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ARTICLE

# "An Inside Thing to Live by": Refusal, Conjure, and Black Feminist Imaginaries among Granny Midwives

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**Abstract**
"Granny midwives" often based their authority to practice midwifery on the spiritual traditions of rootwork or conjure passed down by the foremothers who trained them. However, granny midwives were compelled to give up their conjure-infused methods of birthing if they wanted to become licensed (that is, to get a "permit") or be authorized by the state to continue their practice of midwifery. In response, some granny midwives refused to recognize the authority of the state in the birthing realm, willfully retaining rootwork in their birthing practices. In this article, I contrast the response of granny midwives, a politics of refusal, with another major tradition in African American thought, a politics of recognition, such as gaining citizenship and rights, permits, and licenses from the state. Due to the political stakes of the granny midwife's conflict with the state, I argue that black feminists often endow the figure of the granny midwife (or more broadly, the conjure woman) with the political significance of refusal in our emancipatory imaginaries. To demonstrate this, I will analyze the interventions in black liberation politics that two black feminist writers make through their invocation of granny midwives: Zora Neale Hurston's essay, "High John de Conquer," and Toni Morrison's novel, *Paradise*.

> "They're not gonna stop me from doing the gift God give me to do. I don't want no man stopping these hands from doing what says the Lord. I don't need a permit to deliver no babies. If God tell me not to do it I won't do it"—Onnie Lee Logan

The defiant words in the epigraph were spoken by Onnie Lee Logan, a "granny midwife" of Alabama during the previous century (Clark and Logan 2014, 76).[1] Largely responsible for black and white births in the rural US South, granny midwives and their roles stretch back into their matrilineal line through mothers, grandmothers, and aunts.[2] Granny midwives often based their authority to practice midwifery upon the spiritual traditions of *rootwork* or *conjure* passed down by the foremothers who trained them.[3] During Logan's lifetime, however, granny midwives were compelled to

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give up their conjure-infused methods of birthing if they wanted to become licensed or authorized by the state (that is, to get a "permit") to continue their practice of midwifery. In response, some granny midwives like Logan refused to recognize the authority of the state in the birthing realm, maintaining a blend of rootwork and "modern" medicine in their practice. In this article, I contrast the response of granny midwives, a politics of refusal, with another major tradition in African American thought, a politics of recognition, such as gaining citizenship and rights, permits, and licenses from the state. Because of the political stakes of the granny midwife's conflict with the state, I argue that within black feminist imaginaries the figure of the granny midwife (or more broadly, the conjure woman) becomes endowed with the political significance of refusal. Namely, the granny midwife figure stands as a symbol of the limits of political recognition by a state that continues to oppress us. When invoked, the granny midwife reminds us of what we stand to gain, what we must give up, and what we cannot afford to lose when we seek political recognition from such a state. To demonstrate this, I will analyze the interventions in black liberation politics that two black feminist writers make through their invocation of granny midwives: Zora Neale Hurston's essay, "High John de Conquer," and Toni Morrison's novel, *Paradise*.

In scholarship, we tend to read actions such as Logan's as resistance—especially when it involves conjure (Fett 2002, 11–12; Rucker 2006, 1–14; Young 2007, 1–24; Hazzard-Donald 2013, 68–70, 78–83). However, resistance is closely bound up with a politics of recognition. That is, I consider resistance as a struggle between oppressed and oppressor over the recognition of our humanity, along with the rights that accompany inclusion in this category.[4] In contrast, what is striking about Logan's defiance is a refusal of the state's recognition of her authority, granted by a permit to continue midwifery. A crucial insight that Logan's defiance offers us is the terms by which political recognition in the US is often granted. Namely, for Logan to gain a permit she must accede to a narrative of black abjection. That is, she must accept not only that the rootwork practices of her ancestors are inferior to Western medicine but that they are unsanitary and evil, instruments of physical death and social destruction, when practiced upon her clients (Lee 1996, 37–39; Bonaparte 2016, 32). And to get a permit, Logan must give up the methods of conjure in her midwifery practice and take on the state's methods, which were far from culturally neutral (Lee 1996, 12, 63–64; Owens 2018, 23).[5] In other words, Logan must assent to an imperative of cultural assimilation put forth by the state, cloaked in the language of public health and safety (Bonaparte 2016, 26, 29). And the abjection of Logan's black cultural practices (rootwork) is intimately tied to the advancement of her cultural assimilation: the disavowal implicit in abjection is sometimes necessary for assimilation to even take place. Logan's refusals of black abjection and cultural assimilation remain important considerations in our discussions of black liberation politics today.

For example, several Black feminists across disciplines have recently argued that we need to more fully theorize the political significance of such acts of refusal performed by the oppressed (Perry 2018, 174–175; Campt 2019; Hartman 2020).[6] This can be seen especially in Kristie Dotson's recent "On the Way to Decolonization in a Settler Colony." In this essay, Dotson analyzes the identity politics in the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" (Combahee 1995) to demonstrate "a range of refusals that aid in resisting the completion of settler colonialism in North America, which is still an uncompleted project" (Dotson 2018, 191). For Dotson, these refusals are generated by "orienting stories" that inform our identities as African American women, such as the ancestral tales passed down through generations

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in her own family. "Orienting" stories are contrasted to "originating stories," which justify the erection of settler-colonial states by erasing their past and present violence toward oppressed peoples, producing "colonial unknowing" (190–91). Dotson notes that these "originating stories" are premised upon acceptance of our cultural abjection. Dotson rejects this position of black abjection when she writes: "I know that in telling the stories I've told and accepting them as my orienting stories, I have refused to 'disavow' my own people's 'story, belief, authority.' I come to this world with cultural inheritances and practices and I will not relinquish them" (196). Dotson also notes that "originating stories" are premised upon acceptance of an emancipatory politics that prioritizes cultural assimilation or "migrations toward whiteness" (196). Since the terms of political advancement in the US often rely upon identification with settler aspirations or acceptance of its "originating stories" (that is, becoming "just American") (196), the refusal prompted by insisting upon "orienting stories" has implications for how we conceptualize liberation. I build upon Dotson's insights on refusal and recognition within black feminist politics by positing that the figure of the granny midwife itself is an "orienting story" within black feminist thought. That is, through my analysis of Hurston and Morrison, I aim to show how the figure of the granny midwife invokes refusals similar to the ones Dotson performs here: a refusal to give up the knowledge of our ancestors (via black abjection) as well as a refusal of cultural assimilation.

Dotson draws upon the recent work of cultural anthropologist Audra Simpson in her development of refusal. In her *Mohawk Interruptus,* Simpson marks several features of refusal in her research with the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke. Two aspects will guide how I identify and analyze refusal in the practices of granny midwives. First, their refusals often highlights what Simpson calls "nested sovereignties." Simpson notes that "sovereignty may exist within sovereignty. One does not entirely negate the other, but they necessarily stand in terrific tension and pose serious jurisdictional and normative challenges to each other" (Simpson 2014, 10). These challenges may be posed as questions by Indigenous peoples of North America, such as: "Whose citizen are you? What authority do you answer to?" (10). Simpson documents refusals that often target citizenship, which she takes to be the state's "primary technique of distributing rights and protections" (16). In these case studies, Simpson found that "[a]s well as producing affectively structured citizens, the state produces the conditions for what [she] want[s] to suggest are 'distantiations,' 'disaffiliations,' or outright refusals" (16). That is, the state introduces several "affiliations" to cultivate the recognition of its legitimacy and authority by its citizens, such as pledges to the national flag or prescribing certain behaviors when hearing the national anthem (such as standing). However, those methods of affiliation can also become a means by which the state's legitimacy or authority is refused. And so, by a "willful distancing from state-driven forms of recognition and sociability in favor of others" (16), Simpson's respondents "challenge the very legitimacy" of the state (10) as well as remind the state of its unjust and violent origins (22). Likewise, Logan's defiant words in the epigraph challenge the state's legitimacy even to authorize midwifery. The state-issued license to practice midwifery is an acknowledgment of the state's authority in the birthing realm. However, Logan distances herself from such recognition by denying the need for this license. I take Logan's quote to be asking implicitly: "who are they to tell her she can't deliver babies when she's been charged by God to do so?"

