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**Workin' Roots: African Diasporic Religion and Earth-honoring Traditions and
Urban Agrarianism as Liberatory Practice**

By

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Part I

Introduction

“Now keep your hands off a’ my mojo,

‘cause it sure is lucky to me

Now, keep your hands off a’ my

mojo, I wish I had two or three

I wear my mojo above my knee

to keep you from tryin’ to hoodoo me

So keep your hands off a’ my mojo,

oh, and let me be,

I mean if you ain’t got no stuff for me.” —Leola B. “Coot” Grant & “Kid” Wesley Wilson,

“Take your hands off my mojo.”

It is tremendously important that I start by stating that “Hoodoo” can be hard to quantify with just one fixed definition. It is merely too complex to be flattened in that way. For that reason, asking folks, “What is Hoodoo?” might *conjure* a variety of responses affected by factors like socioeconomic status, age, region, and proximity to Hoodoo culture. What I can offer, based on what I have read and heard from some scholars and practitioners, is the varying definitions that have nurtured (and are

grounded in) the reality of the discipline and the general nature of its practice across America from its origins during the antebellum period to now. In *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System*, sociology professor, dance and, diasporic religion scholar Katrina Hazzard-Donald provides a preliminary and provisional definition of Hoodoo as "... the folk, spiritual controlling, and healing tradition originating among and practiced primarily, but not exclusively (this part of this definition is habitually contested by many practitioners who assert that Hoodoo is a culturally-specific, closed practice) by captive African Americans and their descendants primarily in the southern United States" (11). Another definition of Hoodoo provided by the *Chesapeake Hoodoo Society* on their "What is Hoodoo?" webpage (and admittedly a favorite of mine) is of Hoodoo as "...a tradition, a generational heirloom that is simultaneously medicine, magic, and religion." Where these two definitions (and the many others I have interrogated) overlap is in their fundamental understanding of Hoodoo as a diasporic tradition and a syncretized spiritual system abundant with earth-honoring, ancestral practices that function to capture the full breadth of African American life and existence, serving as a tool of self-actualization that addresses the very problems that historically have confronted them, from ensuring protection, healing spiritual and bodily ailments, and so much more.

In this senior project, I aim to offer more information on Hoodoo by contextualizing the birth of the belief system and its evolution in (and outside of) the wider historical catastrophe that was the kidnapping, forced migration, and subsequently, the enslavement which marked the Transatlantic Slave trade as well as providing information regarding the lie that justified the enslavement of the “Black” race. There is mention of other diasporic belief systems and religions like Vodou/Voodoo and their similarities with and their differences to Hoodoo, which are, of course, informed by various factors not limited to the specific ethnic heritages of the enslaved Africans brought to other parts of the New World we now know as Latin America and the Caribbean, and the nature of their culture of enslavement and how it has impacted the development of those practices. Lastly, I aim to speak of more contemporary legacies of Hoodoo and their public perception, which is frequently rooted in gross misunderstandings of these practices at best, and anti-Black, racist demonization, a result of the Western world’s very staunch Christian hegemony and white supremacist culture at worst. Both can be true. All of the points mentioned above and much more I offer in this paper with hopes of answering the question of how Black people, both then and now, have come to use these religious practices and their spiritual

technologies to enable themselves (and subsequently future generations) to heal and, protect and defend themselves the best they can from white supremacist harm.

Historical Context

In order to come to understand African Diasporic Religions, we must first reckon with the reality and legacy of the Transatlantic slave trade. Before we start to attempt to understand the gravity of that global event and to contemplate what it truly means to displace, brutalize, and enslave almost thirteen *million* indigenous Africans, we must first learn of the colonists and the white supremacist ideology they crafted and spawned onto the bodies and beings of enslaved people and the rest of the world. The story begins in the fifteenth century in Portugal. Prince Henry, a central figure in the genesis of the Portuguese empire, ironically nicknamed “The Navigator,” wanted to participate in the slave trade but did not want to have to engage nor work with Islamic slave traders (whom I should mention also created somewhat of their own type of what can be interpreted as an ethnocentric system of prejudice) who at the time were enslaving different groups of people, including other Arabs, Africans, and yes, even some Europeans. According to author and professor Ibram X. Kendi in his work of non-fiction *How to Be an Antiracist*, “Prince Henry sponsored Atlantic voyages to West Africa by the Portuguese, to circumvent Islamic slave traders, and in doing so created a

different sort of slavery than had existed before” (38). However, we did not start to see the more documented and pseudo-scientific race-making until Prince Henry’s first biographer and ardent apologist, Gomes de Zurara, wrote a biography entitled *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*.

The biography is full of tales detailing the eve of the slave trade, one of which paints a vignette of the first significant slave auction that took place in 1444 (Portugal’s trade of strictly African people started three years prior). In this tale, according to Kendi, Zurara was able to understand that these people did not all look the same despite being trafficked for the same purpose, but the value he attributed to those that were fairer and thinner through his descriptions of some captives being, “white enough and fair to look upon, and well proportioned” (38) while he deemed others unfavorable since they looked “like mulattoes” or “as Black as Ethiops, and so ugly” (38) would of course, set the stage for the proliferation of more anti-Black justifications for enslavement. On this journey to coming to understand Indigenous African religiosity and giving it the respect it deserves, I found myself concerned yet not surprised with Zurara’s work due to the almost mundane nature of the toxic colonialist culture of Christian hegemony that the Portuguese and, subsequently, other settler colonies and enslaver states adopted as well. Zurara suggests in this biography that because Africans were heathens and

therefore enslavable due to allegedly being “...outside the law of Christ Jesus and lost as regards the more important part of their nature,” it was somehow morally just to strip Africans of their agency and assert that they “...were abandoned to the discretion of any Christian people who might conquer them, as far as their lower parts or bodies were concerned” (321). This biography, which functioned to justify Prince Henry’s evangelical saviorship model to the rest of the world on print, a book which Kendi notes is considered Europe’s first book on Africa, cemented the Portuguese as the first international participants of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and also legitimized the creation of an inferior “Black” race. While the term “race” specifically was never used, after the Portuguese and the Spanish arrived in the Americas, we started to see the creation of what we now know as a racial caste system conceived through the flattening of tribal ethnic identity and culture applied through the enslavement and subjugation of different demographics. West and Central Africans, the “Black” people, and other Indigenous people, the “Indios” as the Spanish called them, and the “negros da terra,” meaning “Blacks of the land/from the land” as delegated by the Portuguese.

