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African American Medical Culture in the Antebellum South: As Remembered in the WPA Narratives

THESIS

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

African American Medical Culture in the Antebellum South: As Remembered in the WPA Narratives

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This project examines the oral accounts of former slaves, as recorded in the WPA narratives in the 1930s, to study the development of African American medical culture in the Antebellum South. Through an examination of these transcribed memories, my research investigates how African American praxes with medicinal flora, healing techniques, and spiritual harmony, reflected their ethnomedical and cosmological ideologies. The duality of these ideologies represents an African American medical identity that provided a means to resist the everyday domination of chattel slavery. These medical praxes provide insight into an early set of cultural practices formed by Africans arriving in the American South and are important components in understanding how African Americans developed a larger cultural identity during chattel slavery and into the post-emancipation decades.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1988, an archaeological investigation of a surviving slave quarter of the Jordan Plantation in southeastern Texas revealed an array of items hidden in the wall. The decrepit building yielded a collection of animal bones, shells, beads, feathers, and small leather bags that may have contained roots, leaves, and powders. Individually, these items are unremarkable, but together they resemble the everyday tools of West African Yoruba diviners for healing and spiritual rituals, according to historian Patricia Samford.[1] This was not an isolated find. Other archaeological sites throughout the American South have revealed similar artifacts that resemble medicinal and spiritual properties derived from various West and Central African divine healers.[2] These artifacts are indicative of an African American culture of medical practices that developed in the Antebellum South. As enslaved Africans arrived in the Americas, they adapted their ancestral knowledge of local flora to their new environment. The combination of various beliefs and knowledge, including that of Native Americans, created an enduring African American ethnomedical culture that permeated enslaved medical practices throughout the American South.[3] This medical tradition represents one of the foundational cultural forms of African

[1] Patricia Samford, "The Archaeology of African-American Slavery and Material Culture," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (January 1996): 87, accessed May 10, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2946825.

[2] Samford, "The Archaeology of African-American Slavery and Material Culture," 100-03.

[3] Anthropologist Marsha B Quinlan states that "ethnomedicine examines and translates health-related knowledge and theories that people inherit and learn by living in a culture. Each society has a particular medical culture or 'ethnomedicine,' which forms from the culture's medical common sense, or logic. An Ethnomedical system has interrelated notion about the body, the causes and prevention of illnesses, diagnosis and treatment, such that ethnophysiology, ethnopsychiatry, practitioner-seeking behavior, and ethnopharmacology are all ethnomedical topics." Marsha B Quinlan, "Ethnomedicine," In *A Companion to Medical Anthropology*, ed by Merrill Singer and Pamela I. Erickson. (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell. 2011), 380: Also see, Wonda L. Fontenot, *Secret Doctors: Ethnomedicine of African Americans* (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994). Wonda L. Fontenot engages the historiography of ethnomedicine as part of the African diaspora and formation of an African American identity in the United States.

slaves, and its development influenced a larger African American identity in both slavery and the post-emancipation periods.

Drawing on African spiritualism, enslaved African American healers merged the spiritual and the physical realms in their diverse array of medical treatments. Rites that empowered objects known as fetishes were used for the purpose of both healing and harming individuals through conjuring practices.[4] This medical cosmology was an essential part of, and often indistinguishable from, the use of American flora in the physical medical treatment for enslaved African Americans.[5] The combination of ethnomedicinal practices and cosmological ideologies created a medical culture that operated on two planes to treat spiritual and physical ailments. Evidence from archaeological sites, such as the Jordan Plantation, reveal the treatments and methods of African American healers and serve to highlight the extensive medical knowledge that these practitioners relied upon to service their communities.

Even more than the discovery of artefacts, the oral testimonies of African American healers, patients, and believers, have helped scholars to understand how African Americans expressed their medical culture within the confines of chattel slavery. The New Deal's Works Progress Administration's slave narrative collection represents the largest archive of these testimonies that cover numerous aspects of the everyday life of enslaved individuals. A federally run program, the WPA was created in response to the deteriorating economic conditions during

[4] Conjuring was, and is, known by many regional names including hoodoo, voodoo (taken from the African root word Vodun), fixing, and witchcraft.

[5] For an understanding of cosmology, read Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 39: Fett builds off of religious theorist Theophus Smith's term "pharmocosm' to describe a sacred realm of healing and harming practices through spiritual manipulation: also see, Harold A. Carter, *The Prayer Tradition of Black People* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1976): James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984): Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

the Great Depression era. The project recorded more than two thousand testimonies of former slaves' lived experiences in bondage, including the formation of community bonds and various cultural expressions. The recorded narratives give voice to those previously enslaved; they reveal the history of slavery and its brutality, but also the strong relationships and communal bonds that were formed to survive and resist the oppression of bondage. After decades of neglecting these slave testimonies, scholars now employ the WPA accounts to understand nineteenth-century slavery in new ways. Despite many areas of new scholarship on enslaved community, few historians have examined the oral testimonies for historical evidence of medical practices in the Antebellum South. Some of the most pioneering works in this field include those of Todd L. Savitt, Sharla M. Fett, and Wonda L. Fontenot whose combined efforts seeks to emphasis the importance of African American medical praxes on the daily survival and resistance of chattel slavery.

These narratives document extensive medical knowledge, practiced in part to serve the enslaved community and cement social bonds, while also expressing the practice of cultural beliefs in medicine and healing as a form of resistance to the planter class. Nineteenth-century slavery advanced the ideology that African Americans were completely subordinate and dependent on their masters. The medical practices of enslaved communities contradicted this theory. The ability to treat community members was both a form of resistance to planter oppression and a way to express agency for African Americans. The testimonies of former slaves reveal conflicts with planters over access to medical ingredients, spiritual places, and the right to practice healing. They show reproduction as a critical site of contention, as enslaved women sought to wrestle control of their bodies away from the planter elite. The spiritual and healing

properties of conjuring attempted to settle social disputes and also represented a means to psychologically battle the ideology of chattel slavery.

The WPA narratives provide a personal view into the rich, extensive medical culture of enslaved communities. The WPA collected these narratives at a time when few scholars recognized the existence of such cultural praxes. This thesis builds upon a more recent historiography to investigate how former slaves remembered medical practices as a means to contest the everyday oppression of slavery while contributing to the cultural identity of their communities. This project argues that the memories of former slaves offer a different version of history, one that specifically speaks to diverse medical practices and the formation of an African American medical identity. These memories show an eclectic medical knowledge of American flora and a sacred view of the land and use of medicinal plants. They reveal the gendered structure of plantation health care, suggesting that elderly African American women held positions of great medical wisdom within their communities. These memories also show that African American beliefs in the spiritual healing created a hybrid medical ideology of cosmology and herbal treatments.

The WPA Project: Voice and Memory

The Great Depression and resulting New Deal programs provided the social and political impetus for creating the WPA narrative project; the preceding two decades of racial and demographic shifts also brought it to fruition. Millions of black families fled the Jim Crow South in the "Great Migration" to northern cities in search of war time employment in urban industries. African Americans soldiers returning home from World War I joined this southern diaspora.[6]

[6] James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the great migration of black and white southerners transformed America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 119.

They were determined to have their contributions and sacrifices recognized by the nation they had fought to protect. However, many states continued to disenfranchise African Americans after the war and greater racial tension and violence marked the 1920s and 1930s. Prominent black leaders sought racial equality through various means. For example, Booker T. Washington believed that compliance with segregation laws and industrial advancement would improve economic conditions for black workers. W. E. B. DuBois, on the other hand, sought political recognition as well as class organization for black workers.[7] African American communities in many cities also formed a rising cultural movement, epitomized by the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem represented a cultural capital for urban black America. According to Barbara Ransby, New York held 55 percent of all foreign-born blacks within the United States, many of whom became key figures in shaping Harlem's black community.[8] This in-migration coincided with the arrival of thousands of artists, scholars, and writers from the South, resulting in a florescence of self-expression and black culture.

Seeking to understand this revitalization of post-emancipation black identity, both black and white scholars turned to new methodologies in anthropology and sociology for their study of race and culture. Charles S. Johnson of Fisk University pioneered one of the earliest projects that sought to study African American culture and the experience of slavery.[9] Johnson's interest in narratives was sparked by sociological research conducted in the 1920s that involved interviews of residents of the university's environs. Through these interviews, Johnson collected a number of accounts from African Americans who had experienced slavery and early emancipation first

[7] David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 12-13.

[8] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 67.

