

# Work the Root: Black Feminism, Hoodoo Love Rituals, and Practices of Freedom

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*In “Post-Liberation Feminism,” Ladelle McWhorter raises the question of what practices will be helpful to further feminist goals if we are no longer in a state of domination, but are still oppressed. McWhorter finds resources in Michel Foucault’s concept of “practices of freedom” to begin to answer this question. I build upon McWhorter’s insight while recalling Angela Davis’s Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: namely, that sexual love, as conceived in hoodoo and the blues, became a terrain upon which newly emancipated blacks worked out what their newfound freedom meant. In this essay, I consider what practices of freedom would look like within a life-giving nexus of hoodoo, blues, and sexual love. Not only does the image of the hoodoo woman, prevalent within the blues, emerge through an interaction of race, class, region, gender, sexuality, and spirituality, but analyzing sexual love within this hoodoo–blues coupling will help us track how sexual love was transformed into a practice of freedom. I will argue that sexual love within this hoodoo–blues coupling reveals an important dimension of emancipatory work that both defies categorization as resistance and is crucial to the development of capacities for resistance.*

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In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis claims that sexual love became “a tangible expression of freedom” for newly emancipated blacks (Davis 1998, 8).<sup>1</sup> In her analysis, sexual love became enmeshed with the meaning of freedom within the musical tradition of the blues (4). Although the emancipatory possibilities of the blues have become common knowledge in liberation literature (for example, Cone 1972; Russell 1982), we have often focused on the emancipatory *effects* of this tradition at the expense of engagement with its emancipatory *mechanisms*. For instance, Davis’s insights have recently been adapted to film in Dee Rees’s *Bessie*, where we are presented with black female characters who are fully resilient and resistant to the interacting oppressions of racism, classism, sexism, and regionalism. Yet missing from this extraordinary film was sustained reference to hoodoo, a vital (and deeply political) context for the emergence of Bessie Smith’s defying resilience and resistance

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(Davis 1998, 155–60). So I return to Davis to investigate the connections she draws among sexual love, the blues, and hoodoo love rituals. Deepening Davis's initial insights, I argue that we cannot understand her claim about freedom without the cosmology the blues borrows from spirit work<sup>2</sup> practices—for it is these practices that *imbued* sexual love with emancipatory possibilities.

Freedom has been a central concept in Davis's career from her first public lectures, "Lectures on Liberation." Contrary to Western philosophical discourse, Davis argues that freedom is not a static, inherent characteristic of humans (given that large segments of societies have always been enslaved), but a dynamic process: a "struggle for liberation" (Davis 2010, 66). This struggle occurs on two levels.<sup>3</sup> First, "freedom of thought" (58–59), whereby the enslaved/oppressed gain a critical "consciousness" of their oppression that entails its rejection (50–52, 67). Second, "freedom of action," or the "liberty to move, to act in a way one chooses" (48). In the life of the enslaved, the tension between freedom in the first sense and the denial of freedom in the second sense (that is, their material bondage) goads them to open acts of resistance, whereby the relationship between master and slave is reversed (51–57). This essay not only focuses on the struggle for "freedom of thought," but also seeks to displace the binary of thought and action by exploring the *conditions* for the emergence of a critical consciousness.<sup>4</sup> If the basic "condition" of enslavement is "alienation" or "acceptance of [one's] master's will as the absolute authority over [one's] life" (55), how is the psychic distance needed to "find [an] independent [of oppression/enslavement] means of judging the world" cultivated (56)? And how might Davis's account of freedom in these lectures be further developed if we centered black female experiences of agency?<sup>5</sup>

We can begin to answer these questions within the life-giving nexus of black female sexuality, the blues, and hoodoo that Davis offers in her later *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.<sup>6</sup> Davis's insight is that, within this tradition, sexual love acts as a *metonym* for freedom (Davis 1998, 10).<sup>7</sup> However, when Davis says that the "blues registered sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom" (8), she not only means freedom in the second sense, or in terms of sexual autonomy.<sup>8</sup> She also means freedom in the first sense, or as a means of negotiating the alienation<sup>9</sup> that oppression causes *via* forging a critical consciousness (Davis 2010, 128–30, 135). And I argue that we cannot understand how the blues registered freedom in the latter way without taking into account the cosmology that the blues borrows from spirit work.

As Davis suggests in the lectures, turning to black literature can offer us a "much more illuminating account of the nature of freedom" (46)—in particular, the conditions for a critical consciousness that spurs resistance. In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison offers a similar insight to that of Davis about the connection between love and freedom.<sup>10</sup> For those who had endured the racial and sexual trauma of enslavement, freedom often meant the ability to "get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire" (Morrison 1987, 191). Within the context of spirit work, Morrison highlights the struggle for liberation for ex-slaves. For example, once a main character, Sethe,<sup>11</sup> escapes the material bondage of slavery, Morrison notes an inward emancipation that takes place in her community

of fellow ex-slaves. “Bit by bit, at 124 and the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself,” Morrison writes, “[f]reeing yourself was one thing: claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (111–12).