Logan's denial of recognition is intimately tied to the second insight drawn from Simpson's account. Namely, refusal is an alternative to a commonly proposed remedy of social injustice: political recognition from the state. Simpson argues that "[r]efusal comes with the requirement of having one's *political* sovereignty acknowledged and

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upheld, and raises the question of legitimacy of those who are usually in the position of recognizing: What is their authority to do so?" (Simpson 2014, 11). Put another way, there is often an "underside to [the] desire for recognition" which requires that we accept the terms of those *doing* the recognizing (Winters 2016, 39). For some Indigenous peoples of North America, such political recognition is "politically untenable" and "normatively should be refused" (Simpson 2014, 22), for the terms of that recognition involve accepting the legitimacy of a state that has sought to destroy their people (or assenting to what Dotson calls "originating stories"). Instead of political recognition, some operate according to what Simpson calls "feeling citizenships": "alternative citizenships to the state that are structured in the present space of intracommunity recognition, affection, and care, outside of the logics of colonial and imperial rule" (109). "Feeling citizenships" work to preserve the prior and ongoing cultures that were present before settler colonialism, creating the conditions for "nested sovereignty" to arise (2, 19). In a different context, granny midwives preserved ties to prior and ongoing cultures that were present before enslavement through their retention of rootwork in their practice of midwifery.[7] As such, the figure of the granny midwife provided an alternative model of intragroup racial dynamics that returns leadership and authority to black women while honoring specified links to our West African ancestors.[8]

## "Destiny is my Deliverance"

Similar to Simpson's "feeling citizenships," midwives in black communities often cultivated a sense of esteem and authority that slavery (and the state) sought to extinguish (Fett 2002, 53–55).[9] This was, in part, due to the respect many African Americans held for the spiritual traditions culled from their enslaved West African ancestors. As Katrina Hazzard-Donald notes in her *Mojo Workin'*, several key features of West African religious traditions (what she calls the "African Religion Complex") were incorporated into rootwork (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 40).[10] These features included "counterclockwise sacred circle dancing (that is, the Ring Shout), ancestor reverence, divination, belief in spiritual cause of malady, and herbal and naturopathic medicine" (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 40). Granny midwives, in turn, drew upon these features in their healing practices, such as their use of herbs and roots (137–45).[11] These West African religious features were often blended with Christianity in the healing practices of granny midwives (Fett 2002, 76–83; Martin 2012, 88–91; Hazzard-Donald 2013, 139–45).

The healing practices of granny midwives that sustained such "feeling citizenships" within black communities also created conflict outside these communities. For example, during slavery, many of the enslaved would throw away or refuse medicines prescribed by white doctors, even risking severe punishment (Fett 2002, 147–48). Many of the enslaved put their trust in granny midwives because they deeply *mistrusted* white doctors. This mistrust stemmed from the complicity of white doctors with our oppression during slavery (148–53). The enslaved midwife's willfulness in refusing to discard her own sacred rituals for what white doctors prescribed to the enslaved was a continual source of frustration (140, 174–76; Luke 2018, 22, 49). Although slave owners relied upon the labor of enslaved midwives to keep the plantation running, they objected to the midwives' claims of spiritual authority not only because they were women, but also because they were African (Lee 1996, 12; Fett 2002, 47–49; Bonaparte 2016, 27; Owens 2018, 80).[12]

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This struggle over authority in the birthing realm continued well into the Reconstruction period. For instance, the state began to introduce restrictions upon medical licensing for midwifery (Luke 2018, 32–38).[13] With these restrictions, the state aimed to marginalize and eventually abolish the presence of granny midwives in the medical profession (Bonaparte 2016, 27). These restrictions continued to increase during Logan's time, such that if granny midwives were to be recognized as legitimate actors in the birthing realm by the state, they had to cede the spiritual traditions that motivated them to become midwives in the first place. This conflict between granny midwives and the state continued well into the 1970s, when the state began to outlaw midwifery.

Despite the state's eventual outlawing of midwifery, as a granny midwife, Logan maintained a place of great esteem and authority in her county, for she was "the [one] who delivered you. She was the first one to put her hands on you. She's the one that made you cry, got the breath in you" (Clark and Logan 2014, 31). And she accepted this role because she believed she was called to it. To this effect, Logan reports having visions of midwifery and healing when playing as a child with her doll (37). When the state sought to supervise and regulate midwifery, Logan initially complied by enrolling in classes provided by the state board of health. While in these classes, however, Logan notes that

> when they was teaching me this in my mind I was addin a lil bit mo to it. . . . That's how come I say God give it to me. The Bo'd a Health didn't give it to me. Readin books didn't give it to me. I progressed outa my own mind. My own mind. Thinkin and listenin and knowledge that God give me. (43)

Her refusal to comply with state-sanctioned methods of birthing was evidenced by her incorporation of rootwork, such as using roots for medicinal teas, placing an ax under the bed to "cut" the pain of labor, and sacred knots tied around the belly of the mother to balance energy (32–35).[14] These traditions affirmed Logan's spiritual authority to practice midwifery and even shaped her relation to her body in the performance of her duties as a midwife. For example, she insisted that she could not take credit for her forty years of successful deliveries (losing only one baby in her entire career). Instead, the credit was due to God who "guided my hands. He guided those lil hands and this mind and I did it and it worked" (65). Her understanding of the spiritual dimensions of midwifery prompts her to, in the epigraph, refuse to retire when the state began to outlaw midwifery.

To temper the challenges to its authority issued by Logan and other granny midwives, the state introduced several "affiliations," facilitating the recognition of its authority in the birthing realm. We can see this in state-mandated midwife meetings, which included several rituals that stressed the cultural abjection of rootwork practices and encouraged assimilation into Western knowledge practices (that is, "modern medicine"). For example, the "Midwife Song," sung at every meeting, had lyrics set to Negro spirituals. As Jenny M. Luke notes in her *Delivered by Midwives,* this song was also "sung with accompanying hand motions to reinforce principles of hygiene" (Luke 2018, 14). As Molly C. Dougherty indicates, these cleansing rituals during midwife meetings "reinforce[d] the authority of health officials" as well as the midwife's "legal obligation to integrate medical rituals into their repertoire" (Dougherty 1978, 158–60). These "medical rituals" were to replace the rootwork paraphernalia and conjure methods of granny midwives. There was also the "Birth Certificate Song," which

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described the midwife's role as an informant for the state. The lyrics of this song not only reminded midwives to inform the state of births, but it is also drenched in patriotic and nativist ideology (Luke 2018, 57–58).[15] Additionally, there were skits at these meetings that ridiculed "old superstition and emphasize[d] modern methods" (87). Because of the medical establishment's anxiety over the persistence of rootwork in birthing rituals, they sought to shame granny midwives during these meetings. This was part of the medical establishment's launch of public campaigns against granny midwives, aiming to abject the African basis of their practices. That is, those who refused to give up conjure birthing rituals were portrayed as unclean, superstitious, incompetent, ignorant, and ultimately dangerous for the mother and child (Fett 2002, 46–50; Bonaparte 2016, 27–32; Owens 2018, 80; Luke 2018, 14).[16] Thus, through supplanting midwives' spiritual rituals with those sanctioned by the state, the medical establishment sought to assimilate midwives to the methods of modern medicine.[17] As one granny midwife complained, the state wanted "no more pepper tea, no more dirt dauber, no root of any kind unless you give them hot tea, regular. But no roots and things like that" (Smith and Holmes 1996, 100).

It is tempting to see this conflict in terms of scientific truth and medical efficiency. However, without taking into account the challenge that rootwork posed to the authority of the state in the birthing realm, it is hard to conceive why the state would be interested in seemingly innocuous practices such as walking a mother around a house, giving her teas, or encouraging her to wear a partner's shirt to soothe the pain of labor. I argue that these rootwork practices challenged the state because they superseded the state's authority with that of God. Further, rootwork made the recipient of such authority those deemed least knowledgeable in the national imaginary: lower-class, rural, Southern black women. I want to emphasize that it was the perceived *African* and *feminine* base of such rootwork that often drew contempt from the medical establishment. For instance, Logan reports that a doctor once blamed her for his own mistake. And in the process, he threatened to take away her license, yelling "you uncompetent negro woman. You don't know what you're doin. If you want to deliver any mo babies go back to Africa where you come from. Go back to Africa where you come from" (Clark and Logan 2014, 73).