As the Transatlantic slave trade is gaining traction and many more countries were looking to increase their wealth through the enslavement of Africans for free labor, we must note that there was a time prior to this international colonial project, as

seasoned Hoodoo and author Stephanie Rose Bird states in her Hoodoo How-To guide *Sticks, Stones, Roots & Bones*, where there were “...Africans involved in a lexicon of beliefs, lore, stories, and customs that were designed to help integrate us into an environment filled with plants, animals, and a complex array of spirits” (1). While chattel slavery buried and obscured the connections to and knowledge of the natural world that enslaved African people were surrounded by, causing the grave disconnection many in the African diaspora feel to nature and land that unfortunately still permeates today, enslavement did not stop these people from finding fertile ground to plant their seeds and lay their roots in. Bird states, “The freshly sown seedlings took hold strongest in the sunny climates reminiscent of the fair conditions in Africa. The various hybrids of African-based religion are now thriving in coastal Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Cuba in the form of Candomble, Shango, Santeria, and in Louisiana and Haiti in the Form of Vodoun” (1). The assertion that certain African Diasporic Religions have been able to keep more of their African roots than others is a thought held by many scholars as well as practitioners of African diasporic religions (although it is not a thought I resonate with nor propagate as complete truth).

Anthropologist and Hoodoo initiate-observer Zora Neale Hurston states something similar in her landmark ethnography and quintessential piece of Hoodoo

scholarship *Hoodoo in America*. Hurston states that "... island Negroes had retained far more of their West African background than the continental blacks" (318).

The reason for this, Hurston claims, is a combination of multiple factors that united to bring that reality about. However, she only really expounds on how the nature of enslavement in the Caribbean and the general maintenance of slave communities and kinship heavily informed just how much of our indigenous roots the enslaved were able to retain. Hurston states:

"When an island plantation was stocked with slaves, they remained together, as a rule, for the rest of their lives. Whole African families and even larger units remained intact. They continued to carry on their tribal customs in their new home without even the difficulty of struggling with a new language. The system of absentee landlords afforded scant white contact and the retention of African custom was relatively uninterrupted and easy. Moreover, the French masters were tolerant of the customs of others, even slaves, and the Negroes were encouraged to make themselves as much at home as possible in their bondage. So the African customs remained strong in their new home" (318).

While I can acknowledge how the lack of daily proximity to the settler class, as well as the preservation of specific kinship ties, would allow the maintenance of Africanisms, we cannot assume that this was the reality of every single person enslaved in the Caribbean. While we can not repudiate the fact that enslaved Africans had an assortment of reactions to Christianity upon their conquest (these reactions ranging

from acceptance through hybridization with traditionally Indigenous African spiritual customs to complete rejection), it would also just be ridiculously ahistorical not to highlight how the fundamental nature of enslavement itself destroyed linguistic, familial, and communal ties before the enslaved that survived even made it to the New World. It also must be stated that with what has been expressed by many scholars regarding the nature of enslavement, particularly in the colony of Saint-Domingue or modern-day Haiti, we cannot allow for tolerance to be a legacy afforded to the French (in any capacity) or, to any other colonialist settler-colony especially as far as African diasporic religions and the syncretism that informed the establishment of these practices, both in the Caribbean and on the North American continent is concerned. How open-minded and forbearing can a slave colony be exactly? It may not only be historically accurate but just to theorize that maybe the French colonists and other colonial states who enslaved in the Caribbean might not have thought to use the breaking of kinship ties as their primary form of slave control but instead opted to subjugate African people by other means. In Nathaniel Samuel Murrell's book *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*, "...planters sought to maximize profits and minimize the possibility of slave revolts by resorting to a rigid system of control to ensure slave compliance. This included the

constant use of capital punishment under harsh working conditions, poor nutrition and shelter, and sixteen-to eighteen-hour workdays” (61). The nature of slavery in Saint-Domingue was so gruesome that slave survival was a mere seven years on plantations, and the average lifespan of an enslaved person was only about three decades.

Another point that completely shatters this facade of a benevolent colonial entity that was okay with the enslaved people indulging in their Africanness is the fact that there were efforts, just like in any other slave colony, to subjugate the enslaved by isolating them from the “...vestige of their African heritage and to *remake* them into compliant cogs in the wheel of colonial machinery” (61). Murrell continues, “For almost two hundred years, French Catholics attempted to teach slaves “Christian civilization” and to stamp out Vodou’s “paganism.” Vodou meetings were banned, and violations were severely punished under both state and canon laws, which collaborated to rid Haiti of alleged pagan practices” (61-62). Then, the Black Codes of 1685 were passed ironically enough for the alleged protections of “slaves’ rights” that demanded baptism, attendance of Sunday mass, confession, and especially, the RENOUNCING of any practice of Voodoo. The syncretism that informs every single African Diasporic Religion is forged through heavy sanctions enforced by the soul-crushing nature of colonial

violence, not the benevolence of the master. Africanisms exist in every single diasporic religion and practice (including Hoodoo) due to the perseverance of the enslaved and their dedication to both the freedom of their bodies and their minds through their sense of cultural pride and spirit.

To be a slave was to know spirit intimately. Moreover, to know spirit intimately means to wield the power of influence and revolution. Across the diaspora, an understanding was established through the forging of community amongst the enslaved that the only way to freedom was to persevere and habitually assert one's sense of self and identity. Using colonialist religion and other once-foreign botanical knowledge as an embellishment to the Kongo-based religions that they had already fostered a cultural affinity to was the best way to do that while thwarting colonial violence. In that regard, Hoodoo is a very similar (although also different) technology explicitly used by the enslaved and their descendants in North America to forge that path to freedom.