Elsewhere, I have argued that the Clearing can be read as a space of spirit work (Stewart 2015, chapter 5). Framed with implicit references to the Ring Shout (Morrison 1987, 102–103, 111–12),<sup>12</sup> the Clearing functions as one of the various sacred dancing spaces across the African diaspora where spirit work was performed.<sup>13</sup> Through spirit work, ex-slaves were taught “that the only grace [or relief from slavery’s trauma] they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (103). As anthropologist Katrina Hazzard-Donald<sup>14</sup> notes in *Mojo Workin’*, “[i]n the context of the Ring Shout, slaves could and did assert a limited independence from slavery’s pain as well as agency in forging their community, personality, and place” (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 48).

The need for the Clearing shows us that although the ex-slaves have been freed from material bondage, there is still work to be done. If we recall Davis’s insights about alienation, we can make more sense of why “claiming ownership” is essential to the struggle for liberation. Davis writes, “[t]he most extreme form of human alienation is the reduction to the status of property. This is how the slave was defined: something to be owned” (Davis 2010, 53). Claiming ownership of the self recently freed from material bondage, in turn, can be seen as a way of negotiating the traumatic effects of alienation produced during enslavement. In other words, claiming ownership foregrounds the self’s relationship to the self instead of the self’s relationship to oppression.

Throughout the novel, Sethe learns that freedom from material bondage means nothing if the soul is still imprisoned by the trauma of its enslaved past. For example, the racial and sexual trauma Sethe experienced at the hands of slave masters (that is, the “Schoolteacher” and his sons)<sup>15</sup> had produced a relationship of estrangement with, alienation from, and shame toward her own body. A change in legal status does not erase years of that kind of trauma. However, the practices in the Clearing produced a new relationship to her body, whereby she could learn that she is her own “best thing” (Morrison 1987, 322). Put another way, these practices were “flesh”<sup>16</sup> practices that disciplined the body in a new way than previous enslavement, transfiguring the body in new meaning: “grace” that made possible “claiming ownership” of the freed self. These examples from the novel suggest that spirit work facilitated the processes of “claiming ownership”; I argue that it is this aspect of spirit work that is imported into the blues.

#### “LADY SINGS THE BLUES”

As a historical record of African American consciousness during the period of transition from enslavement to emancipation, the blues tradition is relevant to liberation literature and feminist thought. Davis argues that the blues possessed a nascent critical consciousness that anticipated many feminist critiques and concerns to come

decades later.<sup>17</sup> This is, in part, because blueswomen<sup>18</sup> inherited and actively upheld the “new standards of womanhood” their cultural foremothers forged under the institution of slavery.<sup>19</sup> While this has led some to argue that the blues functioned as a resistant cultural space (Collins 2000, 106), I argue that this is not what Davis means by her conception of sexual love within the blues as a “tangible expression of freedom” (Davis 1998, 8). Rather, Davis’s discussion of sexual love in this context highlights the processes of “claiming ownership”: processes that, I claim, involve spirit work. To demonstrate my claim, I turn to what Kameelah Martin calls the “symbiotic” relationship between spirit work and the blues (Martin 2013, 128).<sup>20</sup> A key insight is the role spirit work plays within the blues: spirit work endows sexuality with power to heal (or harm).

Religion scholar Yvonne Chireau notes that “it was common for blues singers to identify the *mojo* with female sexuality, a powerful, valued ‘charm’ that all women owned and all men wanted” (Chireau 2003, 47). Martin further argues that the “*mojo*” referenced within the blues often functioned as a “remedy” for the blues: “Only through the work of some powerful *mojo* can the blueswoman relieve herself” of present misery (Martin 2013, 135). Indeed, *mojo* is a hoodoo term derived from the West African (BaKongo) *minkisi*, which translates, roughly, into “medicine of the gods” (Leone and Fry 1999, 380–82).<sup>21</sup> As Davis focuses on Smith’s work to illustrate the role of spirit work in the blues, I include an example of Smith’s lyrics to show my point.<sup>22</sup> In “Down Hearted Blues,” the protagonist is a woman who has been abused by her lover: “once I was crazy ‘bout a man/he mistreated me all the time” (Davis 1998, 273). Her lover has produced so much devastation that he has given her “those down hearted blues,” with enough trouble to “follow [her] to [her] grave” (273). Yet the end of the song provides a turn:

I got the world in a jug, the stopper’s in my hand,  
I got the world in a jug, the stopper’s in my hand,  
I’m gonna hold it until you men come under my command. (273)

The lyrics above refer to the common hoodoo love ritual of “stopping up” the intended lover’s sexual desire in a bottle (for examples, see Hyatt 1973, 2346–48). Success with this ritual would render her lover completely under her direction and control. As a result, the blues-stricken woman will move from a position of powerlessness in her love relationship to one of immense command.<sup>23</sup> While once alienated from her body, to the point of imminent early death, she is now in a position of *ownership*, using her sexuality as a source of power. And the means of this transformation was the hoodoo ritual described in the lyrics.