The response of granny midwives to the medical establishment's abjection of their conjure practices operated similarly to Simpson's "nested sovereignty." Two examples of refusal by granny midwives during this time that highlight the "nested sovereignty" of their spiritual traditions are the struggle over the "midwife's bag" and the issue of forced "retirement" by the state. The "midwife's bag" was routinely checked during these state-mandated midwife meetings. With strict guidelines for its dimensions and content, this state-issued bag was to accompany midwives while they worked. By regulating what goes in the bag (state-sanctioned medical tools), the medical establishment sought to prevent midwives from carrying the materials used in rootwork birthing rituals.[18] When the state issued the heavily regulated "midwife's bag," they were attempting to co-opt the tradition of the "midwife's sack" that already existed in black midwifery. This sack often carried the tools for conjure-inflected birthing methods, such as roots and oils, birthing stools, and gunpowder (Lee 1996, 44; Luke 2018, 49). The midwife's sack originally "symbolize[d] [the midwife's] power, creativity, and skill" (Dougherty 1978, 162), so the state issued its *own* bag to assert its authority in this realm, taking midwifery firmly into its purview. Thus, this new bag became the midwife's authorization by the state to practice, "symboliz[ing] the midwife's social position, expert knowledge, and association with high-status medical practitioners"

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(Luke 2018, 162). This method of affiliation with the state, however, also becomes a tool of disaffiliation wielded by granny midwives.

Reactions varied from carrying two bags (one for inspection and one for actual delivery use), to smuggling conjure materials into the state bag, to "turning in" the bag to the state (Dougherty 1978, 162; Smith and Holmes 1996, 100–1, 146; Lee 1996, 43–46; Hazzard–Donald 2013, 139; Luke 2018, 50, 126). For example, one granny midwife complained that the state was "quick to think teas and things going to kill somebody" (Smith and Holmes 1996, 100). Regarding these new state regulations, this granny midwife seemed to sense the implicit requirement to reject the spiritual traditions that enabled her midwifery practice in the first place. In response, she chose to "turn in" her bag, saying "I think I'll bring my bag in and give it to you all because you all are not there when this labor is going on. You don't know how it goes" (100). She simply refuses to continue her practice on the terms provided by the state. If complying with the "midwife's bag" regulations conveyed recognition of the state's authority in the birthing realm, then the granny midwife's various refusals of the bag contest the assumption of this authority. In these cases, granny midwives often insisted upon following the knowledge they received from their ancestors and their God, and they insisted that this knowledge authorized them to bypass state-sanctioned methods in delivery. Through recognizing the "feeling citizenships" their healing practices cultivated, the intergenerational knowledge passed through their matrilineal line, granny midwives also contested the state's authority in the birthing realm. This is because these "feeling citizenships" specified that God's sovereignty overrides that of the state, creating a "nested sovereignty" in these communities.

The issue of "nested sovereignty" can also be seen in the conflict over the forced "retirement" of granny midwives, mandated by the state. As Luke observes, the "[r]etirement reinforced the control and oversight of the state, and the midwife faced severe sanctions should she decide to 'unretire' herself" (Luke 2018, 127). However, when the state attempted to force them into retirement, some granny midwives would simply ignore the state and keep on practicing, even after "turning in" their bags (127–32). The logic behind this move is especially highlighted in Logan's response in the epigraph to the state's failure to reissue her license. Logan retorts: "I don't need a permit to deliver no babies. If God tell me not to do it I won't do it" (Clark and Logan 2014, 25). For Logan, the ultimate authority resides with the one who granted her the ability to practice in the first place. God's sovereignty overrides that of the medical establishment and the state.[19] And this "nested sovereignty" (Simpson 2014, 10) enables Logan to refuse to give up her rootwork practices, thereby staying the forces of cultural assimilation and rejecting a narrative that equates the African basis of her practices with social pathology.

We can see how the retention of rootwork in midwifery becomes a site of competing frameworks of black liberation (recognition versus refusal) by considering the response of black communities to this conflict over authority in the birthing realm. The midwife's relation to the state was complex and far from uniform in black communities. Some African Americans viewed the state resources funneled through the new midwifery program as a step toward progress, racial inclusion, and political recognition by the state (Holmes 1986, 287; Lee 1996, 45–47; Luke 2018, 93).[20] Black liberation for these folks included the transition from midwifery to hospital births. In contrast, some African Americans remained wary of the medical establishment's lack of care for and disrespect of black peoples. Because of these patterns of disrespect, these folks in black communities refused to pursue the services of the medical establishment.

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Instead, they chose to seek out granny midwives even after the state eventually outlawed them (Luke 2018, 131–32). And a large subset of African Americans simply did not have the option of hospital births—they were financially and geographically out of reach (Oparah 2016, 11). Within the midwifery community itself, there was contestation concerning the retention of rootwork in midwifery practices. This contestation can be seen in the colloquial distinction between the "nurse-midwife," who more fully complied with the state's requirements to be licensed (that is, recognized) by the state for their practice, and the "granny midwife," who often refused to give up rootworking methods (Lee 1996, 8–10, 17; Luke 2018, 64).[21] Although both groups may have seen their midwife practices as ordained by God and as advancing the goal of black liberation, the terms of that advancement were highly contested. My point is that such controversy within and without black communities highlights the political stakes in the granny midwife's refusal to give up the conjure in her midwifery practice: acceptance of the state's abjection of our cultural practices and the imperative to culturally assimilate. Both are key stakes in the politics of recognition, as the abjection of blackness is a condition of the assimilation required for recognition by the state. These are also the stakes that anchor Zora Neale Hurston's use of the granny midwife into her own racial politics.

## "I Got High John in my Pocket"

Hurston is considered by many scholars to be the foremother of a black feminist intellectual conjuring tradition (Pryse 1985, 11–15). Several scholars have also noted that Hurston's politics often took the form of refusals (Washington 1972, 68–70; Walker 1979, 1–4; Wilentz 1988, 285–86, Kaplan 2003, 21; Wall 2018, 18). I propose that we read these two aspects of Hurston's work together by tracing how her invocations of granny midwives are undergirded with the refusals of black abjection and cultural assimilation mentioned in the previous section. We can see this, for example, in Hurston's essay, "High John de Conquer" (Hurston 1943/1995). Published in 1943, the essay comes after Hurston's various writings on folktales concerning John de Conquer and "Massa."[22] Unlike the tales Hurston recorded in other works, this essay waxes theoretical in providing a more explicit context about the social world in which High John de Conquer is revered by African Americans. The essay is divided into four parts: an introduction that discusses John de Conquer's origin and role in enslaved life; Hurston's interview of a granny midwife on the importance of John de Conquer; Hurston's creation of a folktale whereby John de Conquer helps the enslaved develop Negro spirituals; and a conclusion that registers the continued importance of John de Conquer in the South post-emancipation. As such, this essay includes much more than the common tales of John de Conquer "getting over" on the slave master.[23] Rather, this essay focuses on the interracial relationship among African Americans that John de Conquer forges through various communal practices of rootwork. Additionally, the essay deviates from other John de Conquer tales that Hurston reports elsewhere by centering granny midwives who wield the power of John de Conquer in their rootwork. There are several refusals that Hurston performs in this essay, but for analysis here I will focus on two that are intimately connected. First is a refusal to allow enslaved life to be defined solely in terms of slavery, sorrow, or our relationships to our oppressors. That is, there is a refusal to accept the abjection of black life, even under the dire terms of slavery. Second is a refusal to equate black liberation with cultural assimilation.