Hurston, in *Hoodoo in America*, asserts that "Negroes fleeing Hayti and Santo Domingo brought to New Orleans and Louisiana, African rituals long since lost to their continental brothers" (318), but given the nature of that ethnography and how abundant it is with examples of rootwork (a regional term used interchangeably with/for "Hoodoo" that also describes the medical, spiritual, herbalist practice of using herbs

and working/doctoring roots for healing, or harming) spiritual rites, and ceremonies that outline Hoodoo's rather distinct protocols for proper and respectful practice, I find it ironic and contradictory that there seems to be a struggle in recognizing Hoodoo as another sovereign African Diasporic Religion.

Furthermore, the inability of Hurston and other more contemporary scholars (and practitioners/initiates of other ATRs/ADRs) to consider Hoodoo both an autonomous and authentic, ethnoreligious practice (despite its syncretism) that can stand alone to indicate projections of inferiority and deficiency too often attributed to Black American cultural productions. This paradox is frustrating given that Hoodoo, like other ADRs/ATRs, has managed to survive and adapt despite its repression and the abundance of misinformation casually spread regarding its practice. Before offering more information specific to Hoodoo's origins and the marred public perception of folk religions here, which continues to perpetuate the delegitimization and demonization of Hoodoo, I feel it is imperative to challenge perspectives of Hoodoo that struggle to hold space for (and defense of) its unique spirit and powerful approach to cultivating early Black American culture and identity both then and now while ensuring the continued protection and healing of an oppressed people.

Hoodoo's Origins, Development, and Practice in the Antebellum South

Upon seeking information regarding Hoodoo's inception, I initially felt compelled to confine Hoodoo and its passionate flame to just one particular geographical setting. That would be difficult to do but ultimately unnecessary and untruthful. Engaging with Hoodoo *beyond* its kind of reductive existence and status as merely a syncretic folk religious system (however true that may be), Hoodoo is the heartbeat of Black American existence and its methods/processes of garnering understanding and making sense of the spiritual, physical, and natural world. That said, Hoodoo originates from, was, and is wherever large populations of Black people are present. According to the *Chesapeake Hoodoo Society*, a collective of Black Hoodoo practitioners and adherents representing the culture of Tidewater Hoodoo of the Chesapeake Bay area, "The regionality of Hoodoo practice is something that started gaining popular acceptance in the past few years. Before then, many would say that Hoodoo Conjure ONLY came from New Orleans and the Delta area." Katrina Hazzard-Donald also calls into question the idea that Hoodoo's genesis is bound to just one region, particularly New Orleans. In chapter 2 of her book *Mojo Workin'*, she states, "Although New Orleans has its significance, wherever there was a sizable African

population, African naturalistic religious practices that would contribute to Hoodoo were there also” (46).

Further in this chapter, she claims that despite the conditions of enslavement that deferred Hoodoo’s evolution toward regimentation, there was a collection of three well-established regional Hoodoo traditions by either the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. These three preliminary Hoodoo regions, the Southwest/Gulf Coast region, the Southeast Sea Island/Gullah “Low Country” region, and the Northeast region of the Tidewater Hoodoo of the Chesapeake, also reflected the regionally specific demands of certain kinds of slave labor (specifically the harvesting of rice, indigo, tobacco, pineapple, sugarcane, and cotton) as well as the specific concentrations of certain African ethnicities whose spiritual technologies would go on to inform aspects of Hoodoo’s practice significantly. In the incredibly vast Southwest Hoodoo region, which included the northwestern tip of Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, parts of eastern Texas, as well as Missouri and Tennessee, the Senegambian Bambara people’s (mainly concentrated in Louisiana) “....best-known and documented contribution to Hoodoo may be in the fabrication of protective amulets known by a variety of Mande labels, including gerregery (gris-gris), wanga, and zinzin” (49).

The Bambara gris-gris, along with the Kongo concept of *Nkisi* (a term used to mean spirits or the objects that spirits occupy and embody) and the Yoruba belief of Ashe (an ideology that signifies the power of change that exists designated by God/Oludumare as per the Ifa divination system) all served as a powerful intra-African spiritual trinity that has nurtured the Hoodoo practice through the invention of the African-American Mojo bag. The Mojo bag is an amulet carried on one's person crafted and personalized from a collection of curios or magical objects or charms by a rootworker or a conjurer to serve various purposes. These purposes include "...from attracting a lover and maintaining a relationship to drawing luck or attracting money" (Bird, 6) to thwarting violence. During the Antebellum era, many enslaved folks carried Mojos on them with the goal of evading whippings and other trouble as they navigated life under the oppression of slavery, a testament to Hoodoo's revolutionary, liberatory potential.

In the Southeast "Low Country" Hoodoo region, which includes Central Georgia spreading to the coastal region of Sea Island and parts of Florida's coast to both the North and South Carolinas, the Hoodoo contribution hailing from this area is the idea of *Yowa* referred to by Hazzard-Donald as the Kongo Cosmogram. The Kongo Cosmogram is a symbol that represents "...the Bakongo people's view of the universe

and the place of humankind in that universe. Among other qualities, it symbolizes the movement from the otherworld of the ancestors as they travel in a dynamic cycle of life, death, and rebirth” (47). The Kongo Cosmogram paved the way for the Hoodoo Ring Shout, a counterclockwise dance whereby enslaved worshippers clap their hands, shuffle, and stomp their feet as they proceed in a circle. The practice of the Ring Shout, or “The Shout,” as some know it, had a plethora of purposes rooted in ancestor veneration, death rituals, and cathartic self-expression. However, the Ring Shout was also essential in providing what writer Chris Newman describes in his article “African Spirituality” as “...a hidden form of communication” (37) that aided the enslaved in secretly conveying information regarding impending rebellion and insurrection. Newman states this was able to happen due to the naivety of enslavers who would disregard the Ring Shout as merely “nothing more than a ‘peculiar service’ where a dozen or twenty jog slowly round a circle behind each other with a peculiar shuffle of the feet and shake of arms” (37). Today, the Ring Shout is still practiced among the descendants of those enslaved in the Low Country, specifically those of Gullah heritage, whether they be Hoodoos or not. More commonly, a derivative form of the Ring Shout can be seen among Baptist and Pentecostal Black church congregations through Praise Break, an incredibly exuberant form of praise and worship encompassing the rapid,

stationary footwork or shuffling along with some shouting to music steadily increasing in pace.