Davis’s insight is that the blues’ focus on sexual love is a type of metonymical musing on the meaning of freedom for the newly emancipated; I develop her insight by arguing that spirit work is the *means* by which the blues muses on the struggle for liberation. That is, hoodoo love rituals register freedom, or the struggle for liberation, in terms of sexual power whereby we claim ownership of the self. As I will argue in the next section, this is because hoodoo love rituals made possible multiple meanings of the body through a cosmology that imbues objects with power *via* metonymical

proximity to the dead. Under hoodoo, freedom becomes flesh, and sexual love becomes the source of new (*positive*) valuation of the body.

“DAY IN, DAY OUT/THAT SAME OLD HOODOO FOLLOWS ME ABOUT”<sup>24</sup>

One of the manifold West African-derived spiritual systems throughout the African diaspora, hoodoo is a complex set of practices whereby a person’s physical, psychic, and spiritual life is fundamentally altered through a relationship to the dead (specifically the ancestors). These practices rely upon a cosmology in which the dead are present enough to make impositions on, and bestow help upon, us, the living. Not only our own futures, but the futures of those yet to be born, are determined, in part, by how we negotiate this relationship with the dead among us. As Zora Neale Hurston writes in “Hoodoo in America,” “[w]herever West African beliefs have survived in the New World, this place of the dead has been maintained” (Hurston 1931, 319). Similarly, Hazzard-Donald notes that a defining feature of many West African religions was a divination system whereby direct communication between the living and the dead is conducted through practices of ancestor reverence that enabled practitioners to “seize the power and memory of [their] ancestors for support, direction, and protection” (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 22–26). Through an intimacy with their dead, practitioners harnessed power that could be used to alter or influence the “overall aspects” of their existence, a “general spiritual condition” called “luck” (44).

To see the connection to “claiming ownership” over their freed selves, consider some of the language of hoodoo practitioners’ self-reports of love rituals used. With menstrual blood as a primary ingredient, several types of hoodoo love rituals imbued sexual love with supernatural power. It was common knowledge in New Orleans, for instance, that one “way a woman could hold a man was to take some of the blood from her menstrual flow and mix it with her man’s food” (Tallant 1946, 109).<sup>25</sup> Men lived in daily fear of being “fixed”<sup>26</sup> by women in this way (as well as in daily suspicion that their woman *had* already done this to them) (109).<sup>27</sup> In Harry Middleton Hyatt’s *Hoodoo, Conjuration, Witchcraft, Rootwork* (volume 3), over forty pages are devoted to these menstrual-blood rituals. Practitioners report that, through these rituals, a lover’s “whole heart and mind falls right into her . . . [t]here’s nobody else and he ain’t contented until he be’s right with her” (Hyatt 1973, 2532). A woman could “do anything in the world” by use of them (2534). And, in fact, if she could not “rule over” her lover, use of these rituals was said to put her lover firmly “under [her] jurisdiction” (2514). In the language above, the body is made an immense tool of power through ritual. We have to remember, however, that this is the self-report of people for whom enslavement, being owned by another, was a *living* memory. This means a relationship of ownership toward their bodies, in light of their previous alienation, is a tremendous *achievement*.

The use of mojos can help to bring the liberatory implications of these practices into relief. Although there are several ways mojos were used and made, in this context a “mojo” often refers to a bundle of objects, bound together by cloth, box, or bottle, that

worked metonymically to “fix” a person. Anthropologists Gladys-Marie Fry and Mark Leone identify three categories of objects within mojos.<sup>28</sup> In hoodoo love rituals, these objects were often bundled together within a container or cloth used to catch menstrual blood.<sup>29</sup> I want to focus on the third category of objects within the bundles: the graveyard dust, riverbed clay, or funeral paraphernalia that acted “metonymically” to “provide direct access to the spirit” (Leone and Fry 1999, 380).

Objects in the third category were considered to be “alive with a spirit” and, as a result, allowed practitioners to touch their dead (Leone and Fry 1999, 380). Bringing the dead close enough for help, these bundles spelled out the practitioners’ success in negotiating their relationships with the dead. And it is the objects in the third category, via the presence of the dead *within* them, that transformed a bundle of ordinary, mundane objects (fingernails, hair, herbs, and so on) into *life-altering* entities. Timothy Ruppel, Jessica Neuwirth, Mark P. Leone, and Gladys-Marie Fry call this transformation an instance of “crossroads thinking,” a major part of spirit work cosmology.<sup>30</sup> A common place of harvesting the third category of items was graveyards, which were considered a type of “crossroads” where the living meet the dead (Ruppel et al. 2000, 329). These liminal spaces were considered to possess immense power that could radically alter a person’s life, as they represented the immanence of the dead within *this* world. Gathered from these liminal spaces, the dirt placed within mojos was believed to transfer that *same* power to what were otherwise everyday, cast-away objects. Put another way, the place of the dead in the cosmology of spirit work endowed what would have been considered trash to many with radical, life-altering stakes. I would argue that this liminal space, represented by “crossroads thinking,” makes possible the psychic distance needed for a critical consciousness in that it imbues material objects with alternate meanings: both small, mundane objects and *bodies* in terms of sexuality (that is, “claiming ownership”). By the creation of alternate meanings, this cosmology could facilitate the struggle for liberation in transforming the traces of alienation within the newly freed.