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In the introduction to the essay, we can see Hurston performing the first type of refusal. Against the backdrop of the horror and suffering of enslavement, Hurston pivots to the hope that High John de Conquer brings. Hurston writes:

> High John de Conquer was a man in full, and had come to live and work on the plantations, and all the slave folks knew him in the flesh. The sign of this man was a laugh, and his singing-symbol was a drum-beat. No parading drum-shout like soldiers out for show. It did not call to the feet of those who were fixed to hear it. It was an inside thing to live by. It was sure to be heard when and where work was the hardest, and the lot the most cruel. It helped the slaves endure. They knew that something better was coming. So they laughed in the face of things and sang, "I'm so glad! Trouble don't last always." And the white people who heard them were struck dumb they could laugh. (Hurston 1943/1995, 922)

Instead of defining enslaved black life in terms of the suffering we endured, Hurston suggests that John de Conquer provided a secret, alternative way to measure our lives, or an "inside thing to live by" (922). Hurston's pivot takes on political valences when we broaden the context of Hurston's racial views beyond the Harlem Renaissance and back to abolitionist discourse.[24] The suffering and abjection of the enslaved was crucial confirmation of the abolitionist argument for the end of slavery. Abolitionists like Frederick Douglass went so far as to banish the possibility of black joy in the lives of the enslaved.[25] Hurston worried about the implications of this position upon political discourse. Namely, that political recognition and coalition with Northern white liberals required that we continue to understand black life in this way, as ultimate abjection or "objects of pity" (Hurston 1943/1995, 933). Against the abolitionist view that deplored any instance of black joy in the South (that is, "white folks" who were "struck dumb they could laugh"), Hurston carves out space where we can see ourselves as more than just what white folks have done to us. That space was provided by John de Conquer, where "[John de Conquer] was top-superior to the whole mess of sorrow. He could beat it all, and what made it so cool, finish it off with a laugh" (923).

Emphasizing John de Conquer's connection to Africa, Hurston extends the possibilities of our self-definition through and beyond the trauma of the Middle Passage and our enslavement (Plant 1995, 88–90).[26] Toward the end of the introduction, Hurston provides a clue as to why self-definition is such an important dimension of liberation. She writes that the function of John de Conquer was

> [f]ighting a mighty battle without outside-showing force, and winning his war from within. Really winning in a permanent way, for he was winning with the soul of the black man whole and free. So he could use it afterwards. For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? You would have nothing but a cruel, vengeful, grasping monster come to power. (Hurston 1943/1995, 924)

I read this passage as a turn away from the battle we wage "out there" with our oppressors to the inner demons we battle within, perhaps due to oppression as well. Hurston seems to be asking about the kinds of selves we are developing while resisting our oppression. Or, as poet Alexis Pauline Gumbs put it, Hurston seems to be asking whether "we are saving up for a freedom we will be unfit for when we get there"

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(Gumbs 2016, 96). Will we, in our very opposition to our oppressors, end up emulating them? For Hurston, this is a real concern. And as a corrective, John de Conquer is put forward as an alternative way to define ourselves for ourselves, such that we "win" in a "permanent way" with our souls "whole and free" (Hurston 1943/1995, 924).

In the second section of the essay, Hurston makes explicit John de Conquer's connection to rootwork in her interview with Aunt Shady Anne Sutton, a granny midwife.[27] While interviewing Sutton, Hurston learns that "High John de Conquer went back to Africa, but he left his power here, and placed his American dwelling in the root of a certain plant. Only possess that root, and he can be summoned at any time" (924–25). However, when Hurston first asks Sutton about this root, she is rebuffed. Hurston is initially met with suspicion and taken to be "one of these here smart colored folks that done got so they don't believe nothing" and "[d]one got shamed of the things that brought us through" (925). With these remarks, Sutton brings out the class and regional tensions that make rootwork a site of contestation in black liberation politics, much like the discussion of granny midwives in the previous section. According to these "smart colored folks," the abjection of (that is, "shamed" feelings about) rootwork was a necessary step toward racial progress and acceptance by mainstream society. However, Sutton refuses to denounce practices of rootwork like these "smart colored folks" along epistemic grounds. For instance, Sutton claims that rootwork "done teached the black folks so they knowed a hundred years ahead of time that freedom was coming. Long before the white folks knowed anything about it at all" (925). And she trusts this knowledge because of where she learned it. Similar to granny midwives in the previous section, Sutton is trained by her mother. "My mama told me," Sutton informs Hurston, "and I know that she wouldn't mislead me" (925). Hurston concludes from the interview that Sutton has given us the "inside feeling and meaning to the outside laughs around John de Conquer" (926).[28] That is to say, John de Conquer, in the case of Sutton, provided "an inside thing to live by" that caused Sutton to believe that her oppression will end, despite signs to the contrary during her own enslavement. This is why Sutton could laugh with the rest of the enslaved. Because of John de Conquer's lessons, Sutton knew that "trouble don't last always" (922).

This secret laughter also occurs in the third section, where another granny midwife is introduced, Aunt Diskie. At the end of an inward mystical journey, John de Conquer tells the enslaved that they should "pay no mind" to how the slave master denigrates them because they "know where [they] got something finer than this plantation and anything it's got on it, put away" (930). Aunt Diskie seizes upon this lesson of John de Conquer, laughing and hugging herself, and remarking, "[u]s got all the advantage, and Old Massa think he got us tied!" (930). Here, the relationship between master and slave has flipped, for rootwork has enabled Aunt Diskie to see herself in a position that places her above her master. Seen in this way, the rootwork of this granny midwife functions similarly to Audre Lorde's sense of the "erotic." For Lorde, the erotic can function as an inward guide that "inform[s] and illuminate[s] our actions upon the world around us" (Lorde 2007, 58). When we are "in touch with the erotic," it prompts a rejection of "powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial" (58). That is to say, "erotic knowledge empowers us" as a "lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives" (57). Similarly, John de Conquer was an "inside thing to live by" that not only "helped the slaves endure," but enabled them to "know that

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something better was coming" and to adjust their lives accordingly (Hurston 1943/1995, 922–25). Indeed, Hurston seems to anticipate a connection between rootwork and this sense of the erotic when she writes that John de Conquer was a source of the secret "pleasure" of the enslaved (930).

Given the emancipatory potential of rootwork, perhaps it is no surprise that Hurston echoes Sutton's concern over the disavowal of rootwork in the black liberation politics of her time. It is in the conclusion of the essay that we find Hurston performing the second refusal: namely, the refusal of a model of black liberation that embraces cultural assimilation. Hurston writes in the conclusion that we have "traded [John de Conquer] to the other Americans for things [we] could use like education and property, and acceptance" (930). In other words, some of us have accepted that cultural assimilation ("trading" our cultural practices to other Americans) is needed for racial progress ("education and property") and political recognition (or "acceptance"). However, Hurston ends the essay by pivoting to another model of black liberation that Southern blacks perform in their adherence to rootwork practices.[29] One important site of Southern black rootwork during Hurston's time, especially John de Conquer, was the Sanctified Church (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 96). Hurston notes in her earlier work, "The Sanctified Church," that the embrace of rootwork in these black Southern churches is not only a recovery of "Negro elements" of black religion "brought over from Africa" (Hurston 1938/1995, 903) but is a "protest" against "the highbrow tendency in Negro Protestant congregations as the Negroes gain more education and wealth" (901). In this way, the retention of rootwork in these black Southern churches is also, for Hurston, a refusal of the terms of political recognition, such as cultural assimilation or "approach[ing] white concepts" (904).

As Hazzard-Donald notes, it was largely granny midwives, like Sutton and Diskie, who introduced and sustained rootwork in the Sanctified Church (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 140). By voicing her interventions in black liberation politics through figures like Sutton and Diskie, Hurston ushers in a model of literary engagement where the granny midwife's legal conflicts with the state outlined in the previous section could be translated into broader, theoretical concerns about the terms of political recognition: the move toward black abjection and the embrace of cultural assimilation. In other words, the figure of the granny midwife, in Hurston's essay, is now elevated to an "orienting story" that serves as a cautionary tale of terms by which African Americans can gain recognition from a state that continues to oppress us.