[9] Charles S. Johnson established the Social Science Institute at Fisk University, 1928, and was instrumental in gathering early slave narratives before the WPA project began.

hand. Understanding the rich contents of these narratives, Johnson began several small side projects that focused on gathering more narratives from the African American community. Building on Johnson's early successes, John Cade, also at Fisk University, similarly began collecting the oral testimonies of former slaves. His work throughout the late 1920s would form the basic foundation of the WPA narratives almost a decade later.[10]

Begun in 1937, the WPA oral history project evolved into the country's most extensive collections of first-hand accounts of slavery. As part of the Roosevelt administration's New Deal, it provided work to a range of people across occupational, racial, and gender lines. The Federal Writers Project (FWP), a subdivision of WPA, funded unemployed writers to produce geographical, social, and historical guides to American cities.[11] Directors Sterling A. Brown and John A. Lomax recognized the research potential of this project and increased its range to include American folklore in a series called *Life Histories*. Each state approached this task differently; in Florida, FWP state director Carita Doggett Corse instructed her team to conduct personal interviews with local African Americans in an attempt to understand the region's social history.[12] Brown and Lomax recognized the richness of these interviews and determined that the project should focus all of its efforts on gathering oral testimonies from the last generation of former slaves.

Interviewers employed by the project came from various backgrounds, bringing with them regional biases and differing attitudes towards African Americans. The WPA project conducted interviews with former slaves in seventeen states, the vast majority of them in the

[10] The earliest of these projects were conducted at Fisk University under the directorship of John B. Cade. John B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History*, XX (July 1935), 294-337.

[11] Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19 (Autumn 1697): 544, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711071.

[12] Zora Neale Hurston was included in this team and was particularly successful in gathering interviews. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," 549.

South. Scholars have raised concerns about the permeation of racial discrimination within the WPA interview process, highlighting the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee as a potential source of contention. [13] Sterling A. Brown, a prominent African American writer and poet, was hired at the federal level to ensure that black writers were not discriminated against in the project's hiring process. The exact number of black interviewers hired by the WPA remains unknown, but Brown's appointment to oversee the hiring of interviewers is a sign that the project directors were aware of the possible skewed power disparities within their workforce.[14] Despite this attempt to lessen the impact of racism within the WPA, writers brought with them regional biases and ideas about race.[15] These biases inevitably influenced the willingness of former slaves to discuss racially charged memories of mistreatment. A sense of mistrust by African Americans of their interviewers pervades the narratives.[16] For example, when asked by a white female interviewer if she had ever been badly beaten, Cornelia Andrews of North Carolina denied it without hesitation. Overhearing this statement, Andrews' daughter persuaded her mother to remove her shirt in order to reveal the extensive scaring on her back. The second half of Andrews' interview recalls terrible and highly personal accounts of friends and family members brutally beaten by her owner.[17] According to historian Paul D. Escott, only 26 percent of former slaves interviewed by white persons expressed unfavorable attitudes towards former masters, while 39 percent interviewed by black

[13] Lynda M. Hill, "Ex-Slave narratives: The WPA Federal Writer's Project Reappraised," *Oral History* (Spring, 1998): 64, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40179473: Also see John W. Blassingame. "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slave: Approaches and Problems." In *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985), 82.

[14] The race of the interviewer was rarely stated in the transcript.

[15] Vann Woodward. "History from Slave Sources." In *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 50.

[16] Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," 50.

[17] George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. *Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies* (1941. Reprint, Westport: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972): 14:1, 29-30.

persons responded likewise.[18] Similarly, in Florida, a state with the highest number of known African American WPA interviewers, former slaves were reported to be more open about sharing their experiences of racial violence by cruel masters.[19] Use of these narratives involves not only the interpretation of the words transcribed, but acknowledgement of the racial environment in which they were collected.

The issue of memory, specifically the reliability of long-term memory, also shapes scholar's perception of the value of oral sources. Of the more than two thousand interviews conducted as part of the WPA project, 51 percent of the subjects were aged between 6-15 years old at the time of emancipation, and therefore eighty years or older by the time of their interview in the late 1930s.[20] Investigation of the memories of oral subjects, such as those within the WPA narratives, has attracted scholarship by cognitive psychologists for more than a century. In the final decade of nineteenth century, Hermann Ebbinghaus successfully theorized a model for the loss of memory over extended periods. His "Ebbinghaus's curve of forgetting" hypothesized that memory loss declines over time.[21] Marigold Linton added to this theory by suggesting that highly emotional events at the time of occurrence (or events perceived as turning points in one's life) further reduced the rate of degeneration of memories.[22] Recent scholarship labels these theories as "life cycle markers" and suggests that events within slavery such as marriage, field work, poor health, and sale auctions, would remain vivid in the minds of those interviewed some

[18] It could be argued that 39 percent is still a low number, but numerous factors must be taken into account for these figures, including suspicion of the motives of the WPA project. Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 57.

[19] Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," 52.

[20] Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," 534-35.

[21] Alice M. Hoffman, and Howard S. Hoffman, "Memory Theory: Personal and Social," in *Thinking About Oral history: Theories and Applications*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (New York: Altamira Press, 2008), 34.

[22] Hoffman, "Memory Theory," 36.

seventy years later.[23] Other investigations have further classified memory into episodic (personal) and social memory.[24] The impact of this subdivision of memory on the WPA narratives highlights what former slaves experienced on an individual level, how it made them feel, and how it affected their daily lives. But it also superimposes those personal experiences over a larger shared memory of cultural markers communicable to others. While memory loss is inevitable, recent scholarship on the reliability of memory within oral history supports the validity of recorded testimonies within the WPA narratives.

Similar to the issue of memory, some scholars have raised concerns about the various use of dialect within the WPA oral histories. With hundreds of different interviewers compiling thousands of transcripts, no uniform style of interviews or transcription existed. Racially charged words were not deemed inappropriate, nor were they typically edited out of the published versions of the WPA narratives.[25] In other cases, words like "I" or "my" took on different versions, such as "ah" and "mah." Some interviewers tried to phonetically represent the speech that they heard as accurately as possible in an attempt to capture the project's original goal of obtaining what they deemed authentic folklore. Some interviewers applied what they considered more "standard" English to their recorded memories, which effectively muted African American linguistic patterns in the transcripts. Though often done with the intent of accuracy, the impact of such conscious transcription was fraught with racial implications. With no single pattern in the written narratives, Sterling Brown feared that the transcripts would be "phonetically indistinguishable" for readers around the world and therefore suggested a certain level of

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[23] Donna J. Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27 (Autumn 1996): 254, http://www.jstor.org/stable/205156: Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 34.

[24] Hoffman, "Memory Theory," 48-49.

[25] The WPA narrative project was terminated in 1939 and so many of the narratives were never edited into a final draft while other remained in a pre-edited state. This latter group is particularly revealing of the racial attitudes of the interviewer and of their relationship to those that were being interviewed.

"approved dialect expressions."[26] He tried to steer the project away from phonetically accurate dialect, advising his authors that "truth to idiom be paramount, and exact truth to pronunciation secondary," because "in a single publication, not devoted to a study of local speech, the reader may conceivably be puzzled by different spellings of the same word."[27] In order to not lose or misrepresent the context of the testimonies, interviewers employed a balance of editing and linguistic authenticity to what they heard and transcribed.[28] Enforcing a uniform pattern of phonetic transcription on the narratives proved difficult and variations in the way interviews were transcribed are mirrored in the printed volumes that exist today.

Scholars utilizing the WPA narratives ultimately make their own decisions about dialect equilibrium, editorial intervention, and authenticity. For instance, in their volume *Remembering Slavery*, historians Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller state that they are "loath to interpose yet another layer of editorial intervention between the ex-slave's speech and the printed page," and so "the editors of this volume have chosen to present the narratives exactly as they appear in the published transcriptions – irregularities, inconsistencies, and all."[29] With the notable exception of blatantly offensive racial terms, this thesis will reflect the precise wording of the interviews as recorded in the WPA transcripts.

The significance of the WPA narratives resides partially in their historiographical and methodological interventions. How did historians narrate the experiences of enslaved people in

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[26] Smithsonian Productions, "*Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom*," ed. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller (New York: The New Press, 1998.)

[27] Sterling A. Brown. "On Dialect Usage." In *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 37.

[28] For an explanation of the theory and methodology of literary dialect, see, Lori Ann Garner, "Representations of Speech in the WPA Slave Narratives of Florida and the Writings of Zora Neale Hurston," *Western Folklore* 59 (Summer 2000), 217, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1500233.

[29] Berlin, *Remembering Slavery,* introduction.

the early twentieth century? Ulrich Phillips' *American Negro Slavery*, published in 1918, embodied a trend of academic racism that pervaded the historiography of slavery studies.[30] He made little effort to hide his southern bias and was heralded by supporters as a leading authority on the southern plantation system.[31] His work justified the institution as an economic enterprise while it portrayed the enslaved as content and compliant. Phillips refuted the use of nineteenth-century published slave narratives, utilizing instead the records of large plantations and planter diaries as his main source material. Such documents inevitably bar any insight into the perspective of enslaved African Americans. Phillips suggested that such people were in fact content with their position in slavery and viewed the planter as a paternal figure: "slaves were negroes, who for the most part were by racial quality submissive rather than defiant, light-hearted instead of gloomy, amiable and ingratiating instead of sullen, and whose very defects invited paternalism rather than repression."[32] He contended that slavery provided a moral framework for African Americans, who required direction and supervision: "the negroes furnished inertly obeying minds and muscles; slavery provided a police; and the plantation system contributed the machinery of direction."[33] The enslaved perspective and voices appears nowhere in Phillips' history.