The cosmology present in these practices was also often represented by a cosmogram, an oval with an X drawn within, symbolizing the relationship between the living and the dead (Ruppel et al. 2000, 326–28). I introduce the cosmogram to stress, again, that spirit work prioritizes a relationship with the dead, through which sexual love is imbued with supernatural power. And the relationship to the dead in spirit work is a special one: it is one of submission. For example, consider the spirit work ritual implicitly referenced in *Beloved*, the Ring Shout. Hazzard-Donald writes that this ritual was also a visual representation of spirit work cosmology as it “traced the circle of the Kongo cosmogram on the ground” (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 48). Placing the Ring Shout within this context also means that it can be seen as “the gateway to a broader spiritual experience, that of spirit possession” (48), a supreme form of submission to the dead.<sup>31</sup> Yet, as noted earlier, Hazzard-Donald argues that the Ring Shout was one of the cultural practices by which the enslaved exhibited agency. If the cosmology present in spirit work was indeed the means by which sexual love became the “tangible expression of freedom” within the blues, then this has deep implications for how we conceptualize liberatory practices, agency, and resistance.

First, we have an example of a form of agency where power is gained through submission. Not only is power conceived on a register different from that of their oppressors,<sup>32</sup> but power is worked out in terms of submission rather than subversion. While these practices *could* ultimately be used to resist oppression, they only “work” through submission to the dead—which temporarily sidesteps the issue of oppression. In such cases, these practices would “hit a straight lick with a crooked stick” (Hurston 1995, 561): the liberatory (that is, resistant) *effects* are not the intentions of the practices themselves (which are bound up with submission), but a *by-product*.

Second, being beholden to a different power source could give practitioners the distance needed to prevent internalization of their oppression.<sup>33</sup> However, I would argue that this psychic distance is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for liberation. These practices are not liberatory in themselves, as they could easily be used for nonliberatory ends. (For example, consider that an abusive lover could use these practices to manipulate her or his partner into staying in an oppressive relationship.) Put another way, these practices are the *means* by which power is secured; they do not necessarily *prescribe* the uses of that power. As Davis writes of spirituality, “[r]eligion can play both a positive and a negative role in [the] road towards self-knowledge. It can thwart liberation ... or it can provide powerful assistance” (Davis 2010, 67).

We might also raise the question of what *mode* of agency these practices exhibit. For instance, spirit work highlights the interrelation<sup>34</sup> between, and perhaps undermines a strict dichotomy of, the two levels of freedom described earlier. However, a narrow focus on resistance may cause us to miss this aspect of these practices. That is, these practices fail to fully register on the logic of oppression and resistance,<sup>35</sup> as their “revolutionary content” (Davis 2010, 63) may lie *precisely* in the sidestepping mentioned earlier. While resistance “reverses” the roles of master and slave (Davis 2010, 83), this reversal preserves the binary power relation. However, as L. H. Stallings writes when considering black female sexual stereotypes, full liberation means much more than reversing “the binary logic of stereotypes about Black women’s sexuality” (Stallings 2007, 2–3)—it means *destruction* of the binary (3). This requires a psychic distance that, again, I think spirit work practices could cultivate by way of “crossroads thinking.” In other words, by privileging a relationship other than master and slave, we may be able to generate an “independent means of judging the world” that is not merely reactionary.

#### “I NEED A LITTLE SUGAR IN MY BOWL”

My argument thus far has been that an investigation of hoodoo love rituals is needed to fully flesh out Davis’s claim that, through the blues, sexual love becomes a “tangible expression of freedom” (Davis 1998, 8). To demonstrate how the previous discussion figures into the blues, I take up another hint that Davis buries. Namely, the connection that “West African philosophical traditions” make between “spiritual and sexual joy” (130). Within the blues, spiritual and sexual joy is coupled through the

practice of “jooking.” In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston identifies the Jook as one of the blues’ primary sites of cultural production, where “Jook” is the “word for a Negro Pleasure house,” and the singing and playing inside is called “jooking” (Hurston 1995, 841). Jooks are especially interesting due to their diversity of traffic, their liminality, and their express designation of purpose. These spaces were often situated on the outskirts of city centers, in the liminal space between the rural and urban, gaining (foot and vocal) traffic from blacks in surrounding rural areas, blacks in town, and blacks (just) passing through (Hazzard-Gordon 1990, 76–77, 80–81).