Lastly, the Northeast Hoodoo “Tidewater” region encompassing the Chesapeake-Maryland, Virginia area, parts of eastern Tennessee, and North Carolina seems to share some similarities with the Hoodoo practice of the Low Country. However, their unique contribution may have been in the practice of Foot track magic or “track gathering,” as per Hazzard-Donald, which has survived the Antebellum era and is prevalent in Hoodoo practice today. The practice details gathering foot track dirt of the individual the Hoodoo conjurer wishes to have influence over. Foot track magic would either bind the afflicted to them or ward them off, among other intentions. It is important to note that, as Hazzard-Donald states, “the differences in climate, dress patterns, and slave quarter organization had an impact on Hoodoo development and practice as they did other aspects of slave life” (51). So, the shoe-wearing that would have been more prevalent in the chillier northern Hoodoo regions versus the barefoot walking of those in warmer climates would have influenced the ability of a Hoodoo to harvest the dirt of their steps, which would have affected the Hoodoo practice. While all three of these preliminary Hoodoo regions have developed and evolved throughout centuries at different paces, the practices explored above offered by the enslaved

Africans brought to the New World and their subsequent mingling and interconnectivity have cemented the practices that Hoodoos engage in now in the contemporary age.

Hoodoo's Reputation Rooted in the Erasure of Its Revolutionary Potential

The reputation of Hoodoo and that of other African Traditional Religions and African diasporic Traditions across the world have undoubtedly suffered due to the propagation of anti-Black ideals rooted in the perpetual narrative of these practices as primitive “Black” magic and witchcraft—that verbiage which inadvertently associates evilness and demonality (and subsequently, criminality) with Blackness and Black people. While these beliefs have been adopted and internalized by many, especially other Black people, it is crucial to know that this culture of demonization of the spiritual traditions and technologies indicative of ancestral African religiosity is rooted in both the Antebellum and Post-Antebellum era fears and fragility of white people who have either heard of or personally experienced Hoodoo through the defensive, liberatory action of the enslaved people whom they have dehumanized and subjugated.

Regarding the Antebellum era hysteria, Hazzard-Donald claims that the enslaved, despite being depended on by their masters for their herbal knowledge and prowess, simultaneously were distrusted and antagonized because, in many parts of the

New World, they were poisoning their masters. Hazzard-Donald states: “In their homeland, many of the Africans had mastered the knowledge of poisonous plants and substances for both medicinal purposes and dealing with enemies. Once in the Americas, they continued the practice throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, enabling the lore as well as the practice of poisoning to remain fairly well developed among bondsmen” (66). The enslaved person, through their role as the root worker, root doctor, or conjurer, was enabled to establish a sense of empowerment and revolutionary spirit that directly challenged their status as a slave. This challenge to the social order proved to be quite problematic and, unfortunately, prompted the brutal ritualized public murder of the enslaved by any means not limited to burning and hanging, which served as a method of reaffirming the power of the enslavers. However, it is essential to remember that slavery’s brutality in and of itself is radicalizing and would continue to encourage the enslaved, especially the Hoodoo, to do whatever they could to forge a path to freedom through their practice. Beyond death and dying at the hands of those whom the enslaver lived to brutalize, for as long as Hoodoo lives, the fear of its wrath will continue to consume the oppressor. This can be observed through the habitual targeting of Hoodoos during Reconstruction.

According to ethnographer Tony Kail's book *A Secret History of Memphis Hoodoo*, a year after the start of the Reconstruction era in the United States, many newspapers in the South were generating negative press regarding Hoodoo, claiming it to be a "barbaric" practice that supposedly only served the purpose of "...terrorizing white communities." As ridiculous and dangerously reductive as this claim was, which was touted as and accepted by many white people as absolute fact, it served as a reminder of the profound ignorance they had and continue to have regarding Black life and Black spirituality. However, this ignorance has, by design, historically manifested itself in oppressive violence, which sought to disenfranchise freedmen. Kail States:

"In one instance, a rootworker was assaulted in Memphis. The *Memphis Public Ledger* reported, "A voodoo doctor, a negro who went over to Bay St. Louis a few days ago from New Orleans to raise proselytes threatened to 'conjure' a white man. The latter pitched in and beat the conjurer soundly, who incontinently made tracks for the city" (17-18).

This relentless culture of fearmongering and sensationalization rooted in the purposeful mischaracterization and decontextualizing of the Hoodoo tradition not only resulted in the normalization of physical violence against newly freedmen, furthering their autonomy through their ancestral spirituality but also posterized the very culture of scrutiny that exists today, which trivializes Hoodoo, its importance, significance, and efficacy through the mockery and delegitimization of its healing practices and rituals

that have been observed for literal centuries. Due to this effective smear campaign, Hoodoos were painted as deceptive quacks, not the spiritual leaders, healers, and protectors they were but, instead, as “...con artists, drug dealers, and murderers” (19). Does that not sound oddly reminiscent of the inherent immorality incessantly projected onto Black people and our existence today?

