and adapts them, using them to heal a community scarred by trauma. Madge emerges as a conjurer who is both spiritually credible and deeply invested in the ongoing transformation of the healing tradition. The duality of the conjurer, therefore, is primarily defined by several key factors demonstrated throughout the narrative: Madge's unwavering faith in Hoodoo conjure tradition, her conjure mastery, and her openness to change. The shift in this portrayal from the earlier representations of conjure women serves not only to demonstrate the resilience of this healing tradition in the face of displacement, but also to present a contemporary image of a conjure woman capable of resisting devaluation.

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