A generation later historians responded to Phillips' racist portrayal of the "peculiar institution." Kenneth Stampp seemed determined to disprove Phillips' methodology by using similar research methods to reach opposite conclusions about chattel slavery. Stampp depicted slavery as overwhelmingly brutal and dominating. He used numerous examples of slave

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[30] Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Régime* (Louisiana State University Press, 1918)

[31] For examples of the praise Phillips' work received by historians, see, Ruben F. Kugler, "U. B. Phillips' Use of Sources," *The Journal of Negro History* 47 (July, 1962): 154-55, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2716499.

[32] Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 341-42.

[33] Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 339.

uprisings as a sign that African Americans were not content with their bondage, but his emphasis on the totalitarianism of chattel slavery left little room for the study of enslaved culture or community.[34] Historian Stanley M. Elkins' problematic study *Slavery* (1959) sought to investigate nineteenth-century slavery in terms of community.[35] Like Stampp, Elkins believed that the oppressive nature of slavery was absolute. But where Stampp had been silent on the question of slave community, Elkins believed that the slave South precluded the existence of communal ties while psychologically infantilizing enslaved people in a process he called the "Sambo effect."[36] Likening slavery to Nazi concentration camps, he believed that conditions within chattel slavery systematically reduced an enslaved person's ability to resist while also barring them from forming substantial and meaningful relationships with others. Though this hypothesis drew criticism, it did serve to alter the discourse of chattel slavery and spark new research by scholars to prove that African Americans formed communities and cultural ties within bondage.

Scholars began to more seriously consult the WPA narratives in the 1970s in search of the personal accounts of African American experiences in slavery. Norman R. Yetman's *Voices from Slavery* (1970), which used one hundred WPA narratives, argued that with the proper use of methodology, the collection was of great historical value to the discourse of slavery.[37] Two years later, George P. Rawich published the entire unbound WPA narrative collection simultaneous to

[34] Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956).

[35] Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

[36] Elkins, *Slavery*, 82-86.

[37] Norman R. Yetman, *Voices From Slavery and Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (New York: New York Press, 1970)

this own study on slave community in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*.[38] Not every scholar was convinced by the effectiveness of the narratives; notably, John W. Blassingame remained skeptical about the value of these testimonies. Believing them to be too doctored by the racial assumptions of white interviewers, Blassingame stated that they would "lead almost inevitably to a simplistic and distorted view of the plantation as a paternalistic institution where the chief feature of life was mutual love and respect between masters and slaves."[39] The first edition of his 1978 book *The Slave Community* did not use the WPA narratives, favoring instead published antebellum narratives of escaped slaves.[40] By the second edition he had conceded to using the WPA testimonies only sparingly, especially to delve deeper into the role of religion in community building. While Blassingame gingerly edited his work to include these vital narratives, others embraced them more openly. Other historians used the narratives to investigate new aspects of enslaved communities. Religion became an important focus for scholars interested in the psychological benefits of resistance and survival.[41] Lawrence W. Levine focused on music as a source of community bonds and cultural expression.[42] The slave family became an area of important study for Eugene Genovese as well as Blassingame and Rawich who looked to understand the ambitions of enslaved daily lives.[43] In 1979 David Brion Davis wrote of the larger discourse of slavery, stating that "the institution of slavery has

[38] George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1972): 19 vols.

[39] Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 82.

[40] John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[41] Blassingame, *The Slave Community,* 60-67. George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of Black Community* (Michigan: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972): Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978)

[42] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[43] Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1972): Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

now been probed at every spot, often with passionate intensity, and the explosive debates have left few questions settled."[44] Indeed, there is much left to answer about slavery though it is doubtful that it has "been probed at every spot," as Davis suggests. With each breakthrough in scholarship comes new questions in the disciplines that study slavery; these findings continue to redefine our understanding of African American experiences in bondage.

For this thesis to successfully emphasis the importance of medical praxes and healing beliefs on a larger African American identity, one must first establish the foundation of interpreting identity and acculturation. A review of this debate revolves around the discourse between Melville J. Herskovits, E. Franklin Frazier, and the joint investigations of Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price. While this discourse took place sometime ago, the model that was theorized as a result provides a strong framework for the investigations of this project into an African American medical identity. Herskovits, an American anthropologist, was a prominent scholar of African American studies. His work on black identity in the Americas, most notably Haiti, helped expand the field of African American studies in American academia.[45] He believed that in order to understand the identity of the African diaspora, scholars must look to the cultural practices of African Americans to see how they practiced Afroeurasian traditions.[46] Indeed, Herskovits was a strong proponent of the idea that African American identity was ultimately rooted in West and Central African cultures. For example, of Haiti he stated "the plural marriage…is obviously African," while in Trinidad, marriage practices reinterpreted "West African forms that operate within a polygynous frame."[47] E. Franklin Frazier disapproved of this

[44] David Brion Davis, "Slavery and the Post-World War II Historians," *Daedalus*, 103 (Spring 1974): 2, http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ095362.

[45] Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941. Reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

[46] Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro* Past, 81-85.

[47] Melville J. Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937. Reprint, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1971), 260; Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, *Trinidad Village* (New York: Knopf, 1947), 293.

model. He believed that any linkage to African identities were severed during the migration to the Americas. He called this theory "Forgotten Memories," explaining that "probably never before in history has a people been so nearly stripped of its social heritage as were the Negroes who were brought to America."[48] For Frazier, African American identity began at the moment of enslavement and transport, leaving individuals culturally deprived of traditional institutions.

Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price complicate these models in their search for more sophisticated treatments of African American identity. They argue that no group could successfully transfer its way of life, belief systems, and cultural practices, intact to America. They suggest that Herskovits' view of the African origins in African Americans identity is too simplistic.[49] Likewise, they conclude that the process of forced migration made even basic social interactions between enslaved individuals difficult, reducing communication to universal body language and pigeon tongues.[50] But this was not to exclude the existence of African continuities as Frazier would suggest. Despite language barriers, enslaved individuals conducted themselves in ways similar to their African kin. Slaves came from heterogeneous communities throughout the African continent and each relied on their own belief systems. While certain sociocultural cues might be interpreted differently between these communities, Mintz and Price suggest that there are also similarities that link these people together in the understanding of such cues. As an example, they explain that the Yoruba of West Africa deified twins and conducted elaborate ceremonies to worship them, while the nearby Igbo people summarily destroyed twins at birth.[51]

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[48] E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 20.

[49] Richard Price and Sidney W. Mintz, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 1-2.

[50] Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture*, 21: For more on the struggles of early communication, read Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[51] Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture*, 10.

While both groups treated twins differently, they shared a common understanding of the importance of such an occurrence, be it a good or bad omen. Enslaved Africans arriving in the Americas may have struggled to communicate with one another but ultimately they shared a deeper understanding of important social and cultural continuities from Africa. Thus, for Mintz and Price it is important to look at the sociocultural habitudes that enslaved people developed in America to "inform their condition with coherence, meaning, and some measure of autonomy."[52] Such praxes reveal how African Americans retained, adapted, and expressed their cultural identity despite the oppressions of chattel slavery.

This paper investigates one such praxis. An examination of the medicinal knowledge of plants and beliefs in spiritual healing can reveal much about how African Americans identified with continuities from the African traditions. But more broadly it shows the development of a strong and proud African American identity expressed often in defiance of oppression and in support for one another.

ORIGINS OF MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE

Scholarship on healing as a cultural institution for the understanding of African American identity remains marginal to larger currents in the field. Antebellum and early post-emancipation literature on slave health care reflected the racial ideologies of the time. Dr. Samuel Cartwright, a white physician writing in the 1850s, wrote of a supposed disease called Cachexia Africana, or dirt eating, that only affected African Americans and assigned to them characterizations of the basest animal behaviors. He further postulated that runaway slaves suffered from a mental illness known as Drapetomania which caused their desire to flee from the paternalism of southern

[52] Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture*, 41.

slavery.[53] Reflecting on such racist views of African American health, William M. Harvey acknowledged the effect that racism had on twentieth-century scholarship, stating "the bulk of material [on African American medical practices] is unsystematically gathered, heavily anecdotal, and was written when expressed anti-Black sentiment and racial slurs were acceptable…"[54] Scholarship on enslaved health care persisted throughout the first half of the twentieth century without any substantial challenges.