Furthermore, this criminality that white people attributed to Hoodoo and their practice was not just a contributor to white vigilante violence but ensured violence enforced by the state upon Hoodoos as well. Later in the chapter, Kail describes the targeting of a Hoodoo practitioner at the hands of police, resulting in their frisking and the confiscation of their Mojo bag, which they earnestly expressed was for warding off evil. Unfortunately, although not surprisingly, one of the officers decided to berate the man by declaring, “A grown man, even if he was a negro, ought to have better sense than to believe in such stuff” (19), destroying the charm in front of him. This spiritual persecution of Hoodoo and Hoodoo practitioners, as per Kail, continued in Memphis until the 1960s, resulting in the confiscation of “...herbs, oils and various ritual tools” (21) at the hands of the Memphis police. This centuries-long battle against the oppressors and their relentless subjugation of Hoodoo by various means has led to the practice’s disrepute, noted in the 1930s by Zora Neele Hurston in *Hoodoo in America*.

Nonetheless, this grave disrespect of Hoodoo (and of other Black cultural productions) has continued today, further affirmed by the spread of misinformation about Hoodoo and its practice and the fetishistic, sensationalist portrayals in popular media of Hoodoo and (other African diasporic religions) that portray Black people as uncivilized threats to civilization and freedom.

While this long-lasting damage done to Hoodoo's reputation continues to define much of how the practice is engaged with and perceived in the general public sphere, it is vital to highlight that the resilience of the practice of Hoodoo and that of its practitioners is reeling in a movement of reclamation and reconciliation which is healing the wounds of this suppressed religion with quite the revolutionary fervor. Whether it be through intimate online spaces across various platforms connecting elders in the tradition to the young minds seeking the practice or the therapeutic, in-person community spaces where many gather to sing, dance, pour libation, and learn more of the traditions under the Hoodoo system, Hoodoo has survived and is a breathing practice rooted in centuries worth of Black joy, pain, existence and yes, resistance.

To conclude, Hoodoo is so much more than the bastardization of its image, a byproduct of white racial anxieties. Hoodoo is not evil, devil worship, nor a syncretized

relic of a primitive African past. Hoodoo is a practice forged through the fire of colonial violence that has allowed Black people then and now the ability to forge connections to each other, the natural world, and God, which seeks to make sense of the world around us. Hoodoo is Black; Hoodoo is a legacy, the legacy, of Black people's commitment to life and living in the face of death and adversity. Hoodoo is a system of knowledge, an epistemology of indigenous botanical and spiritual wisdom. Hoodoo is a tool of liberationist work, and one often wielded against terror. Moreover, it is about time that oppressed people, especially in the Hoodoo tradition, are allowed to reclaim their indigenous cosmologies and define them for themselves instead of succumbing to those who work to deny this reality.

Part II

Before I had settled on writing a hybrid project where I further explore Hoodoo and other earth-honoring spiritualist practices through autoethnographic account, I believed I'd be writing an ethnography regarding Black cultural music, hoping to focus on jazz and its many manifestations across the African diaspora to interrogate how Black artistic productions have informed the stylistic evolutions of other musical traditions around the world. Coincidentally, around that time, I had just made a new friend who happens to be a jazz vocalist. While my excitement for that project was

there, fueled by my interest in ethnomusicology, a friendship in its eve, and my personal history with musicianship, I decided it was probably best to put the idea on the back burner until I was able to formulate more of a plan on how I'd conduct my research. Feeling frustrated and defeated, I reached out to that friend to hang out, hoping that leaving my space and submerging myself in good company would help me feel better. After a brisk walk across campus to her apartment, I recall her sweet dog greeting me as soon as I walked through the door. As I walked past the kitchen, I found myself a bit puzzled, although not upset, by the strong, warming scent of cinnamon as it wafted into my nostrils. As I walked to her bedroom door expecting to see a cinnamon candle burning, its smoke leisurely dancing through the air, I was pretty confused to find my friend, ironically named after another one of my favorite spices, sweeping the carpet of their room with a mini pine broom that I later learned was embellished with cinnamon oil. As you can assume, I was full of questions, some of which were answered for me that day after my friend reintroduced herself to me as a Hoodoo, and others that dug up seemingly lost memories of mine that further tethered me to this world of "alternative" African spirituality that I believed to be unknown and foreign to me. It was at that moment that I realized I needed to write a senior project that not only explored Hoodoo's origins, nature, and contemporary existence but also allowed me to engage in

(re)memory work regarding the earth-honoring spiritualist practices I had been introduced to and gleefully participating in through urban farming. Part two of this senior project will be a collection of a couple vignettes of the earth-honoring spiritualist practices, like herbalism and spiritual agrarianism, among others that have come to me before, throughout, and because of my journey and experiences as a youth apprentice and volunteer during the fall 2023 season at the Hattie Carthan Community Garden and Herban farm, a Black woman founded and led pair of community spaces both located in the historic neighborhood of Bed-Stuy as we all (should) know it, a robust cultural hub for Black people considered to be the heart of Brooklyn. Through this part of the project, I aim to offer perspective regarding what it means and looks like to grow curiosity in and reverence for engaging in ancestral modes of healing and protection through an understanding of food justice (Bed-Stuy is a food desert, meaning there is minimal access to nutrient-dense, local, affordable food which is essential to note as it relates to this work), communal care, and collaborative earthwork, and land stewardship.

I have learned and remembered through the community I've fostered with Farmer Yon and the other youth apprentices, some of whom I have met for the first time, and others I have been reacquainted with that farming, especially in urban environments actively experiencing waves of change brought on by gentrification and

its violence, is political, spiritual, and incredibly sacred as a means of providing safety and sustenance to the communities that have often been scapegoated and forgotten. I have also just witnessed in myself, the other apprentices, and local patrons of the spaces that, despite the ignorant beliefs many outsiders may hold of earth-honoring practice, spiritual farming, and community building as bizarre, silly, and fruitless, there is an affinity for these practices that we have developed and are nurturing because, through them, we have been offered a glimpse of a better world that can be forged through them. Before I offer glimpses into the reality and practices that contribute to the crafting of this world, I would like first to provide an affirmation meant to ground you and ensure you receive the bounty this work wishes to offer you.