What defined these spaces—back rooms in houses, sheds on the banks of bayous, riverside restaurants—as “Jooks” was simply the purpose for which they were designated: sexual pleasure that took on spiritual meanings. Similar to how “crossroads thinking” in hoodoo love rituals imbued everyday objects with life-altering meaning, the spiritual traditions that framed jooking elevated sexual pleasure to life-“fixing” status. As Hazzard-Donald notes, the Jook was a “secular institution rooted in West African traditions that intertwined religious and secularized elements” (Hazzard-Gordon 1990, 16). One example of these religious elements is worship celebrations characterized by “raucous joy” from which jooking takes its form (77).<sup>36</sup> Another element is the Ring Shout, from which much of African American dancing has evolved.<sup>37</sup>

Hurston notes that, within jooking, movements are “slow and sensuous,” for what matters most is “gaining sensation” (Hurston 1995, 842). I would argue that this emphasizes the *quality* of sexual pleasure gained through the dance, rather than the terminal fulfillment of said sexual stimulation. This shift of emphasis resonates with Audre Lorde’s discussion of the erotic—which not only pertains to “what we do . . . but how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (Lorde 2000, 54). For Lorde, the erotic, or the “sharing of joy,” can be a tremendous source of empowerment (56–57). This is not to say that the erotic, in itself, is liberatory. Rather, the information *gained* from tapping into the erotic can be used for liberatory ends.

For instance, Hurston writes toward the end of her discussion of the Jook:

To be sure, the black girl is still in power, men are still cutting and shooting their way to her pillow. To the queen of the Jook! (Hurston 1995, 844)<sup>38</sup>

Earlier in the essay, Hurston draws attention to the tendency of many white theater shows during the time to choose light-skinned women for lead roles (842–43). This devaluation of dark-skinned women also permeated several aspects of black culture, from popular songs and jokes to the selection of romantic partners. Across class there was internalized racism (that is, “colorism”), and upward social mobility, via a move to the North, often meant choosing lighter-skinned romantic partners. However, within the Jook, this colorist and classist devaluation of dark-skinned black women was overturned. For the blueswomen knew the only thing that matters when “jooking” is the “jelly roll.”<sup>39</sup> Hurston writes:



Negro shows before being tampered with did not specialize in octoroon chorus girls. The girl who could hoist a Jook song from her belly and aim it against the front door of the theatre was the lead, even if she were as black as the hinges of hell. The question was, “Can she jook?” She must also have a good belly wobble, and her hips must, to quote a popular work song, “Shake like jelly all over and be so broad, Lawd, Lawd, be so broad.” (842)

The system of valuation within the practice of jooking ranked the *quality* of sexual love, through pleasure, at the top. As a result, the devaluation of dark-skinned women due to the multifaceted oppression they faced was overturned and replaced with a rough egalitarianism. Hurston writes, “[t]he woman in the Jook may be nappy headed and black, but if she is a good lover she gets there just the same” (843). With the practice of jooking, alienation due to the interaction of sexism and colorism is reversed. Through their sexuality, blueswomen could reclaim their bodies as sources of power.

I want to stress that this informative pleasure, whereby blueswomen reclaimed their bodies, *emerges* within the coupling of spiritual and sexual joy. Within the blues tradition, sexual love was contextualized by an alternative meaning of the body than that under oppression (that is, “grace”). However, this alternative meaning is made possible through the “crossroads thinking” that hoodoo love rituals imported into the blues. It is this *borrowed* cosmology in the blues, in turn, that lifts the sexual pleasure in jooking from embodied ecstasy to spiritual heights.

A more contemporary example of the liberatory possibilities within this coupling of spiritual and sexual joy is Aretha Franklin’s performance of “Dr. Feelgood” at the Fillmore West Stadium. There are many blues examples to choose from, but I am interested in this one for its implicit references to hoodoo *in the midst of* coupling sexual and spiritual joy. I would argue that the resolution to the blues via sexual love would be misunderstood (and misguided) if we failed to appreciate how sexual love is framed within the context of the spiritual traditions mentioned earlier. Consider how Franklin describes Dr. Feelgood’s loving:

Don’t send me no doctor  
 Filling me up with all those pills  
 Cause I got a good man named Dr. Feelgood  
 And that man takes care of all my pains and ills  
 (Franklin 1971)

The lyrics here suggest that physical solutions given by the doctor—“pills”—will not fix her affliction. But the sexual love offered as a solution is *surely* physical. To make sense of this, we have to consider that the sexual love Franklin is singing about has been imbued with spiritual power. This is why Dr. Feelgood’s loving is an *appropriate* remedy to the “blues”<sup>40</sup> she is feeling.<sup>41</sup>

The turn of the song occurs at the “yes” refrain that marks the transition from the backwoods blues porch to the Sanctified Church altar during the performance.<sup>42</sup>