In 1951, William Dosite Postell published one of the first books to make health care of enslaved African Americans its sole focus. His *Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations* concluded that "the health of slaves was comparable to the public health of the era. The medical care and treatment rendered the slave was in accordance with the accepted practices of the day, and the failures were the failures of the time."[55] This overly simplistic view situates African Americans as passive recipients of white orthodox medical care and says little about how enslaved individuals viewed or treated their own illnesses. A much more in depth investigation of planation health care can be found in the publications of prominent medical historian, Todd L. Savitt. His first book, *Medicine and Slavery* (1978), skillfully juxtaposes WPA narratives against antebellum medical journals and planter records to establish a portrait of how slave health was viewed differently by African Americans, slave owners, and physicians.[56] In a later publication of seminal essays he challenges Postell's theories by investigating the degree to which African Americans showed their agency as active participants in their own health care both during

[53] Samuel A. Cartwright, "Disease and Peculiarities of the Negro Race," *De Bow's Review: Southern and Western States* 11 (1851), http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h3106t.html.

[54] William M. Harvey, "Black American Folk Healing," in *Folk Medcine and Herbal Healing*, ed. George G. Meyer et. al. (Springfield: Charles C Thomas Publishers, 1981).

[55] William Dosite Postell, *The Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 130.

[56] Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Disease and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Illinois: Illinois University Press, 1978).

slavery and post-emancipation.[57] Most recently, historian Sharla M. Fett's study distances itself from the standard biomedical model of physician-patient relationships to investigate the cultural and spiritual significance of African American ideas of health and healing.[58] Fett's work exemplifies the hybridity of healing and spiritualism that informed African American beliefs in the need to treat both physical and metaphysical planes. Her use of narratives reveal points of contention between the sociocultural views of white physicians and enslaved patients over the effectiveness of certain treatments. The personal accounts recorded in the WPA narratives continue to influence new research into enslaved medical practices and their significance on the cultural identity of African Americans.

The importance of the WPA narratives lie in their ability to textualize the oral traditions of medical knowledge among enslaved communities. Few African Americans had access to reading and writing under bondage. They relied instead on the passing of information orally from generation to generation. Vinnie Brunson of McLennan County, Texas, described this process in his narrative, stating that "we did not have any doctors hardly at all in dem days, but we had remedies dat wuz handed down to us from de folks way back befo' we wuz born."[59] Former Georgian slave William Edwards, echoed this oral tradition, stating "we hab tuh find remedies fuh our sickness an know how tub cuo snake bites aw cuts and boils, eben female complaints,"

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[57] Todd L. Savitt, *Race and Medicine in Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century American* (Ohio: Kent University Press, 2007): also see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The Frist Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998) Kathrine Bankole, *Slavery and Medicine: Enslaved and Medical Practices in Antebellum South* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998): Todd L. Savitt, "Black health on the Plantation: Masters, Slaves, and Physicians in the South Carolina Race District, 1735-1865," in *Medicine, Nutrition, Demography, and Slavery*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989).

[58] Fett, *Working Cures*: Glenda Sullivan, "Plantation Medicine and Health care in the Old South," *Legacy* 10 (Autumn 2010), http://www.opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/legacy/vol10/iss1/3: Dea H. Boster, "An 'Epileptick' Bondswoman: Fits, Slavery, and Power in the Antebellum South," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83. (Spring 2009), doi: 10.1353/bhm.0.0206.

[59] Rawick, 3:2, 513.

and so he learned from "ole people about herbs dat wuz good fuh diffunt ailments."[60] The passing of information was done in what informants called fireside training that saw with younger community members shadowing their more experienced elders as they gathered and prepared medicinal ingredients.[61] In the narratives, fireside training was a superior teaching than other forms of education. For instance, John Jackson recalled "you know, they lays a heap o' stress on edication these days. But edication is one thing an' fireside trainin' is another. We had fireside trainin'."[62] Jackson's unapologetic emphasis on which training he had suggests that he was proud of his participation. Perhaps this is because he knew of the practicality of fireside training given the lack of formal education for enslaved individuals, or perhaps because such training continued to serve him post-emancipation. The apprenticeship training that facilitated the oral dissemination of medical knowledge was an important part of the formation of African American medical identity. Ancestral knowledge is practiced in black communities today and continues to define the structure of an African American medical culture.[63] It is through the testimonies transcribed in narratives, such as those of the WPA project, that scholars are afforded greater access to the generational knowledge that has helped form the identity of African American communities.

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[60] Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940. Reprint, Savannah: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 57.

[61] Sharla Fett explains that Fireside training was a process in which "younger men and women in plantation communities learned this complex body of knowledge through an extended process of apprenticeship," often practiced after the day's work was complete, in a communal setting. Fett, *Working Cures,* 75.

[62] Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, "Ex-slave stories," *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project, 1936-1938.* XI:2, 3.

[63] In her investigation of modern rural communities in Louisiana, Wonda L. Fontenot concludes that the oral tradition of passing medical knowledge on is still very much alive, arguing "the survival of folk medicine…must be addressed in a culturally diverse population such as this one [Louisiana]." Fontenot, *Secret Doctors*, 68.

The memories recorded in the WPA narratives reveal continuities with surviving Africanisms.[64] Enslaved Africans transported to the New World had to adapt their knowledge of the medicinal use of herbs to fit with the American flora. The evolution of African materia medica within the American South is evident in the narratives of former slaves such as Harriet Collins. During slavery, Collins used herbs to treat people on the plantation. She explained that this knowledge came from her mother who had herself been taught by "de ole folks from Africa, an' some de Indians taught her."[65] Herbs she utilized included leaves, roots, and barks for herbal teas and medicinal treatments. Many of these ingredients share a common genus with the transplanted flora from West and Central Africa. Some common families included Aristolochia, Croton, Dioscorea, Ocimum, Orimum, and Sambucus whose usage by African American communities showed commonalities to that of various African peoples.[66] Collins described the use of elderberries "roun' de neck an' de chile will hab er easy time cuttin' he teef."[67] Elderberries are a subgroup of the Sambucus family and common to tropical regions of the American South and West African coast, likewise, the wearing of these ingredients around the neck resembled charms used by West African groups. Enslaved Africans arriving in America would have recognized this plant and known of its medicinal uses early in their adaptation to life in America. Other examples include medicinal teas made from crushed okra leaves, the chewing of cotton root, and the wearing of asafoetida bags around the neck as a traditional West African

[64] I use the word Africanism to describe features of African American culture that closely resemble those associated with the various tribes of West and Central Africa, including language, religious beliefs, and use of herbs and medical techniques.

[65] Rawick, 3:2, 893.

[66] Abayomi Sofowora, *Medicinal Plants and Traditional Medicine in Africa* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., 1982): Connie Krochmal and Arnold Krochmal, *A Field Guide to Medical Plants* (New York: Tomes Books, 1973): Julia F. Morton, *Atlas of Medical Plants of Middle America: Bahamas to Yucatan* (Illinois: Charles Thomas Publisher, 1981): Samuel J. Touchstone, *Herbal and Folk Medicine of Louisiana and Adjacent States* (Louisiana: Folk-Life Books, 1983).

[67] Rawick, 3:2, 894.

charm.[68] Familiarity with American flora provided enslaved individuals with cultural continuities in the use of such plants, this similarity among enslaved African people facilitated in the creation of early African American medical culture that contributed to a larger cultural identity. Knowledge of medical commonalities among newly arrived slaves from different parts of Africa bridged the cultural divide in a way that verbal communication could not. The role of cultural continuities with surviving Africanisms shaped African American communities and helped pass on both ancestral and acquired knowledge.

Enslaved communities were not homogenous, associating only with their African heritage; another important, and often overlooked, influence came by interactions with Native American peoples.[69] The WPA narratives display a strong intermingling of medical ethnobotany shared between African American and Native American peoples. These groups shared, learned, and influenced one another in the medicinal use of herbs and healing practices. John Jackson recalled that in North Carolina "we had a lot of these malatto negroes round here…they was free issues and part Indian…My daddy was one of the part Indian folk."[70] It is possible that Jackson's father had some influence into his son's fireside training, reflecting his indigenous influence, and equally likely that Jackson's training had some influence on his father's view of medicine in an exchange of healing knowledge. As stated above, Harriet Collins' mother also credited her medical knowledge to a hybrid of Native American and African influences. Many of the herbs described in the narratives bear the prefix "Indian" including Indian pink, Indian grass, and

[68] For extensive lists of known medicinal plants, see Herbert C. Covey, *African American Slave Medicine: Herbal and non-Herbal Treatments* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), 80-123: Kay K. Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine 1750-1820* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 169-212.

[69] Scholarship has focused largely on the influences of white American and well as colonial British, Spanish, and French influences on African American cultures. My goal is to explore the lesser known influences of Native American peoples on African American medical institutions.

[70] "Ex-slave stories," XI:2, 3.