## "I'm Not Your Girl About Town"

During the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement, we find black women novelists extending Hurston's model of literary engagement with granny midwives.[30] That is, many black women novelists during this time use the figure of the granny midwife to complicate, and sometimes refuse, the terms of political recognition embedded in these movements.[31] Although these movements strove to celebrate the "African" aspects of African American culture, some of the ways these "African" aspects were taken up reproduced the issues of political recognition noted above: cultural assimilation and black abjection. For instance, at times there was a tendency to romanticize "African" culture in a way that ultimately emulates or reproduces dominant culture (Dubey 1994, 13; Beale 1995, 146–47; La Rue 1995, 164–66).[32] As Angela Davis notes, Black Nationalism sometimes advocated a model of liberation that reinforced white, heterosexual patriarchy by appeals to an "abstract emphasis on African heritage"

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(Davis 1998, 122). The reproduction of US dominant culture through appeals to an abstract "African heritage" is one of the ways that our liberation dreams can become co-opted by cultural assimilation, even when we are trying to avoid it. This turn to a vague, glorious "African" past was also a way to displace the "era of slavery as the formative historical period for Americans of African descent" (122).[33] The desire to displace our enslaved past, I argue, is motivated by abjection of the black cultures forged under slavery. That is, accepting that what we did to survive during this period is something that merits shame.

These concerns also inform Toni Morrison's essays during this period. For instance, Morrison distances herself from the Black Power movement in her "Behind the Making of *The Black Book*" and "Rediscovering Black History" of 1974. Morrison criticizes the romanticism and escapism that seems to prompt this turn to an abstract "African" past. "What I am suggesting is that there is a quality of the mystic and the reactionary in our new version of history that troubles me," writes Morrison, "I don't believe it. Do we really have to go back to Shongo and the university of Timbuktu to find some reason for going on with life?" (Morrison 2008a, 35). Morrison notes that our imagination of black liberation, couched in terms of a vague "African" past, often emulates white, dominant culture. "Still I have never seen Black people so preoccupied with *the man* as I do now," Morrison complains, "[i]t's as if all those Black children had their brains shot out just so we could wear a kente cloth bikini in 'our own' magazine (that looks just like 'his' magazine)" (35). And in this rehearsal of white, dominant culture, gender dynamics become oppressive as well. For example, proclamations that "black is beautiful" were aimed at "the assumption about our loving white folks . . . based on Madame Walker's success and folksy expressions like 'all that yaller gone to waste'" (35). The straightened hair and bleached skin of black women become easy targets for criticizing internalized racism. But Morrison is more concerned about the sticky, insidious ways that whiteness works its way into our emancipatory imaginaries (35). For this reason, Morrison questions whether our romanticization of this abstract "African" past is implicitly based upon (a "reaction to") white values (Morrison 2008b, 40).

In Morrison's essays, rootwork is one place where a refusal of these models of black liberation is staged. Analyzing the Civil Rights, Black Arts, and Black Power Movements, Morrison writes that "political expediency ran roughshod over some valuable and tender roots" (Morrison 2008b, 42). We might consider this metaphor a pun because some of those things we left behind "in the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing" (41) were indeed forms of knowing found in rootwork practices. In her "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison describes these conjure practices as "indicative" of a "cosmology" that the "press toward upward social mobility" required we "get as far away from . . . as possible" (Morrison 2008c, 61).[34] However, like granny midwives in generations before her, Morrison refuses to give up the forms of knowing these rootwork practices yielded. Instead, Morrison steps into this fray of competing visions of black liberation, giving rootwork a "very strong place" in her work (61). I maintain that the turn to rootwork enables Morrison to refuse some of the problematic dynamics that informed these liberation movements: namely, the settler-colonial aspirations bound up in the "press toward upward social mobility," even when it is cloaked in gestures toward an abstract "African heritage."

Morrison's turn to conjure in this way is not idiosyncratic but part of a longstanding tradition in black feminism. As Barbara Smith argues, Morrison's use of conjure links her to Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker (Smith 1978, 22–23). In her "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Smith asserts that the incorporation of

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"traditional Black female activities of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure and midwifery" in black women's writing "is not mere coincidence" or "accidental" (23). Rather, their use of conjure is part of a "verifiable historical tradition" that is a "direct result of the specific political, social and economic experience they share" (22). There have been many critiques of Smith's essay for its reliance on "experience" over "theory" (Griffin 2007, 491–94), but I want to focus on the implications of Smith's advocation of conjure in the context of these black feminist criticisms of black liberation movements that I have been outlining so far. The use of rootwork, in the tradition Smith invokes here, is one that refuses the traps that lie in certain models of political recognition outlined above: romanticizing Africa until it reproduces the West or disavowing our ancestors by abjecting the lives and practices of the enslaved. Instead, the use of rootwork in this tradition honors those ways of knowing that our enslaved African ancestors struggled to forge right here on US soil.

We can see the use of granny midwives in this way in Morrison's novel, *Paradise*. Set in rural Oklahoma, *Paradise* is a story about two communities that have competing views of liberation, and ultimately, paradise. The contrast between the two communities offers Morrison the space to explore how intra-group dynamics, such as class, colorism, and gender politics, inform both our relations to the racial oppression we have suffered as well as our definitions of black liberation.[35] One community is composed of women (one of whom is white, the others black) who have abandoned or been abandoned by society. They have taken refuge in an old convent on the outskirts of an all-black town, Ruby. The other community is Ruby itself, which has developed a remarkable amount of wealth and self-sufficiency even under Jim Crow. The community of Ruby is defined by a devastating blow that its ancestors faced when they, being dark-skinned ex-field slaves, were shunned by a light-skinned black community. This rejection by the light-skinned community has been seared into the memories of the townspeople of Ruby. The main action of the novel revolves around the violence enacted toward the convent women, whom the townspeople see as threats to their version of paradise. That is, the convent women are blamed for the ruin and decay that has set upon the town of Ruby: the sickness and death of children, the rise of sexually transmitted diseases in the town, the increase in intergenerational strife (Morrison 2014, 11). In response to these signs of ruin, the men of Ruby advance violently on the convent to make the inhabitants leave. Although many other black feminist novels center on granny midwives, I turn to *Paradise* because it is a powerful example of how the figure of the granny midwife maneuvers through the dangers of the politics of recognition I have been outlining: namely, the imperative of cultural assimilation and the abjection of black cultural practices.

Morrison seems to reject the simplistic turn to a vague "African heritage" in Reverend Misner's black liberation politics. In an argument with Reverend Misner, Pat (a citizen of Ruby) asks why he is so interested in identifying with "Africa" rather than the rural South. "[I]s it just some kind of past with no slavery in it you're looking for?" Pat asks (210). Misner warns that ignoring "Africa" or "cut[ting] [our]self off from the roots" will result in our "wither[ing]," but Pat reminds him that "roots that ignore the branches turn into termite dust" (209). I take her response to mean that an approach to black liberation politics that evades the intra-group gender dynamics of race by appealing to a glorious, vague African past will also grind itself into dust. Her indifference to "Africa" is not borne out of spite, but rather her investment in what we have managed to accomplish in the New World during slavery in the South. As such, Pat defends her town because "this is their home; mine too" and "[h]ome is

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not a little thing" (213). Pat's emancipatory insights notwithstanding, this character is still trapped in the oppressive gender and colorist dynamics of the town. Instead of healing from the pain that the town inflicts upon her as an outsider (that is, a light-skinned woman), Pat revisits this pain upon her own daughter (203–4). It is in the figure of Lone, Ruby's granny midwife, that we get a more robust alternative to the vision of black liberation posed by Ruby. And this alternative is wrapped up in all the social-political contestation of granny midwifery provided in the previous sections.

As a granny midwife, Lone is on the verge of becoming obsolete in Ruby due to the social and political factors mentioned earlier. For instance, Lone notices that the women of Ruby "let her poke and peep, but for the delivery they traveled hours (if they could make it) to the hospital in Demby, for the cool hands of white men" (271). Despite Lone's excellent reputation of never having lost a baby, the women of Ruby turn away "their swollen bellies, their shrieks and grabbing hands" (271). The women look down upon her rootwork as superstition, as they "[l]aughed at her clean belly-bands" (or sacred knots tied upon the belly) and "poured her pepper tea in the toilet" (271). Even though Lone had "planted herbs in their gardens and given good counsel for the past twenty-five years" as a granny midwife in Ruby, the inhabitants, similar to the state, blamed Lone for things beyond her control, such as when the Fleetwoods' children are born with disabilities (271). As such, "the suspicion that she was bad luck and the comforts of the Demby hospital," Morrison writes, "combined to deprive her of the work for which she was trained" (271).