Affirmation

Today, I affirm my presence within this miraculous vessel. I acknowledge its unique design, resilience, and profound connection to the natural world surrounding me. As I embrace this moment, I ground myself, anchoring my awareness in the physical sensations that color my existence. As my ancestors who once were here on earth, guiding me from above, I recognize that I am part of nature's grand tapestry, as the plants and animals are also intimately woven into its luscious fabric. I am not merely an observer but an integral participant in the habitual stumbling, falling, and rising that

informs the dance of life. With each breath I take and expel, I am attuned to the earth's pulse, synchronizing my heartbeat with the planet's. I honor my body as a temple, a sacred abode that houses my essence and revolutionary spirit. My body is a conduit for sensory delight, emotional depth, and spiritual and political awakening. May I treat it with kindness, nurturing it with wholesome sustenance, mindful movement, and plenty of rest. With reverence, I acknowledge my connection to the earth beneath my feet, and I stand tall, feeling the solid ground supporting me and allowing its stability to flow through me. May I always acknowledge that humans are not the only influential force of nature and that we should not center ourselves nor our “humanness” on this journey. I invite the energy of the earth to rise within me, grounding me in a deep sense of rootedness. I am a seed that will be watered, allowing time, space, and sun to grow me into my best self in a bushel, among others, as I will not succeed without community. As I breathe in the crisp air, I am thankful for the oxygen that sustains my life, grateful for the trees and plants that selflessly provide this precious gift. May I always remember to thank and honor them and talk to them.

As painful as the truth of the oppression and suffering in the world may be, I shall not avert my gaze. As the vibrant hues of the natural world—the lush greens of the foliage, the vivid colors, the purples, pinks, blues, and yellows of blooming flowers, and

the endless blue expanse of the sky above allow me to develop a sense of gratitude that further empowers me to fight for justice for those whose faith is wavering, clouded by the fog and fire of war, and its strife enacted by colonial powers. I listen attentively to the symphony of nature—the melodious songs of birds, the rustling of leaves, the buzzing of bees, and the chirp of crickets—all harmonizing to create a soothing melody that resonates with me. May the warming heat of the sun and cool breeze of wind across seasons that graze my skin remind me of my interconnectedness with the elements. In this moment of profound connection, I affirm my commitment to preserving and nurturing the promise of the world around me. I pledge to steward the environment, respecting its delicate balance and protecting its sanctity for future generations. I am a part of nature, and nature is a part of me. As I ground myself in my body and embrace the wonders around me, I cultivate a deeper understanding and appreciation for the world's magnificence and beauty. May this affirmation be a guiding light and the ultimate reminder of purpose, allowing us to tether ourselves to our bodies to engage with nature profoundly and meaningfully forever. Ashe.

Saturday, June 10, 2023 ~ Food Heritage Festival

My first time back on the farm for the season was to attend the 19th Annual Hattie Carthan Community Garden's Food Heritage Festival. After about two weeks of

nonstop work on a computer, confined to a desk in an isolating, stale, and, might I add, ridiculously freezing office space (at this point, I've grown to despise central air), I managed to snag a day of freedom where I could escape to revel in Bed-Stuy's beauty away from Midtown's monotony and tap back into the very culture and community I'd been missing. After nine stops on the A train, another three on the G, and a calm three-minute walk, I finally arrived at the space, confused to see that the main gate of the entrance to the market was closed. The confusion didn't last long once I realized this particular entrance would be closed until the start of the market season in mid-July. However, I just elected to follow the music, a mix of Reggae and new school Hip-Hop emanating from the Garden's entrance a few feet away. Once I stepped foot in the space, something just clicked. As I leisurely walked further through the garden, taking in all of the green, the warmth from the sun as it enveloped my body in its kiss, and the mixture of bright cerulean now dimmed with specks of yellow and orange that informed twilight, it had dawned on me what exactly I was experiencing—the euphoric embrace of home.



The Hattie Carthan Community Garden is a sovereign space and sea of green embraced by Bed-Stuy's vibrant constituency.

While this garden and the version of it I first developed a relationship with back in 2017 holds a fond place in my memory, the new changes that I witnessed, like the installation of seating among the vegetation, which included but was not at all limited to patches of red clover flowers, various herb beds, collards, and more have blossomed the garden into a sovereign, third place for community members, both young and old. For the festival, a sandbox space was established for the youngins (although many adults, myself included, did not shy away from having some fun) adorned with hula hoops, jump ropes, and a couple of bubble wands. At the sand pit, I made a new friend,

the sweetest little black girl and a major cutie, whose hair was styled in these adorable ponytails embellished with a couple of berets. At first, I felt awkward around the little mama, but once she brought me a hula hoop in an invitation to play, my guard was down, and the game was on.

A couple of rounds of hula hooping turned into a bubble-blowing session and ended in the skipping of some rope. This playdate, which felt like a whole day's worth of fun, might have lasted around forty-five minutes, which quickly ended with the little girl's grandmother's "alright na babeh," signaling it was time to head home. Soon after, I bid the doll and her grandmother farewell, preparing to explore more of the space.

Before I left, I heard Granny ask her darling if she was ready to go home, to which she solemnly nodded no as she continued mischievously to dig her palms deeper into her spot in the sand. Walking toward the plaza where the DJ played some tunes, I saw many of the community's older women dancing gleefully with each other. Among the women was Farmer Yon, who was off to the side taking pictures and video of the scene, her gaze meeting mine very briefly. I don't think she recognized who I was right away, but when she did, she signaled me over to her with an enthusiastic call of my name and the widest smile. We embrace each other, and I thank her for inviting me, reminding her of the beauty of this place forged with her hard work fourteen years ago and my love for it.

After she thanked me, we swiftly made our way to the food stand, where there was an assortment of trays from grilled meats, stewed beans, and cornbread to a variety of sweets and a cooler full of her sorrel: a drink made from the dried leaves of the roselle/hibiscus plant popular around the African diaspora and known by various names like Agua de Jamaica, Bissap, and Sobolo to name a few. As she was serving me, I broke into a bit of dance in anticipation of the food (Farmer Yon's cooking is fantastic; I am surprised every time), which grabbed the attention of one of the volunteers who cheered me on, reminding me to "feel no shame" and go ahead and shake what my momma gave me, a testament not just to this woman's age but her support of my body's freedom, something I don't take lightly as through my journey on the farm, I've been encouraged habitually not to shrink and shy away from expressing myself, no longer resembling the meek girl I was when I first explored this place. When we sat down to eat and catch up, I was showered with compliments from Farmer Yon regarding my hair, which at this time was an icy shade of pink, makeup, and outfit, which, although casual, seemed to stand out since it matched my hair.