Indian root.[71] Some informants, such as Victoria Thompson, provide insight into the complicated relationships between enslaved African Americans to Native American masters. Thompson's father, Doc Haynes, was a slave in a Cherokee family in Oklahoma, and was described as a practitioner of herbal remedies: "for sickness daddy give us tea and herbs."[72] Historian Tiya Miles describes the nineteenth century as a time of shifting attitudes among Afro-Cherokee relations. In an effort to acculturate to American notions of civilization, the Cherokee increasingly distanced themselves from African American friendship bonds, instead, using slavery as a sign of their own sovereignty.[73] Doc Haynes, however, seemed to maintain a closer relationship with his Cherokee masters. They had registered his name as "Doc" with the Indian Agency and allowed him to practice his herbal remedies. Some of the practices described by Thompson show the adaptation of African charms to Native American symbols: "he made us wear charms. Made [sic] out of shiny buttons and Indian rock beads. They cured lots of things and the misery too."[74] The seeds of the Job's Tears plant have been found to be used by both African Americans and Native Americans in the creation of prayer beads and amulets for protection and curing.[75] Former South Carolina slave, Martha Richardson described her mother as a mulatto but her farther as Indian. She recalls that her father would "make a little money a showin' people how to make Indian medicine…He tell us many times 'bout de great Catawba Indians, who make all deir own medicines…," which seemed to include common ingredients to both African and Native American medicines such as the ground up bark of oak trees.[76] Investigation by historians have found other continuities between African and Native American

[71] Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 80-123: Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine 1750-1820*, 169-212.
[72] Rawick, 12:1, 322.
[73] Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 34.
[74] Rawick, 12:1, 322.
[75] Fontenot, *Secret Doctors*, 131.
[76] "Ex-slave stories," XIV:4, 19.

peoples. For example, the emphasis placed on cedar leaves, oak bark, and cane by Creek Indians resemble that of African American herbal remedies in the region.[77] The WPA narratives recorded the intermingling between African American and Native American groups that resulted in an extensive and important knowledge of herbal remedies that evolved through these interactions. These influences helped provide an early set of medical expertise for the development of the African American community.

The narratives of healing practices express a sacred worldview of medicinal plants, the land, and the knowledge of how to use them in a similar fashion to the worship of African deities. In parts of the Americas and the Caribbean, enslaved communities contain direct linkages to African-based religions. In Cuba, for example, before entering the forests traditional healers practice libations to Osanyin Elewe, the Yoruba god of herbalism and curative plants, in a religion known as Santeria that mixes elements of Roman Catholicism with West African beliefs.[78] Comparatively, North America shows much less African religious retention, especially moving into the nineteenth century, when Christianity became the dominant religion practiced by African Americans.[79] However, as Santería scholar George Brandon argues, "little attention has been devoted to examining the use of plants in the context of the various African American religions."[80] A critical analysis of the plant use in the WPA narratives reveals that Christianity, as practiced by African American healers, patients, and believers, shared a sacred view of plants and forest locations similar to the worship of African healing deities around the Americas and the African continent.

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[77] Fontenot, *Secret Doctors*, 132.

[78] Robert Farris Thompson, "Icons of the Mind: Yoruba Herbalism Arts in Atlantic Persepective," *African Arts* 8 (Spring 1975): 53, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3334955.

[79] Fett, *Working Cures*, 78.

[80] George Brandon, "The Uses of Plants in Healing in an Afro-Cuba Religion, Santeria," *Journal of Black Studies* 22 (September 1991): 55, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784497.

Access to herbs was essential for the creation of home remedies. Many plantation owners allowed slaves to use common land to plant their own gardens and herbs. Of one such garden, Celestia Avery of Troupe County, Georgia, recalled, "we used every thing [sic] for medicine that came out of the ground."[81] While these were the most common and widely used remedies, rarer and more sought after herbs could be found in the swamps and forests beyond the plantation limits.[82] These were places of great importance for the gathering of medicinal herbs; they assume a heightened spiritual presence in some narratives that describe interactions with spirits. George Briggs of South Carolina recalled a sacred encounter that he had in the woods as he searched for something to relieve a toothache: "Something told me to git some rats-vien (wild arsenic weed) and make some tea and drink it. It soon rid me of dat misery in my tooth."[83] A similar experience was described by an unnamed Tennessee woman, stating that "the spirit directed me to get some peach-tree leaves…I did this, and in a day or two that swelling left me."[84] The spirits mentioned in the narratives are of a Christian identity, yet, they provide the same benefit as African deities in other parts of the Americas and Africa continent, guiding and informing people within sacred areas. Healers often attributed their powers and knowledge to a divine being. Former slave George White was a healer like his father before him. His success with patients, he explains, was in part to do with the [Christian] Lord's blessing: "Dere's a root for ev'y disease an' I can cure most anything, but you have got to talk wid God an' ask him to help out."[85] Similarly, a previous patient of Aunt Darkas remembered that "she always said the Lord told her what roots to get, and

[81] Rawick, 12:1+2, 26.
[82] Fontenot, *Secret Doctors*, 127
[83] Rawick, 11:1, 73.
[84] Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 60.
[85] Charles L. Perdue, Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, ed., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex*-Slaves (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. 1967), 310.

always 'fore sunup, you would see her in the woods with a short-handed pick."[86] Aunt Darkas was described as being blind but she said "the Lord gave her power and vision," to enter the woods and retrieve the required herbs.[87] In this sense, the Christian God takes on a similar role to that of the Yoruba deity Osanyin Elewe, informing healers in their sacred work of making medicines. Through the practice of gathering and making medicines, many African Americans expressed a relationship with the land that encompassed both practical and spiritual elements linked to traditional African beliefs.[88]

WOMEN IN THE WPA NARRATIVES

The WPA narratives offer vital information for scholars on an issue that has only started to receive sufficient interest in the last couple of decades; the roles claimed by enslaved women in health care. More than two decades ago, Wonda L. Fontnote claimed that "literature about rural African-American women in general is practically nonexistent and data on African-American women and health issues is equally scarce."[89] Today, scholars have begun to lift the veil of women's roles as health practitioners and how they were perceived in the nineteenth-century South. Historians Anita Spring and Judith Hock-Smith have argued that in the majority of nineteenth-century western societies, white women healers commanded less respect from their communities than African American women did from theirs.[90] In part this is because of the growing professionalization of white male physicians and medical practitioners that accompanied a harsher view of women's work outside of the typical gender norms in the early

[86] "Ex-slave stories," 4:2, 149.
[87] "Ex-slave stories," 4:2, 150.
[88] Fett, *Working Cures*, 76.
[89] Fontenot, *Secret Doctors*, 85.
[90] Anita Spring and Judith Hoch-Smith, *Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles* (New York: Plenum Press, 1978). Also see, Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives Nasty Wenches & Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

nineteenth century.[91] Scholars have also discovered continuities with African cultures that promote the role of women as healers in American.[92] African gender and age norms placed a greater importance on the role played by elder women as healers in enslaved communities. as healers, midwives, and on occasion assisting in resistance. Marie Jenkins Schwartz utilized the WPA narratives to investigate the role of African American women in health matters and in plantation pregnancies. She explains the importance of these narratives, stating "some [narratives] recounted their own experiences with pregnancy, childbirth, and other health matters…Their voices tell the story of medicine as part of the history of slavery."[93] Jennifer Morgan, among other scholars, has sought to investigate cases of sexual assaults, writing more generally that "the women whose voices were captured through WPA interviews carefully crafted their stories…even women whose narratives were wrenched from them exerted considerable control as they mustered efforts to retain their autonomy and direct their future."[94] These investigation seek to understand the power struggles between planters and enslaved African American women, women who fought for control over their bodies and over their reproductive rights in an institution that sought to deny them such rights.[95] The WPA narratives

[91] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (Madison: Vintage Books, 1991).

[92] Nell Irvine Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995): Laurie A. Wilkie, "Expelling frogs and binding babies: conception, gestation and birth in African-American midwifery," *The Beginning of Life* 45 (June 2013): doi: 10.1080/00438243.2013.799043.

[93] Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 7. Also see, Cheryll Ann Cody, "A Note on Changing Patterns of Slave Fertility" in the South Carolina Race District, 1735-1865," in *Medicine, Nutrition, Demography, and Slavery*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989): Melvin Zelnik, "Fertility of the American Negro in 1830 and 1850 in the South Carolina Race District, 1735-1865," in *Medicine, Nutrition, Demography, and Slavery*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989).

[94] Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 199. Also see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985): Thelma Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had to Go Though A Plenty: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1 (Winter 1990): doi: 10.1353/jowh.2010.0050.

[95] Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 3.

offer an intimate and telling account of African American women's experiences in slavery. Through such testimonies historians can piece together how the practice of enslaved medicine was structured, and understand the vital roles that women played as health practitioners.