Through the character of Lone, Morrison is also careful to draw out the class and gender dynamics that contribute to the displacement of Lone as the granny midwife in Ruby. For instance, the women of Ruby are drawn to hospital deliveries in Demby partly because they provided a respite from the harsh realities of rural home deliveries, such as having to prepare "the family's breakfast the second or third day [after giving birth] and worrying about the quality of the cow's milk as well as her own" (271). In contrast, a hospital birth offered "the luxury of sleep and being away from home, the newborn taken each night for somebody else's care" (271). That is, the hospital in Demby offers these women a chance to be pampered as much as their middle-class, white, female counterparts from whom they are segregated. Lone surmises that the fathers also appreciated the transfer of authority from granny midwives to white male doctors. "Lone suspected [the men], too, were happier," Morrison writes, "with the closed doors, waiting in the hall, being in a place where other men were in charge instead of some toothless woman gumming gum to keep her gums strong" (272). That is, an old black woman possessing the power of life and death in her hands caused much insecurity in the fathers of Ruby. As Lone's adopted mother and midwife trainer taught her, "[m]en scared of us, always will be. To them we're death's handmaiden standing as between them and the children their wives carry" (272).

There are several refusals that Lone performs against this social and political backdrop of erasure. For example, Lone refuses a version of Christianity that abjects rootwork to the realm of the sinful. We can see this in her argument with Consolata, a native of Brazil, who struggles to accept her supernatural gifts (222–25). In response to Consolata's charge that "the church and everything holy forbade" the practice of "magic," Lone simply retorts, "[s]ometimes folks need more" (244). Lone instead offers a cosmology that blends the practical with the supernatural, one that refuses to "separate God from His elements" and encourages embracing *all* that we need, "earth, air, water" (244). Lone also refuses the blame of the town for the disabilities of the Fleetwood children (271–73). And perhaps most important, Lone refuses the vision of liberation and

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paradise that the patriarchs of the Ruby uphold, one that requires violence against women for its fruition. Like black nationalists of Morrison's time, the patriarchs of Ruby embrace a model of black liberation that ultimately reproduces the values of white, heterosexual, patriarchal culture. Lone understands that the men, in nursing the intergenerational pain of being rejected by light-skinned blacks, have become exactly what they resisted (275–76, 302). Their trauma is born from a betrayal by those who, instead of allying with them, cast them out. Instead of healing from that trauma, they have repeated it in a violent equation of "paradise" with the further elimination of outcasts (that is, the convent women). In other words, the men have become the "cruel, vengeful, grasping monster come to power" that Hurston forewarned (Hurston 1943/1995, 924). Through their fierce opposition to their oppression, they have assimilated the cruelty of their oppressors. Lone refuses this vision of the men by intervening, gathering members of the community to halt the war waged upon the convent women.

As the moral center of the novel, Lone is guided by the "inside thing to live by" that rootwork provides (Hurston 1943/1995, 922). Morrison writes that Lone "knew what neither memory nor history can say or record: the 'trick' of life and its 'reason'" (Morrison 2014, 272). This special knowledge is accompanied by references to rootwork in the novel. For instance, she is gathering her roots when she overhears the men's plans to attack the women in the convent. Sensing coming rain, Lone went out to "harvest mandrake while it was still dry" for rootwork purposes, which put her in the right place at the right time (269). "Had she not been" out harvesting mandrake, Morrison writes, "she never would have heard the men or discovered the devilment they were cooking" (269). Lone understands her placement at just the right moment as part and parcel of responding to God's messages:

> Playing blind was to avoid the language God spoke in. He did not thunder instructions or whisper messages into ears. Oh, no. He was a liberating God. A teacher who taught you how to learn, to see for yourself. His signs were clear, abundantly so, if you stopped steeping in vanity's sour juice and paid attention to His world. He wanted her to hear the men gathered at the Oven to decide and figure out how to run the Convent women off, and if He wanted her to witness that, He must also want her to do something about it. (273–74)

Lone's notion of God as one who sends messages and direction through rootwork is very similar to Aunt Sutton's understanding of the role of John de Conquer:

> Sho John de Conquer means power. That's bound to be so. He come to teach and tell us. God don't leave nobody ignorant, you child. Don't care where He drops you down, He puts you on notice. He don't want folks taken advantage of because they don't know. Now, back there in slavery time, us didn't have no power of protection, and God knowed it, and put us under watch-care (Hurston 1943/1995, 925).

For both Sutton and Lone, rootwork is how we learn to navigate the dangers the world poses to us. The careful messages "God" is sending to us help us take care of ourselves. And, similar to the granny midwives in the previous section, interpretation of these messages can prompt us into action. Lone intervenes, refusing the plan of the men and gathering a group to stop the violence, because she believes she has been authorized by God to do so. "Eyesight too dim, joints too stiff," Lone accepts that "this was no work

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for a gifted midwife" (Morrison 2014, 273). And yet, she also knows that "God has given her the task, bless His holy heart, and at thirty miles an hour on a hot July night, she knew she was traveling in His time, not outside it" (273). Her confidence that she *can* complete this task, as well her conviction that she *should* do this, is based upon her belief that "[i]t was He who placed her there; encouraged her to look for the medicine best picked dry at night" (273).

In these ways, rootwork becomes a register of refusal that Morrison employs. In *Paradise,* Lone's embrace of rootwork in her midwifery practices refuses Consolata's abjection of rootwork (and diasporic blackness, given Consolata's Brazilian heritage) as evil and sinful. Mirroring the social and political dynamics of black liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, Lone's embrace of rootwork is also a refusal of a certain model of liberation that furthers gender and class oppression. Although the political acceptance that the citizens of Ruby seek is not from the state but from the light-skinned community that rejected them, it should be noted that the light-skinned model of the self-sufficient black town often imitated white, dominant culture, reinforcing the oppressions they originally sought to escape. By pointing to the gender and class dynamics of this vision of black liberation, Morrison specifies the costs of political recognition that these movements sought, the ways we are expected to "migrate" toward whiteness (Dotson 2018, 196). Morrison's use of the figure of the granny midwife hearkens back to Hurston's in that both use the granny midwife as an "orienting story" to signal the importance of acts of refusal in black emancipatory politics.

## "I'll Run the Voodoo Down"

Both Morrison and Hurston use rootwork to cultivate an "inside thing to live by" (Hurston 1943/1995, 922). Both Morrison and Hurston use the granny midwife's willful retention of conjure to signal broader theoretical and political refusals in their work. And, for both Morrison and Hurston, the refusal to give up rootwork goes hand in hand with a refusal of modes of political recognition advocated by black liberation movements of their time. The various movements of refusal analyzed in this article are captured by Cassandra Wilson's composition of lyrics to Miles Davis's "Run the Voodoo Down," from which the section titles are drawn.[36] Similar to granny midwives, the protagonist of the song acts in ways that deviate from the norms of society.[37] And the protagonist justifies her deviations by the spiritual traditions that convey to her that "destiny," or what has been ordained by God, is her "deliverance" or source of liberation. These spiritual traditions are those of rootwork, signaled by the "High John in [her] pocket," and they grant a sense of "pleasure in remembering" the lessons of the protagonist's ancestors. As we saw with Hurston, rootwork via John de Conquer functioned similarly for practitioners, especially granny midwives. It is a fount of inner knowledge that is not only a source of pleasure but also prompts them to refuse the cultural assimilation that some advocated at the onset of Reconstruction. This inner knowledge as well prompts the protagonist of the song to declare that she is "not your girl about town," refusing the abjection of her identity as a black woman. She is not one to be trampled over or put to the side when envisioning our political futures. Likewise, Morrison's development of the granny midwife, Lone, of *Paradise* intimates a similar kind of refusal. Lone reminds us that black women are not to be trifled with in our visions of liberation when she intervenes on behalf of the convent women. And it is her engagement of rootwork that prompts her to make this intervention.