Once in her pulpit, Franklin ministers to her audience-congregation with the “information” gained from her tapping into the erotic: that “you’ll be surprised at what big bridges you can meet” when troubles come. As James Baldwin describes in “Uses of the Blues,” the ethos of the blues is “this ability to know that alright, it’s a mess, and you can’t do anything about it . . . so, well, you *have* to do something about it” (Baldwin 2011, 72; italics mine). Spiritual joy,<sup>43</sup> as exemplified by Franklin here, is an acknowledgment that no matter how dismal the situation is, we cannot stay *there*, we are *compelled* to act. My point is that the coupling of spiritual and sexual joy, granted by the cosmology in hoodoo, made possible the resolution to act or “meet” our “big bridges.” While these practices are not necessarily aimed at overturning oppression, is this not the type of *resolve* we need to “*be able*” to stand firm in our fights against injustice?<sup>44</sup>

In this essay, I have explored how sexual love, as conceived within the blues, became a terrain of freedom for the newly freed. I have argued that making sense of this claim requires an investigation into how spirit work imbued sexual love with supernatural power, thus supplying the ex-slave’s body with an alternative meaning than that provided by their former regime of oppression. As a result of this investigation, I have argued that the terrain of freedom Davis envisions is that of “claiming ownership” over their newly freed selves. Although the mechanisms of “claiming ownership” are practices that are not necessarily resistant to oppression, the *effects* of these practices, such as alternative understandings of the body, established the *preconditions* of resistance to interacting oppressions in the case of blueswomen in the Jooks.

While this essay has had a historical focus, the conclusions have significant theoretical and practical implications for liberation work today. For instance, McWhorter notes in “Post-Liberation Feminism” that certain feminist liberation strategies no longer gain (much) traction due to our current political climate (neo-liberalism) (McWhorter 2013, 63–66). However, McWhorter is clear that we can still understand women as oppressed. As an alternative, McWhorter offers practices of freedom (similar to “claiming ownership”) as a way to destabilize power relations of oppression. This important insight, however, is not new. Hurston recognized in “Crazy for this Democracy,” for instance, that the structure of institutional racism is to make “concession[s] from the throne” of oppression rather than granting true “human right [s]” (Hurston 1995, 948); that is, to grant emancipation in name while maintaining institutions that leave oppression safe. This is precisely the situation ex-slaves found themselves in upon gaining “legal” emancipation during Reconstruction. In an age that scholars such as Michelle Alexander are calling the “new Jim Crow” (Alexander 2012), we should follow the example of our ancestors and find *new* ways to “work the root.”

## NOTES

1. The context for Davis’s work in this text is African American life during Reconstruction within the United States. Given the aims of this article to further develop

Davis's analysis, this is my immediate context as well. It should be noted, however, that depending upon the style of the blues, there were several geographical sites of blues development during this historical period: for instance, the delta blues of Mississippi and Louisiana, the Gulf Coast blues, the Memphis blues, or Midwest blues (primarily Chicago). Similarly, hoodoo practices also had various areas of concentration: New Orleans (and the general Delta region), the Gulf Coast, the upper East Coast, and the Midwest. Moreover, although my analysis is focused primarily within the United States, the spiritual tradition of hoodoo has constitutive similarities to, and overlaps with, many other West African-derived spiritual traditions across the African diaspora, such as Voodoo in Haiti, Santería in Brazil, and Obeah in Jamaica. For substantial development of this point, see Hazzard-Donald 2013, chapter 1.

2. I borrow this term from folklorist and literary scholar Kameelah Martin. She writes, “[b]y ‘spirit work,’ I mean to suggest an intimacy with both the healing and harming ritual practices of African-derived religious practices that evolved in the New World: obeah, Vodou, Lucumi, espiritismo, conjure and hoodoo, Candomble, Voodoo, and others” (Martin 2013, 1).

3. Liberation literature has several analogues to the distinction drawn here. For example, consider Patricia Hill Collins's distinction, in *Black Feminist Thought*, between struggles aimed to create a “free mind” or “independent consciousness” and struggles aimed at “institutional transformation” (Collins 2000, 204). In recent feminist thought, Ladelle McWhorter also makes a similar distinction, relying upon Michel Foucault (see Foucault 1998, 283–84). Resistance, or “direct opposition to power,” is distinguished from “practices of freedom,” which *both* “work[s] within [networks of power] to counter specific effects and at the same time transform[s] ourselves” *and* may in fact destabilize systems of oppression (McWhorter 2013, 55).

4. Henceforth, unless specified otherwise, I will mean freedom or the struggle for liberation in the *first* sense when those terms are used.

5. Frederick Douglass's fight with Mr. Covey, a slave-breaker, remains the paradigmatic example of resistance in African American thought. Davis also mentions, in passing, a hoodoo ritual (a “root”) that preceded this infamous fight. However, upon her reflections on these lectures, nearly forty years later, Davis notes that her development of freedom, based upon this example, was “implicitly masculinist” (Davis 2010, 28).