Both African American men and women commanded respect for their services as healers within slave communities, but the WPA narratives indicate that elderly enslaved women had greater opportunity than men to gathering and practice medicines on plantations.[96] Ruben Fox of Coahoma County, Mississippi, recalled that the plantation's elderly women primarily treated people who fell sick: "when we was sick old women, they made tea out of some kind of herbs that would cure any little ailment."[97] Similarly, Joe High from North Carolina, remembered that treatments for illness "wuz mostly done by old women."[98] Willis Williams of Jacksonville, Florida, claimed that those "who spent much time around the "grannies" during slavery learned much about herbs and roots and how they were used to cure all manner of ills."[99] William's narrative is similar to that of John Jackson's account of his "fireside training," elaborating further that it was elderly women who provided the knowledge during such apprenticeships. Elderly African American women were recognized for their superior healing authority in plantation communities and their years of accumulated knowledge and service to their communities afforded them great respect. This respect builds on a larger tradition of revering elders that had its origins in Africa and was transplanted to the American plantation, according to Fontenot[100] This respect is evident in the prefixes bestowed on elderly African Americans within the narratives. The account of John Jackson, who became a healer after his apprenticeship, is entitled

[96] Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 1-3: Fontenot, *Secret Doctors*, 88.
[97] Rawick, 7:2, 778.
[98] Rawick, 14:1, 413.
[99] "Ex-slave stories," III, 353-54.
[100] Wonda L Fontenot suggests that "Africans brought with them, as part of their value system, respect for elders. This custom continued in the Americas. Hence, it is taboo for young people to ask older persons questions in this society." Fontenot, *Secret Doctors*, 29.

"Uncle Jackson."[101] The former patient recalling her experiences with the blind healer, called her Aunt Darkas despite having no relation.[102] The narrative of Mr. and Mrs. Flowers opens with an explanation that "Everyone calls him Uncle Doc…[and her] Old Aunt Jinney," describing them as strong and influential characters beloved by their community.[103] The prefixes "Uncle" and "Aunt" reflect the strong bonds that elderly healers had to their communities. As plantation health practitioners, enslaved women facilitated in the early care of children, creating familial bonds that lasted into the youth's adulthood and perpetuating a respected role for women in the practice of enslaved medicine.

The vital role played by women in healing was further necessitated by a great distrust of American allopathic physicians. Medicine at this time was empirical and experimental with registered physicians struggling to legitimize their profession.[104] Lay practitioners who had access to the same materia medica were likely to be as effective in treating illness with home remedies as physicians were.[105] Like white lay medical persons, African American healers distrusted allopathic physicians, these attitudes are reflected in the narratives. Former South Carolina slave Josephine Bacchus recalled "Oh, de people never didn' put much faith to de doctors in dem days. Mostly, dey would use de herbs in de fields for dey medicine."[106] Another informant, Wallace Davis, described how enslaved people uses tree bark and herbs in medicinal teas to treat sickness. When asked about doctors, Davis stated "we had doctors, too, but dey made lots of dier medicine from de bark and herbs," highlighting the redundancy of needing a physician's help.[107] Willis Williams had a similar view of allopathic doctors. Continuing his

[101] "Ex-slave stories," XI:2, 2.
[102] "Ex-slave stories," 4:2, 249.
[103] "Ex-slave stories," II:2, 315.
[104] Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 37.
[105] Moss, *Southern Folk Medicine 1750-1820*, 2.
[106] Rawick, 2:1+2, 24.
[107] Rawick, 2:1+2, 307.

narrative about learning from the elderly women, he contrasts the knowledge he gained to the more orthodox practices of white physicians, concluding "the doctors gave practically the same kind of medicine for most ailments. The white doctors at the time had not been schooled to a great extent and carried…very few other kinds of medicines which they had made from herbs and roots."[108] The absence of a strong, unified medical authority encouraged lay medicine in the American South. Within African American communities, a heightened importance was placed on women who formed the foundation of enslaved medicine. Henry Baker reflected on these women with pride, stating in his narrative, "der waz some of de ole women on de plantation dat waz jus' as good as de Doctors. Dey could git you well jus' as quick as de Doctor, sometimes quicker."[109] Women played an essential role in the health of enslaved societies and their skills were recognized by their communities in the narratives of grateful patients.

Planters also recognized and utilized the medical knowledge of enslaved women in the care for the plantation workforce, and in doing so, reinforced the gendered structure of health care by elderly women. Chattel slavery's economic function encouraged planters to raise profits and decrease inefficiency; in this sense, elderly women were the ideal demographic for health practitioners. The decreased productive labor of elderly slaves performing fieldwork could be recouped in their preventative services for the health of a younger workforce. Former Texas slave Mary Gaffney recalled "if we were just ailing Maser got us the old negro Mammy and she would gather all the medicine out of the woods."[110] Gaffney's narrative suggests that the slave owner utilized the medical knowledge and manpower of elder slave women to save time and money on the necessary medicines. Milton Marshall of South Carolina claimed that "de old

[108] "Ex-slave stories," III, 354.
[109] "Ex-slave stories," 2:1, 143.
[110] Rawick, 5:4, 1451.

folks" would gather herbs and bark for medicines which the planter would then give to his fieldworkers each morning "to keep worms from gitting in dem."[111] On Ruben Fox's plantation, the planter delegated the actual dissemination of medicine to trusted elder women, "and they would give it to the sick people according to the way Old Master said."[112] The preventative care provided by these women was extensive and time consuming, made possible only by their absence from fieldwork. "Ma" Stevens was herself a healer and recalled "when I was young…I didn't have much time to cure folks. Den when I got too old to work steady I stay home an' mix up all kind of charms and magic remedies."[113] Gus Feaster, similarly described that women "too old to do any work" would "take and study what to do fer de ailments of grown folks and lil' chilluns."[114] Feaster recalled that the responsibilities of these women included weaning, feeding, and bathing babies, while also gathering and making medicines to alleviate back pain for other slaves. Utilizing the medical knowledge of elderly enslaved women was an economically viable solution for a self-sufficient plantation. But, in doing so planters, consciously or unconsciously, reinforced the structure of an African American medical identity that was dominated by the labors of women.

The threat of sexual violence was constant in the lives of enslaved women who struggled to control their reproductive health in a society that did not define such control an essential right of slaves.[115] In 1808 the United States officially ended its participation in the international slave trade barring further importation of slaves into the country. The only access to more slaves in the Southern states was through natural increase, the procreation of existing slaves. Historian

[111] Rawick, 3:3, 175.
[112] Rawick, 7:2, 778.
[113] Rawick, 2:4, 584.
[114] "Ex-slave stories," 2:2, 68.
[115] Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 3.

Jennifer L. Morgan suggests that the reproductive capabilities of enslaved women had been an area of focus for slave owners since America's colonial origins. The close of the slave trade and continued rise of the plantation economy in the South placed greater demands on the enslaved women's reproductive as well as their productive labor.[116] Planters looked to exploit a racial assumption that African women and their descendants in America were more fecund than white women.[117] According to historian Thelma Jennings, nearly 40% of WPA informants reported experiencing or witnessing some form of sexual abuse.[118] Hilliard Yellerday of North Carolina explained that "a slave girl was expected to have children as soon as she became a woman. Some of them had children at the age of twelve and thirteen years old."[119] Former Tennessee slave Alice Douglass warned "You better have them whitefolks some babies iffen you didn't wanta be sold away."[120] The threat of being separated from loved ones was a facet of everyday life for African American women in bondage. Mary Grayson's mother was sold away from her parents because she was "too young to breed."[121] A few years later she was sold again because her new master deemed that "she was no good breeder." The planter separated her from her husband and sold her across state lines.[122] Expecting mothers had to weigh the health concerns raised by pregnancy and child birth against the cruel and unpredictable nature of chattel slavery. A Georgia informant recalled a story about a woman who gave birth to twins on a neighboring plantation. The day after the delivery her master, described as being "just as mean as he could

[116] Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 49: Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 10.
[117] Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 15.
[118] Jennings goes on to say that the reluctance of former slave women to discuss these private matters, especially with white interviewers, accounts for why these figures are not higher. Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had to Go Though A Plenty," 45-6.
[119] "Ex-slave stories," 11:2, 434.
[120] Rawick, 7, 73.
[121] Rawick, 7, 115.
[122] Rawick, 7, 116.

be," ordered her to scrub the floors of his house.[123] Feeling weakened from the demands of child birth and insufficient bedrest, the new mother fainted from exhaustion before completing the task. The planter had her whipped and beaten until the mother died from her wounds. The cruelty of slavery placed exceedingly heavy demands on the reproductive capabilities of enslaved women. These demands raised health questions that were unique to women, highlighting one way that African American men and women experienced slavery in gendered ways.