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Born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi, Wilson's inspiration for the lyrics of this song may come from her own grandmother, who was a conjure woman.[38] Wilson's memory of her ancestor, lovingly spun into the lyrics of this song, is a staple of black feminist imaginaries. In this essay, I have argued that one function of rootwork in black feminist imaginaries is to signal a politics of refusal. Revisiting the conflict over authority between granny midwives and the state, I have argued that granny midwives refused some of the problematic terms of US political recognition. That is, granny midwives' refusal to give up rootwork challenged the state's authority to license or politically recognize their practice as midwives. Their refusal was prompted by a deep understanding of the terms of political recognition by the state or what this program of racial "progress" would cost them: black abjection and cultural assimilation. I have argued that these concerns are also taken up in black feminist imaginaries through the literary invocation of granny midwives, such as in Hurston's "High John de Conquer" and Morrison's *Paradise*. In this way, the invocation of granny midwives becomes an "orienting" story, or one way to signal the ethical implications and dangers of how we define and envision liberation. Who might continue to be oppressed by our vision of paradise? Who might get left behind in our definitions of racial progress? Such questions have always been raised in black feminist thought to critically assess those forces of domination that haunt our visions of political liberation. Because of these connections between rootwork and refusal in black feminist imaginaries, "run[ning] the voodoo down," as Wilson suggests, can expand our visions of liberation in creative and transformative ways.

## Notes

1 *Granny midwife* is a term that was used colloquially to refer to Southern black women midwives who used some form of rootwork and/or folk remedies in their midwife practice. Although there were also European immigrant midwives at this time who used their own folk remedies in their practice, my discussion of refusal in this article focuses exclusively on Southern black women.

2 This is not to say that there were not male midwives at the time. However, my analysis of the erasure of granny midwives by the medical establishment is oriented within feminist scholarship that highlights the gendered discrimination that these women faced in the medical field (Fett 2002, 45–50; Bonaparte 2016, 25–26).

3 Kameelah Martin defines *conjure* as the "syncretic African spirituality practiced in the United States. This includes Louisiana Voodoo and the hoodoo, goopher, or root work traditions associated with the American South" (Martin 2012, 91). For this article, I use the terms *rootwork*, *hoodoo*, and *conjure* synonymously as Zora Neale Hurston does in her work. Hurston writes, "'conjure' is also freely used by the American Negro for these practices. 'Roots' is the Southern Negro's term for folk-doctoring by herbs and prescriptions, and by extension, and because all hoodoo doctors cure by roots, it may be used as a synonym for hoodoo" (Hurston 1931, 317).

4 I develop this position from Angela Davis's discussion of resistance in her "Lectures on Liberation" (Davis 2010, 77–84). For more on my development of this position, see Stewart 2020, 63–64.

5 As Valerie Lee writes, "attitudes about health are rooted in the larger cosmology of one's views on life, and all perspectives are culturally mediated. The white doctor fails to see his science as a cultural system. Although state sanctioned, he is not more informed or more sensitive than the women" (Lee 1996, 12).

6 It is worth noting that Imani Perry also discusses alternatives to recognition politics by invoking the figure of the witch. The political potency of the witch for Perry resides in her knowledge of "different possibilities of social orderings, specifically those in which the feminine would not necessarily be subject to patriarchal authority" (Perry 2018, 27–28). Because of this knowledge, witches refuse a "politics of inclusion" that is largely nominal, which positions them to raise questions about "the value of integrating into a burning house" (175). Perry's discussion of the witch blends the woodsy hags of Europe with the rural "saints" of the Sanctified Church in the US South, and Perry seems to unite these figures in their various

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refusals of "patriarchy, ladyhood, or personhood for more people" (174). It should be noted as well that the refusals of these figures classed under the term *witch* take different forms given their wildly different social contexts. Whereas the hag of Europe may be isolated on the outskirts of society, the granny midwife of the US South is deeply rooted in her communities.

7 As Angela Davis writes, "[b]ecause the slaveocracy had sought to extinguish the collective memory of black people in order to confine them to an inferior social space, music, folktales, and hoodoo practices were always important ways black people could maintain connections—conscious or not—with the traditions of their ancestors" (Davis 1998, 155).

8 As Lee writes, black feminist writers invoked granny midwives "to place in the foreground the politics of race, gender, and class; to affirm a history of resistance, and to offer a counter discursive practice that problematizes notions of health, healing, and wholeness" (Lee 1996, 3). And, as Martin notes, by centering the conjure woman, black women writers "returned [her] to the status of honored Ancestor and spiritual leader," drawing upon a rich legacy of spiritual authority (Martin 2012, 70). In this way, these writers explored "issues of agency, authority, and gender" in their fiction (88).

9 All section titles are from Cassandra Wilson's composition of lyrics to Miles Davis's "Run the Voodoo Down."

10 The connections between rootwork and West African religious traditions is also well documented in other scholarship (Lee 1996, 35; Fett 2002, 2; Chireau 2003, 11–14, 54; Martin 2012, 91; Owens 2018, 71).

11 As Jenny M. Luke observes, "some traditional practices such as herbal teas to augment labor, placing a knife under the bed to relieve pain, and aiding the ease of labor by having a woman wear a hat belonging to the baby's father endured" in granny midwives' practices "despite the county health departments legislating against their use" (Luke 2018, 49). These herbal teas were made from herbs the granny midwife often grew herself (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 137).

12 For instance, one enslaved midwife, Mildred Graves, reports that her slave mistress was having so much trouble with labor that the slave master sent for a doctor. When Mildred informed the doctor that she could deliver the baby, the doctor laughed at her, saying "Get back darkie, we mean business an' don' won't any witch doctors or hoodoo stuff" (Berlin, Favreau, and Miller 1996, 103–4). The doctor's insults here point to how the African basis of her healing practices delegitimated her knowledge from his viewpoint.

13 A significant turning point in this history was the introduction of the 1921 Shephard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act. Because of this act, the supervision of midwives became state-sanctioned. Prompted by the high infant and mother mortality rates across the South, this act used black midwives as scapegoats for the structural and social problems that gave rise to such deaths (Luke 2018, 32–33).

14 A healing practice brought to the Americas by enslaved Africans, this ritual involves a string being tied across the body and knotted in the place of affliction (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 147–50). Katrina Hazzard-Donald emphasizes that this string "provided the conduit for a uniting of the spiritual and physical energies, which were constantly being refocused and rebalanced by the string" (147). In addition, this practice "focused the individual's psychic energies on that part of the body that required medical attention," which "raised confidence and psychic strength" within the individual (147).

15 As Luke writes, the Birth Certificate Song's lyrics spoke of the "benefits of citizenship . . . full participation in America's social, political, and economic life" (Luke 2018, 57–58). For example, some of the lyrics read: "He'll need [the Birth Certificate] for enlistment or maybe go abroad/ Producing his birth record will prove he's not a fraud/ It'll make him mighty happy if he can really say/ 'I'm a native of the U. S. A.'" (58). Also: "We know that's important, a solid standard rule/ He'll need birth registration to enter any school/ To prove he's the right age to marry or to vote/ So be sure his birth date you report" (58).

16 As Alicia D. Bonaparte argues, "[r]eferring to southern black spirituality as superstition reflects the colonial denigration of African religious practices," and doctors linked this "superstition" with "poor hygiene and ignorance" (Bonaparte 2016, 29). Moreover, "[b]y using the trope that midwives were 'dirty,' doctors engaged in demarcation strategies that informed" the public that "midwives were deviant and undesirable participants in birthing work" (29). But the very standards by which "cleanliness" was judged were often "subjectively" applied to midwives. As Lee observes, midwives, already religious women who strove to be clean, were often "never clean enough" according to the Board of Health. This was in part due to their constant association with hoodoo as well as their Southern background (Lee 1996, 38–39).

17 This assimilation was deeply *classed* as well as cultural. As Luke observes, the state aimed to transform granny midwives "from a 'disorderly and dirty group of tobacco-chewing women' into a well-behaved class of pseudo-nurses wearing starched aprons" (Luke 2018, 35).