Since Farmer Yon is very concerned with memory and not having the work done in the space erased or forgotten, she, in her fashion, continued to document through pictures, taking a few of me as we enjoyed our food together. After some minor

conversation over our food and drink, Farmer Yon encouraged me to go around and further explore the space and make conversation with other community members, as I got very comfortable in my seat away from the party. Since I came here yearning for community, I took her advice, which led to a fun conversation with Ericka, Beth, Sasha, and Tray, some of the youth apprentices of this year's Youth Food Corp. I thoroughly enjoyed catching up with Beth and Ericka, whom I met last year at the intersectionality and ecology workshop I taught for market training. Our conversation revolved around the calling we have felt to nature through herb scholarship and the use of natural remedies, as well as living food to heal ourselves. A conversation that then turned into pondering alternative spirituality and other schools of thought, morphing into a playful discussion of astrology. Sasha then offered me a slice of watermelon as she explained her excitement for the beginning of the market season and the community she hopes to establish through food. Tray agreed, adlibbing the conversation with a peaceful swagger as they kept an eye on the volunteer sign-up sheet on a table embellished with various Afrocentric trinkets meant to call the attention of community members entering the space. After there was not much left to say, the love wasn't lost, and we all sat there leisurely, just taking in what was left of the day before the sun went down. As my heart and belly were replete and I was gearing to head out to stop by the home of a friend of

mine for her birthday party, I bid these lovely folks farewell, thanking them for their warm welcome and fruitful conversation, hoping to bump into them soon.

Just as I returned to Farmer Yon to say goodbye, she convinced me to stay a bit longer to help serve some folks as a wave of people entered looking to purchase plates. With each transaction, I felt a deep sense of accomplishment and pride as some folks I hadn't seen before came out to support the festival, expressing their gratitude to Farmer Yon for the bounty of the space, which made its way to their plates and into their bellies. After about thirty minutes of serving as the DJ played the last of his set, I sneaked to the chicken coup to greet the chickens; they didn't pay me any mind as they were too busy enjoying some watermelon. After saying goodbye to Farmer Yon, the apprentices who were still in the space, and the community elders who were winding down through conversation over beer and buzz balls, I decided to take a walk through the market space, taking in the clay oven where the ancestral grain bread making workshop takes place during the fall and the ancestor altar space which honors many Black and Indigenous figures who have helped contribute to the liberation of our community including the recent ascended Michael Samson, a land steward, impeccable drummer, loving father, and a beloved member of the community who passed away earlier this year. Biting back tears, I poured libation and paid my respects. May we never

forget them. As I made my way out of the space and into the street, steadily walking back towards the station, I welcomed the wave of emotions coming over me, the sadness and grief yet also the joy, happiness, and fun that I was blessed to experience today among kin. As I waited on the platform for the train, I closed my eyes, thanked God for the opportunity, and embraced the journey to come.

Sunday, September 24, 2023 ~ Autumnal Equinox

This day has taught me that there is always a prize in showing up, especially amid obstacles that attempt to deter you from your purpose. The weather outside was wet, chilly, and windy. My alarm did not go off, and despite freshening up and getting dressed relatively quickly, I missed the school shuttle (which was running on an hour schedule) that arrived at the stop about two minutes before the time listed on the agenda. When I saw that bus pulling up, I tried my hardest to make it, sprinting from my dorm's exit through the parking lot while screaming for the bus matron to wait. If it wasn't apparent, my pleas fell on deaf ears as the driver slammed their foot on the gas, and I watched in disbelief that after all of that, the bus was speeding off. A "FUCK!" then proceeded to come out of my mouth with such a guttural intensity that it shook through my body, a nasty pejorative encompassing the misery and misfortune I felt at the moment. I sat at the stop for about thirty minutes in the cold with nothing but a

couple of layers between the harshness of the elements and my flesh in a state of unadulterated frustration, waiting for a bus to miraculously save me from tardiness. After ten more minutes, I realized it was no use and decided to use the last of whatever money I had left in my checking account to order an Uber from the loop stop to the Metro North. After a forty-five-minute train ride to the city and another two rides on the Seven and G trains respectively, I remember biting back tears as I realized I had exited the station through the wrong location, extending my commute by about ten more minutes.

At this point, my walking stopped as I struggled to see the purpose of going to the farm, worried that my mood would disrupt the environment and complicate any work I had to do. Paralyzed by fear and intense feelings of overwhelm, I contemplated returning to campus for about a minute or two, opting to text Farmer Yon that I tried but couldn't make it. But, after remembering that this work requires dedication and strength as it will not be easy, I decided to keep pushing. I continued to walk from the station, past the primary market location, and through Herbert Von King Park towards the Herban Farm while taking a couple of deep breaths, hoping to gather some composure before stepping into the space. I swiped away at any tears that escaped my eyes, fixed my face, and took a final breath before walking through the Herban Farm's

entrance and greeting Tray, Sasha, Sholanda, and Alex, our youngest youth apprentice.

As I was looking for somewhere to put my things, I immediately got enveloped in a cloud of Sage smoke as Farmer Yon lit some smudge sticks, walking around the farm to cleanse the energy for the Equinox, a change in season, a new beginning.



The Hattie Carthan Herban Farm.