To assert control over their reproductive health, African American women relied on the support of each other and the medical knowledge to prevent or terminate unwanted pregnancies. The use of abortifacients was dangerous in that it defied planter's demands for procreation and made women vulnerable to punishment and reprisal. But, despite these dangers women continued to intervene in the reproduction process. Women were forced to hide knowledge of abortifacients, sharing it among themselves in secret and in doing so creating a medical knowledge unique to women's health.[124] When Mary Gaffney was forced to marry a man she despised, she relied on her knowledge of local flora to prevent pregnancy: "I never did have any slaves to grow and Master he wondered what was the matter. I tell you son, I kept cotton roots and chewed them all the time but I was careful not to let Master know or catch me."[125] Similarly, former Texas slave Lu Lee commented that "I have known too of women that got pregnant and didn't want the baby and the [sic] unfixed themselves by taking calomel and turpentine."[126] Lee continued by explaining that when knowledge of these abortifacients became known to the planter, enslaved women switched to indigo, a plant that grew on the plantation and was used for

[123] "Ex-slave stories," 13:3+4, 296.
[124] Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 3.
[125] Rawick, 5:4, 1453.
[126] Rawick, 5:6, 2299.

dying clothes.[127] Knowledge of the abortifacient properties of plants such as Okra, cotton, and aloe would have accompanied slaves from Africa to the America's where it was disseminated among enslaved women. The practice of controlled fertility was common enough for some slaves to express their fears about the continuation of the race. Dave Byrd of Texas went so far as to project the "depopulation" of the race, explaining "all the negro womens they had become wise to this here cotton root" chewing it so that "they would not give birth."[128] Informant Anna Lee described a similar use of chewing cotton root to prevent pregnancy. The defiant tone of her account underscores the belief that these women were directly shaping slavery by their actions: "If slavery had lasted much longer they would not have been any slaves [left]…we had done quit breeding."[129] The struggle over the reproductive health of enslaved women necessitated a medical culture separate from the health needs of enslaved men. Of the inheritability of slavery from mother to child, Morgan writes, "racial slavery, then, functioned euphemistically as a social condition forged in African women's wombs."[130] By relying on the medical knowledge of abortifacients, women worked together to wrestle control over their own bodies away from their masters and resist the demands of slavery on their reproductive health.

CONJURING AND HEALTH

When herbal remedies failed to cure illness many African Americans placed their faith in conjurers to treat the spiritual aliments that plagued their wellbeing. In the Antebellum South, conjurers provided divine healing similar to the West African Bablawo healers of the Yoruba people.[131] Conjurers derived their power to manipulate the spiritual world from divine gifts

[127] Rawick, 5:6, 2299.
[128] Rawick, 3:2, 568.
[129] Rawick, 6:6, 2284.
[130] Morgan, *Laboring* Women, 56. Also see Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 5.
[131] Ira E. Harrison, "Health Status and Healing Practices: Continuations from an African Past," *Journal of African Studies* 2 (Winter 1975): 547. http://search.proquest.com/docview/1303253415?accountid=14509: Bankole, *Slavery and Medicine*, 143.

received through birth that singled them out as important figures in the community. Fanny Randolph explained that her niece was born with a veil over her face, a powerful sign that meant she could see ghosts.[132] In conjure narratives a "veil," sometimes known as a "caul," refers to remnant amniotic material from the womb, its presence was a believed to be a sign of power and a connection to the spirit world.[133] Lucretia Alexander of Arkansas believed conjurers held the power of clairvoyance, stating "a seventh child can more or less tell you things that are a long way off."[134] In both cases, the narrators state that it was the nature of an individual's birth that bestowed on them certain powers attributed to conjuring. This precursor privileged some while screening others from associating with these abilities, but unlike enslaved plantation healers, there appears to be no gender preference for who could control such powers. Those that claimed to possess conjuring powers commanded a lot of respect amongst believers for their ability to influence the supernatural world through charms and rituals.[135] It was their ability to successfully connect to the spiritual realm (where others could not) that, afforded them a position of authority in enslaved communities. Remembering the many services provided by conjurers, Patsy Moses stated "de old voodoo and conjure doctors was de ones dat had de mo's power it seemed in de days befo' an after dey free."[136] African Americans both respected and feared conjurer's abilities to affect the wellbeing of individuals through supernatural forces. Where conjurers possessed the power to heal, the power to harm was ever present. Parents told their children to respect

[132] "Ex-slave stories," IV:3, 197.

[133] Yvonne Chireau, "Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 7 (Summer 1997): 232, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1123979.

[134] Rawick, 8:1+2, 39.

[135] Charms were known by many regional names including conjure kits, fixes, fetishes, others took on original African names such as gbo from the ancestral lands of the Dahomey people, or minkisi from the Kongo Kingdom. For more references see, James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares: African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 15, 75: Fett, *Working Cures*, 95. Fontenot, *Secret Doctors*, 113-26.

[136] Rawick, 5:3+4, 143.

conjurers least they suffer a curse. Ellen Betts remembered a story about a disrespectful youth who was fatally fixed by an offended conjurer and "all a sudden dat li'l boy jus' crumple up dead on de floor."[137] Marrinda Jane Singleton recalled "many of us slaves feared the charm of witchcraft more than de whippin' dat de Master gave."[138] The reputation of conjurers as healers and bewitchers created a powerful persona that made them influential figures for those who believed in their abilities. Conjurers were a central part of enslaved healing practices, commanding great power and respect for successfully being able to navigate the supernatural realm and preserve spiritual health.

Though conjurers dealt specifically where the spiritual realm overlapped with the living world, the actual spectrum of their services were both extensive and vital for their communities. Many African Americans did not separate the metaphysical from the physical; instead everything coexisted in a harmonious balance that required as much attention to spiritual matters as to worldly affairs.[139] If there was an imbalance in life, conjurers held the authority to correct it through supernatural means. This authority often aligned with the herbal remedies and treatments of other African American healers; illness that persisted with no relief from herbal remedies became the domain of conjurers. Duncan Gaines of Madison, Florida, explained that "there was much talk of "Hoodooism" and anyone ill for a long time without getting relief from herb medicine was thought to be "fixed" or suffering from some sin."[140] Gaines' narrative emphasizes the notion that illness could be affected by something that could not be treated with traditional

[137] Rawick, 4:1+2, 80.
[138] Perdue et al., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 267.
[139] Fett, *Working Cures*, 93. Also see, Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 106. D.T. Bailey, *African American Alternative Medicine: Using Alternative Medicine to Prevent and Control Chronic Diseases* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 2002): Elliott. J. Gorn, "Black Magic: Folk beliefs of the Slave Community," in *Science and Medicine in the Old South*, ed. Ronald. L Numbers and Todd L. Savitt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).
[140] "Ex-slave stories," III, 136.

medicine, a “fix” that required another form of treatment. Similar views were expressed by James Washington: “when yuh bin fix, yuh can’t git well wid regluh medicine,” and Emmaline Heard: "I called medical doctors and they jest didn’t do me no good. Let me tell you right here, when you done been conjured, medical doctors cant do you no good; you got ter get a nudder conjur doctor ter get it off you."[141]

The 1988 archeological investigation of the Jordan Plantation revealed a host of flora and animal bones in small bags believed to have been used by conjurers in Texas. Similar ingredients are reported in the narratives as effective charms charged with supernatural powers. Patsy Moses recalled “a favorite charm bag [made by conjurers] is a red flannel cloth wid some bones of a frog, a piece of snake skin, some horse hairs, and a spoonful of ashes, dis bag was used to protect one from his enemy.”[142] By themselves these charms held little value to those without conjuring powers, it was through their use by conjurers that these charms took on power to influence the spiritual wellbeing of their recipient. Much the same way that allopathic physicians might treat an illness with various techniques until one is found to be effective, so too did African American healers when they turned to conjuring in lieu of herbal remedies. In this sense, conjuring became an extension of African American healing practices and was in every way as important to the medical identity as herbal healers.

In matters of fertility and childbirth, conjurers worked alongside the physical practices of healers and midwives to influence and protect children through the manipulation of spiritual forces. Emmaline Kilpatrick described a conjurer of Native American descent that lived across the creek from her plantation. She recalled that the “Injun ‘oman…sold us chawms ter mak de mens lak us, en chawms dat would git er boy baby, er anudder kind er chawm effen yer want er

[141] *Drums and Shadows*, 39: “Ex-slave stories,” 4:4, 251.
[142] Rawick, 5:3, 143.

gal baby."[143] Kilpatrick's narrative reveals a desire to influence the gender of an unborn child and a belief in the conjurer's charms to manipulate spiritual forces in order to achieve this. By supplying a powerful charm to the expecting parents, the conjurer reaffirms the notion that she is an influential figure in the spiritual aspect of birth. Rena Clark of Lafayette County, Mississippi, was a conjurer and midwife who employed a repertoire of charms and herbal remedies in the birthing and early life of a child. At the moment of birth, Clark would tie a mole's right foot around the child's neck, "this was to keep him in good health and to bring him good luck."[144] Staying with the child through their infancy, Clark would later attach six small white buttons to the mole's foot to help with teething, explaining that "if this was done a child would never feel any pain and would not know he was cutting teeth."[145] She further described herbal teas to ensure the child caught "hives" at the age of six months, and small charm bags containing asadetida to ward off measles, mumps, and whooping cough when they were older.[146] Clark's narrative offers an enriching insight into the hybridity of physical and spiritual healing. By her own account, Clark was present through every stage of a child's life into and throughout adulthood, every step of the way providing supernatural protection and good luck alongside herbal remedies. These children would grow up respecting and revering conjurers like Rena Clark, perpetuating the belief in such skills and the need for them within the community.