6. It is in the blues that Davis recovers a radical black feminist leadership that was often at odds with middle-class, conservative sects of the black church. Davis notes that blues women singers' work could be viewed “as female subversion of the male Christian ministry that equated blues and sexuality with the Devil and sin” (Davis 1998, 125).

7. Not only sexuality, but travel also functions in this way (Davis 1998, 8–10). It is beyond the scope of the essay to develop how *male* freedom became aligned with travel. Another interesting question is how nonheterosexual examples could further develop my account.

8. Although there is that. Davis writes, “sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation” (Davis 1998, 4).

9. This is not my preferred term; however, I use it to keep with Davis's thought.

10. The connection between sexual love and freedom in Davis's analysis reflects a long-standing insight in black feminism: the tradition of regarding labors of love as

important *emancipatory* work (Collins 2000, 97–98). For an earlier example, see June Jordan's "On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston" (Jordan 1974). Additionally, Davis notes how, under slavery, domestic care-taking tasks were transformed into exercises of autonomy (Davis 1981, 16–18).

11. Sethe's character is based upon the true story of Margaret Garner, a woman who killed her child to prevent their re-entry into slavery.

12. Additionally, the presence of Baby Suggs, a conjure woman, also marks this space as a place where spirit work is performed (Morrison 1987, 102–104, 111–12).

13. For a more detailed discussion of these sacred dancing spaces, see Evans 2011, 52–61 and Southern 1983, chapter 4, the section titled "African Traditions in the South." For an example of these spaces in a Haitian context, see also Dunham 1969, chapters four and six especially. Dunham, a contemporary of Zora Neale Hurston, was a Voodoo practitioner and dancer-anthropologist who studied the development of African American dance within the context of spirit work practices.

14. Katrina Hazzard-Donald is listed as the author of *Mojo Workin'* and Katrina Hazzard-Gordon as the author of *Jookin'*; they are the same person.

15. Most memorable from the novel, Sethe was held down and "milked" by the slave master's sons while pregnant, then brutally whipped for resisting.

16. "This is flesh I'm talking about here," asserts Baby Suggs, "[f]lesh that needs to be loved" (Morrison 1987, 104).

17. For instance, early blueswomen often challenged popular notions of femininity, heterosexual romantic love, and marriage, and they boldly laced their songs with "affirmations of sexual autonomy and open expressions of female sexual desire[s]" that "[gave] historical voice to possibilities of equality not articulated elsewhere" (Davis 1998, 11–14, 22–24).

18. *Blueswomen* is a creative (and political) term in usage within African American communities.

19. This "standard" is "hard work, perseverance and self-reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and insistence on sexual equality" (Davis 1981, 29; Davis 1998, 121).

20. For an expanded development of the symbiotic relationship between hoodoo and the blues, see Martin 2013, 135–50.

21. See also Baraka 1999, 7 and 19, for how the cultural-spiritual content of the blues was erased as it crossed over into mainstream culture.

22. As hoodoo was prevalent within the blues tradition (Martin 2013, 133–36), a comprehensive list is beyond the scope of this essay; instead, I have focused, in this section, on an artist Davis uses within her own analysis. There are, however, honorable mentions beyond Davis's work that fit my analysis, such as the Neville Brother's "Voodoo," Nina Simone's "I Put a Spell on You" or "Obeah Woman," and Koko Taylor's "I'm a Woman." A current example is D'Angelo's "The Root," on his album, *Voodoo*, from which I derived the title for this essay: "*She done worked a root/in the name of love and war, took my shield and sword.*"

23. And Smith's "Red Mountain Blues." At the low point of the song, the woman is so love-sick she seeks out a conjurer ("fortune-teller") who instructs her to use High John de Conquer, a powerful root often used in hoodoo love rituals to secure power over the intended lover (for another example, see Hyatt 1970, 593).

24. From Billie Holiday's "Day in, Day out."

25. This was commonly referred to as a "Marie Laveau trick," in reference to the notorious "Voodoo woman" who wielded immense social and political power in New Orleans across class and race during the nineteenth century (Tallant 1946, 109).

26. Another term used in hoodoo is *fixed*. The term's usage in hoodoo comes from the second way to define "fix" (according to Webster's dictionary): to "make fast, firm, or stable; to place definitely and more or less permanently, to direct or determine." The term within the context of hoodoo refers to the act of fundamentally altering a person's future.

27. The first category were the "seeds or herbs" that "instruct" the spirit "metaphorically" to a particular task (Leone and Fry 1999, 380). The second category included items to "link and direct spirits to the person upon whom the bundle is to work," such as fingernails or hair (380). The third is listed below.

28. Such as the "jug" in Smith's "Downhearted Blues" mentioned earlier (for more examples of this type of ritual, see Hyatt 1973, 2515–17). Another variation of these rituals, using a cloth, is: "Well, she goin bring him home and make him stay with her. She'll take that [sanitary] cloth and take them needles, them nine needles and cross them, take a silver dime from him if she kin get it, and take a piece of his hair outa his head, and sew it all up in that cloth together, and cross it . . . . Well, after she do that, she takes it and puts it in her pocket. If it's necessary she wears it all the time" (Hyatt 1973, 2529–30).