The smoke quickly spread in the area as if it was waltzing through the air with such an alluring freeness. To further clear my head and calm my heart, after Farmer Yon put the bowl carrying the sage down, I naturally wanted to hover over the bowl and

move it around my body, asking for the heaviness of this morning to find its way out of me. And so, I did. After a few more breaths of the sage and a good shake, as some movement is always medicine, I got it together and continued preparing myself for work among the plants. After I greeted Farmer Yon and settled in, Sasha and I, as the rain started to pick up a bit in intensity, began to help Farmer Yon harvest some of the herbs and flowers for the herbal water as other apprentices stood by waiting to join in and or, assist community members making their way to the farm stand to either buy produce or pick up their weekly produce baskets. Despite offering her knowledge of herbs she's nurtured for the past eighteen years, Farmer Yon also wanted to test ours and implored us to choose herbs that would serve the water well. The herbs that called to me as I walked through the space were thyme (purification, courage, strength, love), red clover (balance, harmony, luck), mint (freshness, awareness, clarity), and rosemary (faith, remembrance, protection, fidelity). It hadn't occurred to me then since I was merely following my instincts, but I now understand that the herbs I felt drawn to embody some of the qualities I needed help fostering in myself. Nature knows, ashe! As we picked by hand and cut some of these herbs, Farmer Yon reminded us to be gentle and caring with herbs and to speak with and to them, insisting that we don't engage with them in a manner that is impersonal as they are living as we are and deserve respect.

Not practicing this fundamental act of mindfulness would result in a violation (the specific term she uses is “rape”) of the land. After we picked our herbs, we placed them in a big silver pot where we would make the herbal water. At the end of our foraging, we had a gorgeous assortment of eighteen different herbs, flowers, shrubs, and leaves as the base of this herbal water. I couldn’t stop staring at it and didn’t want to. It was so beautiful.



Pictured here is a collection of about eighteen plants, all serving a distinct purpose, although many have similar spiritual uses and elements.

Afterward, many of us gathered around the basin while Farmer Yon poured libation. As she circled the bowl, sprinkling the ground with various spiritual colognes, she expressed gratitude for the first paid apprentices, her ancestors who knew it all, and their ancestors for bringing us to the land and mine. She then allows a stream of cologne to hit the floor before me while saying, “May you receive the benefit of why your *Ori* sent you here. May you not waste your own time.” And just like that, all of the cologne entered the pot, showering the plant matter with the rain falling from the sky, joining the promise brewing before us, before me. The second to last step of the herbal water creation process requires marrying the plants with the waters. We do this by getting our hands dirty and disassembling each part of the plant bit by bit. Once we finished, it was time to set the intention for the herbal water, a process that requires focus, presence, and, most importantly, vulnerability. Sitting in front of that bowl with my legs crossed on the damp, cold ground beneath me, I realized I needed care.

I often give a lot of myself, whether it be my thoughts, labor, or love. And frequently, more than not, I end up feeling incredibly depleted. These feelings have given themselves to this profound sense of rejection rooted in experiences I had no

control over, altering the fabric of my life in ways I didn't yet understand. These experiences have produced grief in me, which has impacted my body alongside the demands of my academic and social responsibilities. I call this my "intimacy wound," as this grief and its stress have made me hesitant to trust myself and others to support me. I want support. I need support. I want to support myself, and I yearn to support others. Care. Care. Care.

Farmer Yon, wielding her hand in the water like a wand, calls abundance, love, care, connection, and healing into the water, among many other things. I also add my hands, enduing the water with my energy and praying for the ability to be more open, less afraid, stronger, and more courageous. Farmer Yon then proceeds to wash folks with the water as an offering to all of us for this work going around the circle we had around the bowl. She cups her hands lightly when she gets to me, collecting the water between her palms and caressing my face, rubbing a single trumpet flower across my face. My surrender and a wave of tears came with the water's cool embrace. I sat there until I could no longer, electing to get up to make way for other community members intrigued by this communal ritual. Farmer Yon also offered them the healing of herbal water. My wound is not entirely gone, but I feel freer and more confident in my ability to do what I can to ensure I care for myself while allowing others to care for me. I make my

way to the market stall just so I'm not in the way, and I find that I'm still reeling from the rejuvenating experience I just had. I feel lighter, brighter, and an unshakable joy as I watch others seek that water's healing. I'm so grateful. Before you know it, business at the stall has slowed down, and it's time for healing food! Farmer Yon prepared a cream cheese-stuffed squash dish we enjoyed with a herbed sweet potato mash, roti, some ferments (since Farmer Yon loved to pickle and brine), and sorrel to wash it all down. After dinner, before we proceeded to close the farm space, we had our closing circle, where we reflected on the market day and other topics as they came up. We spoke of divine femininity, which I asserted isn't at all bound by biology, as well as heritage and ancestry as it relates to coloniality and the harm it has done to our collective identity and the intellectual, spiritual, and historical bypassing it has allowed for others. You know, casual conversation.

After helping wash a few dishes, closing up the apothecary space, packing away produce, and closing the market stall, I figured it was time to collect some of the herbal water we made earlier as it had marinated, charging in the elements. It felt so weird holding a personal catalyst of mine in a bottle. Alchemy truly is a gift that never stops giving. After bidding everyone farewell and giving Farmer Yon the most enormous embrace I could, I left the farm space with an even deeper appreciation. I had no clue

that this day would happen how it did, and I can't imagine forfeiting my blessing due to not showing up to claim it. May I never forget there is always a space among nature where I can work through my pain and find sanctity. May I never forget the herbs, flowers, bushes, and trees that hold me. That know me. May I always work to remember and help others recognize this, too.

The vignettes I offered in this ethnography are but a few I have accrued throughout a few weeks spent in the farm spaces. Through my personal experiences and those of the individuals around me, I've come to understand that divinity, healing, and community are experienced through the ancestral knowledge bestowed upon us of the natural world, plants, and herbs. I find these technologies to be of strong revolutionary potential as they allow us the space to rectify that harm brought to us while empowering us to care for ourselves and others as we develop our imaginations and start to build. May the seeds we've planted, especially the ones believed to be lost, scattered across time, waiting to be watered, grow beyond our wildest dreams. May we nurture the gardeners, farmers, herbalists, and many others using plants and seeds to make revolution irresistible and attainable in our lifetime. Ashe.

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