Conjurers offered enslaved African Americans powerful psychological tools to survive, resist, and push back against the institution of slavery. The power to harm or to protect could be turned on slave owners in order to reduce the oppression of daily life under bondage. Believers in conjuring sought out the power of charms to influence their position in slavery and protect

[143] Rawick, 13:3, 12.
[144] Rawick, 7:2, 409.
[145] Rawick, 7:2, 409.
[146] Rawick, 7:2, 409-10.

them from cruel masters. Isaac Carpenter, for example, consulted a conjurer on two separate occasions concerning two separate mistresses who beat him mercilessly. The conjurer offered up a charm for protection and some yellow powder to alter the slave-owner's mean temperaments. On both occasions, Carpenter was sold shortly after consulting the conjurer. This outcome was favorable for Carpenter who in the process escaped the cruelty of his former master and no doubt influence his decision to return to the conjurer a second time when those services were needed once more.[147] In this case, Carpenter believed that it was the conjurer who had provided him the means to alter his situation under bondage for more favorable conditions. Aunt Clara Walker was born with a veil over her face and exercised the power of conjuring throughout her life as a healer. She recalled that on a nearby plantation a newly acquired bondsman from Africa also exhibited conjuring skills. This "witch doctor" as she described him, did not care for his new master and so created an effigy of him from mud and sticks, "an' he stick thorns in its beck. Sure 'nuff, his master got down with a misery in his back."[148] The "witch doctor" left the thorns in the figure, "until he thought his master had got 'nuff punishment."[149] As a practitioner of conjuring herself, Walker's account of the nearby conjuring man expressed admiration for his power over his master's health. In a reversal of plantation power relations, the African slave dictated the slave owner's punishment and its duration. Whether the slave owner believed his misery was caused by the slave is unknown, but Walker's account suggests that enslaved African Americans in the surrounding areas believed in the conjuring man's ability to punish those responsible for their bondage.

[147] Works Projects Administration, *Slave Narratives: a Folk History of Slavery in the United States; From Interviews with Former Slaves; Indiana Narratives* (Columbia: Quality Classics, 2010), Section 4. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13579/13579-h/13579-h.htm

[148] Rawick, 11:7, 20-21.

[149] Rawick, 11:7, 21.

Scholarship has tended to understand conjuring as a tool of resistance against planter oppression. [150] While it was certainly used in such a way, the WPA narratives reveal that conjuring was utilized more as a control on the social structure within enslaved African American communities. The close proximity of slave quarters increased slave interactions, reduced privacy, and exacerbated daily conflicts that might result in the desire for revenge.[151] Animosity needed to be checked and conjuring provided the means for offended individuals to strike back at their antagonists through clandestine attacks on a person's spiritual wellbeing. Informant John Spencer explained that "tricking" or malign magic had been extensively used for revenge in the time of slavery.[152] Used in such a way, conjuring offered a clandestine means to manipulate the spiritual wellbeing of an individual and affect their physical health. In the early post-emancipation period, Ellen Dorsey decided to leave her husband and find work on her former plantation. A short time later she took ill and explained that it was because her estranged husband had consulted a conjurer to make her too sick to work and "tuh make me come back home [to her husband]."[153] Social conflicts involving conjurers often resulted in the death of the antagonist. A Georgian informant named Estella Jones recalled a conflict between two slaves on the plantation, Willie and John. John admired Willie's step-daughter but could not convince Willie to allow him to see her. After a heated disagreement between the two men "John made it up in his mind to conjure Willie. He went to the spring and planted somethin' in the mouth of it,

[150] Yvonne Chireau, "The Uses of the Supernatural: Toward a History of Black Women's Magical Practices," in *A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism*, ed. Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), 171-89: Covey, *African American Slave Medicine*, 57: Fett, *Working Cures*, 87. Though Sharla Fett does not share this belief, her acknowledgement of it and historiographical investigation into it can provide the read with a clear summary of the discourse: Gorn, "Black Magic," 295-326: William M. Harvey, "Black American Folk Healing," in *Folk Medicine and Herbal Healing*, ed. George G. Meyers, Kenneth Blum, and John G. Cull (Springfield: Thomas Publishing, 1981), 153-65.

[151] Fett, *Working Cures*, 87.

[152] Perdue et al., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 278.

[153] *Drums and Shadows*, 29.

and when Willie went there the next day to get a drink he got the stuff in the water."[154] The conjuring resulted in Willie's death, the causes of which were described as choking from turtles lodged in his throat. With Willie's passing, John no longer had a barrier between him and the step-daughter but now had a reputation for malicious conjuring. In a later interview, Jones recalled the loss of her cousin. After sharing a drink with his scorned lover, Jones' cousin complained of frogs growing in his belly: "the frogs had got to be a pretty good size, you could hear 'em holler every time he opened his mouth….'fore he died you could see the frogs jumpin' 'bout in him and you could even feel 'em."[155] References to animals within the body, such as spiders, snakes, frogs, lizards, and turtles, pervade the memories of conjuring in the WPA narratives. Historian Yvonne Chireau, associates these lower forms of animal life with mud, slime, and corruption, stating "African Americans might have interpreted some afflictions as moral sin…the subsequent release of the creatures could denote an individual's freedom from corruption, or sin."[156] The conjuring of an individual was the result of how their actions were perceived by others. Morally corrupt actions could incur the employ of a conjurer by aggrieved parties. The victim's deteriorating health or death was of a direct correlation to the conjurer's will and their power to place supernatural forces within the body. Conjurers then, acted as a reminder that a person's actions had consequences. Conjure narratives are richly textured and reveal much about the social structure and belief in the duality of healing and spirituality in African American communities. They also counter the presumption that conjuring was a tool used solely to resist slavery, these narratives show that conjurers were powerful figures in their

[154] "Ex-slave stories," IV:4, 277.
[155] Jones, "Ex-slave stories," 278.
[156] Chireau, *Black Magic,* 106.

communities who provided a form of checks and balances within the social structure of enslaved communities.

CONCLUSION

The personal histories recorded by the Works Progress Administration offer scholars first-hand accounts of the lived experiences under chattel slavery. The voices of former slaves offer insight into the complicated social bonds that made up enslaved communities in the Antebellum South. They shed light on how enslaved African Americans viewed their bondage; as historian George Rawick stated in 1972, "silenced so long, they [the narratives] must be allowed an opportunity to inform us, and should not simply be used to illustrate some preconceived theory. It is their memories and ideas that must be allowed to speak."[157] Four decades since Rawick's study, the narratives continue to challenge how scholars think about chattel slavery, textualizing a rich oral tradition that sustained an African American medical identity through slavery and post-emancipation. Through the narratives scholars can understand how former slaves viewed the creation of some of the earliest sociocultural praxes that contributed to a larger African American identity.

This thesis investigates one such praxis, that of health care and medicine practiced by African American healers in the Antebellum South. The WPA narratives reveal much about an African American medical culture that operated within enslaved communities and alongside allopathic physicians and white medical lay practitioners. These accounts of ancestral knowledge from Africa also shows signs of Native American and European-American influences that created an eclectic materia medica of American flora. The narratives highlight the prominent roles assumed by women elders, who held position of wisdom and respect within enslaved

[157] Rawick, *The American Slave*, xxxv.

communities. Continuities with African deity worship are present in the sacred world view and spiritualism associated with the access to medicinal plants found in forests and swamps. Similarly, African religious practices can be found in the African American conjurer's power to manipulate the spiritual world. Conjurers worked alongside other African American healers as an extension of the healing process. A patient with a headache might seek an herbal healer to alleviate the physical symptoms while also seeking a conjurer to cure the supernatural causes of the pain. A conjurer's power to heal went hand-in-hand with their ability to harm individuals. The duality of ethnomedical beliefs with cosmology created an African American medical culture sometimes distinct from those around it, providing a means to resist the everyday domination of chattel slavery. Through the testimonies of former slaves, scholars have access to first-hand accounts of the African American medical knowledge they used to adapt, survive, and resist bondage. As the largest singular collection of former slave narratives, the WPA narratives are, and should continue to be, an essential component for our understanding of the "Peculiar Institution."

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