29. Ruppel et al. write, "[c]rossroads thinking is where two ways come together, where this world meets the next, where the dead meet the living, where the living can communicate with the dead" (Ruppel et al. 2000, 329).

30. Sometimes the bundles were also arranged in the shape of the cosmogram when buried (Ruppel et al. 2000, 326–28).

31. Dunham writes of her own experience of spirit possession through dance, "[t]here is something in the dance of religious ecstasy that has always made me feel that through this exercise man *might come into his own, be freed of inferiority and guilt in face of whatever might be his divinity*" (Dunham 1969, 109).

32. As Lawrence Levine notes, because slaves "recognized different loci of power" than their oppression, "[t]he whites were neither omnipresent or omniscient; there were things they did not know, forces they could not control, areas in which slaves could act with more knowledge and authority than their masters, ways in which the power of whites could be muted if not thwarted entirely" (Levine 1977, 73–74).

33. For example, Chireau notes that slaves were often more afraid to disobey hoodoo doctors on the plantation than to disobey their owners (Chireau 2003, 18). It is this sort of behavior that convinced Levine that these practices "created the necessary space between the slaves and their owners and were the means of preventing legal slavery from becoming spiritual slavery" (Levine 1977, 80).

34. L. H. Stallings analyzes how the trickster figure has long been a symbol of resistance to multifaceted oppression *as well as* radical self-invention in African American folktales (Stallings 2007, 10–11, 24–27). For instance, in "High John de Conquer," Hurston highlights how a particular trickster figure performs both functions. However, High John's ability to resist (or "trick" the master) is tied up *within* the hoodoo practices he embodies, which are distinguished from resistance (or "carrying the sword in our

hearts" [Hurston 1995, 928]). Hoodoo practices shift the terrain of battle, from that of oppositional engagement with our oppressors to "winning within" (928). For another example of the hoodoo trickster figure in African American literature, see Chesnutt 1998.

35. In recent works, scholars have also noted that discussions of liberation tend to have a narrow focus on resistance to oppression and exploitation (or even read both dimensions of the struggle for liberation as forms of resistance). For instance, Saba Mahmood argues that there are certain "modes" of agency the subjugated exhibit that are not seen properly when we read their acts in the logic of subversion and resistance (Mahmood 2005, 9). Instead, the "meaning of agency must be explored within the grammar of concepts within which it resides" (34), for the practices with which the oppressed engage are themselves *constitutive* of any type of agency available to them. Similarly, Eddie Glaude argues that we need a "thicker conception of agency" than what narratives of resistance offer when dealing with black religious experiences (Glaude 2007, 92). Stallings makes a similar point within the context of black female sexuality: focus on resisting sexual stereotypes may actually result in the policing of sexuality. That is, resistance keeps us in a binary where "the complexities of having numerous genders and sexualities" cannot be acknowledged (Stallings 2007, 2).

36. For Hazzard-Donald, many forms of both sacred and secular dance (as well as music) for African Americans "originated in an African worship system that included a wide range of praise methods" (Hazzard-Gordon 1990, 16, 77–78).

37. "As the sacred dance of the hoodoo religion, the Ring Shout contained all the antecedent dramatic, mimetic, and stylistic elements of future African American sacred as well as secular dancing" (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 47).

38. Hurston's term for women blues singers in the Jook.

39. A sexual euphemism (Martin 2013, 137).

40. In the opening minutes, Franklin refers to the song as a "blues."

41. The title of Feelgood—"doctor"—places the song within the spiritual tradition of hoodoo. This was a title often given to hoodoo practitioners. It was also common practice to refuse medical treatment of doctors, not only from (justified) mistrust of whites, but fear of misdiagnosis. Practitioners often saw ailments as physical manifestations of *spiritual* or psychic maladies, thus operating on a register Western medicine did not recognize.

42. For instance, at 4:12, the "yes" refrain transitions from a rejoinder of "goood" sexual love to the affirmation refrain sung in the Sanctified Church—a sect whose practices bear loose affiliation with hoodoo practices (for example, Hurston 1981; Hazzard-Donald 2013, chapters 1 and 2). Both Hurston and Hazzard-Donald also identify "shouting," as in the second part of the performance, as a continuation of West African practices—namely, possession by the gods during worship services (for example, Hazzard-Gordon 1990, 15–16; Hurston 1995, 851–54).

43. Baldwin writes in "Uses of the Blues": "I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd it may sound, a kind of joy" (Baldwin 2011, 70).

44. Douglass writes of his fight with Mr. Covey, “from whence came the spirit I don’t know—I resolved to fight” (Davis 2010, 187). Well, perhaps the “spirit” came from the “root” he was wearing.

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