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18 As Darline Turner writes, "[t]heir bags were routinely inspected, and midwives were required to carry certain medical instruments and medications, not their own instruments, cloths, and the herbs to which they were accustomed" (Turner 2016, 23).
19 As Logan remarks, "With God's faith and with what God tell you to do, the doctors ain't got a chance when He want to walk in and show you He's God" (Clark and Logan 2014, 65). So firm was this belief that some granny midwives were even willing to face jail time in their refusal to give up rootwork in their practice (Luke 2018, 50).
20 The state sought to become more integrated into black communites through the local midwife. Because of her centrality in rural Southern black communities that lay slightly outside the purview of the state, the midwife was crucial for the "local infiltration" of these communities (Luke 2018, 53). During slavery, midwives were considered authorities in their communities, highly esteemed, and even feared by men for some of their rituals for controlling male sexual desire (Lee 1996, 6, 35; Hazzard-Donald 2013, 140; Luke 2018, 23, 28–29). Further, as Hazzard-Donald notes, granny midwives were often sought out for their advice and counsel concerning family dynamics (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 137, 140–42). These relations continued during Reconstruction, and the state attempted to co-opt them for its own purposes. That is, the introduction of state regulations added reporting to the various duties of the midwife: reporting vital information about births, deaths, and even parenting problems if they thought a child was being neglected (Clark and Logan 2014, 48–49; Luke 2018, 54–56). In this way, midwives were pressured to become "representatives of the state boards of health" in their own communities (Luke 2018, 53).
21 Molly C. Dougherty writes: "There is frequent conflict between the nurses and midwives regarding the correct behavior and belief during birth events. Nurses, vocal in denouncing traditional practices and beliefs, are physically and socially separated from midwives' usual activities" (Dougherty 1978, 161).
22 Hurston includes folktales about John de Conquer in her *Every Tongue Got to Confess*, a previously unpublished anthology of folk tales edited by Carla Kaplan (Hurston 2002, 83–102). Hurston also includes folktales about John de Conquer in her more popular anthology of folklore, *Mules and Men* (in Hurston 1935/1995, 72–75).
23 Deborah G. Plant also notes that Hurston's tone in this essay deviates from other versions of High John de Conquer tales that her contemporaries recorded. Instead of focusing on a bitter struggle between master and slave as in the other versions, Hurston turns to humor and "conciliation." Plant writes: "There are several ways to read Hurston's conciliatory tone. Perhaps Hurston suggests that a little humor could work wonders on the human soul—no matter whose it is. Perhaps the laughter coming from someone as indurate as a slaveholder creates a dramatic irony that releases tension. Perhaps, also, Hurston suggests that revenge isn't necessary, as in the case of Lester's version, and that whites, symbolized by 'Ole Massa,' really aren't the threat they are believed to be; that time might be better spent building one's own barn than burning down another's; and that by not being consumed with 'Ole Massa,' Blacks become the center of their own lives" (Plant 1995, 90).
24 Cheryl A. Wall identifies a "legacy of enforced silence" from slavery that Hurston attributes to W. E. B. Du Bois via the "sorrow songs" in Hurston's essay, "Art and Such" (Wall 2018, 107–8). Hurston's response, for Wall, is "a refusal to advance the race leader's political agenda" whereby blacks are portrayed as ultimately tragic (107–8).
25 For example, Frederick Douglass's interpretation of Negro spirituals emphasizes sorrow and banishes black joy. He writes: "I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness" (Douglass 2010, 121).
26 Hurston writes: "[High John de Conquer] had come from Africa. He came walking on the waves of sound. Then he took on flesh after he got here. The sea captain of ships knew that they brought slaves in their ships. They knew about those black bodies huddled down there in the middle passage, being hauled across the waters to helplessness. John de Conquer was walking the very winds that filled the sails of the ships. He followed over them like the albatross" (Hurston 1943/1995, 923).
27 "Aunt" was also a common title used during this time to refer to black Southern midwives.

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28 As Plant indicates, "Hurston considered humor and laughter the wellspring of life and the outward indication of an inner spirituality" (Plant 1995, 88).
29 That is, Hurston points to the "thousands upon thousands of humble people" who "do John reverence" by sowing the root into their pockets or placing the root upon a secret altar in the home (Hurston 1943/1995, 930).
30 As Lee writes, "[m]idwives, root workers, and traditional women healers dominate and transform the narratives of a significant number of black women writers, including Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Julie Dash, Ntozake Shange, Tina Ansa, and Paule Marshall, to name a few" (Lee 1996, 8–9).
31 Jeffery Anderson notes in his *Conjure in African American Society* that "[b]lack cultural nationalism provided the medium through which hoodoo has regained a prominent role in African American culture" (Anderson 2005, 19–20). Although there is some truth in this reading, we also need to give nuance to the ways in which recoveries of conjure during this time were gendered. For example, Anderson describes the reclamation of hoodoo during this period as "a symbol of African American resistance to white culture" (20). Focusing on Ishmael Reed's work, Anderson observes how the trickster figure in conjure is used to "subvert white dominance" (20). However, as Farah Jasmine Griffin notes, "while black male writers focus their attention on relationships and struggles between black and white men, black women most often turn their gaze to the relationships among black people" (Griffin 2007, 499). Anderson misses this distinction, in part, because of his lack of engagement with the work of black women novelists for whom conjure was also central.
32 As Linda La Rue writes, "American values are difficult to discard, for, unlike what more militant 'brothers' would have us believe, Americanism does not end with the adoption of Afro hairstyles on pregnant women covered in long African robes" (La Rue 1995, 165). Similarly, Madhu Dubey observes that "black nationalist ideologues defined black feminine identity within a heterosexual and reproductive frame that re-inscribed the white U. S. bourgeois ideology they set out to subvert" (Dubey 1994, 13). Moreover, Patricia Haden, Donna Middleton, and Patricia Robinson put it even more starkly: "[i]f we feel ourselves to be college-educated and politically aware, we end up nothing but common opportunists, playing some role of some dreamed-up African Queen, like we 'gonna' rule some black country somewhere with some dashiki cat, acting haughty and ending up a tripped out black king. It does not matter to us that it is a historical fact that our own feudal period in Africa was cruelly oppressive to black women and peasants; that in Africa this warring and exploitative period was only interrupted by the landing of the European colonist and slave trader. . . . We want desperately to feel black, but we also need to feel superior to whitey. We want to take his place. We really want to take over his system and rule over and exploit *everyone*" (Haden, Middleton, and Robinson 1995, 178–79).
33 For more on this point, see Dubey 1994, 25–26.
34 Morrison writes of this cosmology: "[w]e are a very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were 'discredited knowledge' that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was 'discredited'" (Morrison 2008c, 61).
35 Morrison writes: "I wanted to dig into these matters by exploring the reverse; exclusivity by the very black-skinned; construction of their very own 'gated community,' one that refused entrance to the mixed race. Considering the need for progeny in order to last, how would patriarchy play and how might matriarchy threaten? In order to describe and explore these questions I needed 1) to examine the definition of paradise, 2) to delve into the power of colorism, 3) to dramatize the conflict between patriarchy and matriarchy, and 4) to disrupt racial discourse altogether by signaling then erasing it" (Morrison 2014, xiii).
36 It should be noted that this connection between rootwork and refusal in black feminist imaginaries persists not only in our literature, but in our songs as well. Centering the conjure woman, Wilson's lyrics draw upon a legacy of spiritual authority that enables her to insert herself into a genre of music that is heavily male-dominated. As Angela Davis notes in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism,* several refusals are present in the music of blues women, such as "women's place" in the domestic sphere, notions of romantic love in mainstream culture, the institution of marriage, and/or motherhood (Davis 1998, 11–15).

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37 That is, in the lyrics, the protagonist "doesn't care" for the "idle conversation" or social pleasantries that women are expected to engage in. She "doesn't mind some company" but offers no guarantee of marriage or the comforting stability of home. She knows her place isn't in the home, for she travels, having "walked all the way from Mississippi/just to spread the news."

38 In an interview, Wilson reports of her grandmother, "her habits were mysterious and unusual . . . she would wear an apron, which had two pockets in which she carried seeds, and had a wonderful smell. I have some of those seeds still. She was a woman who had moved from what would be called rural Mississippi to the city, and she kept a gun. Even in her seventies, she loved to go off into the woods and gather. She was an herbalist. She could make medicines. She used to take a cup and raise it above her head and circle her head three times . . . it's a Yoruba gesture. Three times over the head before leaving something, casting it away" (Panken 2015).

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