

INVASION AS AFFLICTION: WORMS AND BODILY INFESTATION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN *HOODOO* PRACTICES

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When the medical doctor does you no good, you should go to the Conjure doctor. He will give you a brew made out of roots and herbs...then will ...come out little ground puppies...they are given this name because they have heads and tails like little dogs and they are always wiggling.¹

Descriptions of worms and worm-like animals like salamanders, snakes, and tadpoles are a remarkable feature of African American affliction narratives in late 19th and early 20th centuries. Often appearing as unwelcome internal inhabitants of the human body, the creatures are envisioned as the material manifestations of illness. However, the fact that many descriptions of bodily infestation derive from second-hand testimonies, unconfirmed eyewitnesses, and hearsay reports has led to their dismissal as a kind of “folklore,” “delusions” or simply “superstitions.” On the other hand, one might also argue that these descriptions of bodily infestation possess their own integrity as historical documents, in that they present new possibilities for interpreting embodied experience. Furthermore, because many of the accounts are embedded within discourses of spirituality and religion, they are especially interesting for what they suggest about worldviews within given populations. Beyond their use as texts for theorizing sickness, stories of infestation also provide valuable evidence of the ways that African Americans have historically constructed and mapped their inner worlds. In this essay, I will examine accounts of worms and animal infestations that appear in African American *Hoodoo* narratives. *Hoodoo* is a spiritually-based healing and harming practice that dates back to slavery. In their conceptualizations of affliction within the *Hoodoo* tradition, African Americans simultaneously imposed and negated boundaries of the self and provided a rich, densely organized subjectivity by which they conceptualized and articulated physical suffering. A closer investigation of African American narratives of *Hoodoo* infestation reveals a vast and colorful complex of ideas and expressions that have effectively interacted with the external social realities of African American life.

Descriptions

...it was no illusion that they had begun to crawl within my body. I didn't need a mirror to feel the slight itching as the curled and stretched themselves, multiplying as they burrowed deeper into my flesh...It was reaching a point where I couldn't stand it anymore. There is a limit to how long you can feel your insides being gnawed away without beginning to lose your mind...but they were multiplying up toward my throat, and once I saw that I was spitting out worms, it would surely take me over the edge.²

This excerpt from Gloria Naylor's 1989 novel, *Mama Day*, reveals the mental and physical agony of worm infestation from the imagined point of view of a victim. Naylor told me that she had grown up hearing about such things when she was a child in Mississippi, where folk traditions and stranger-than-fiction storytelling were important sources of vernacular knowledge, as they were in black communities throughout the South. Naylor's created character is unique because she provides a self-described experience of bodily infestation, whereas most narratives of *Hoodoo* affliction derive from second- and third-person perspectives, and are not normally offered by victims. This is significant, because while African American *Hoodoo* narratives of infestation utilized distinctive imagery to articulate physical distress, they did not privilege the voice of the sufferer in doing so. While the sick and afflicted themselves were unlikely to describe their bodily symptoms as infestation, other observers, such as family members, neighbors, and friends, constructed graphic accounts, creating a profoundly empathetic documentary of illness.³

I believe that *Hoodoo* stories encode culturally-specific ways of depicting disorder and disease for African Americans. Recurring descriptions of creatures circulating throughout the bodily system, contained but dangerous, can be read as signs of distress. These are social narratives in that they link personal affliction to community concerns and relationships, taking full consideration of the environment and its actors in the telling of the tale. In this report, for example, sickness is narrated as a local affair by an unidentified spectator, yet it implicates specific places, persons, and designated roles of patient and healer in the infestation plot:

In 1873 I was going down the street and came across a Conjure doctor, and he asked me where did a certain lady live, and I told him and he went there; and when he got

there the woman told him she had some kind of pain in her head and side, and told him something kept coming up in her throat and she did not know what to do...⁴

This account outlines a typical *Hoodoo* story, literally placing the affliction and its treatment within a context of treatment. According to the narrator, the "Conjure" doctor gives the sick woman his own medicinal formula, and "in five minutes," he notes "a scorpion came out of her mouth." This narrative, like so many others, details a specific illness process that was well known to a significant segment of African American people in the United States from the nineteenth century onward. As they are told, *Hoodoo* stories appear to be fantastic, but they are nearly always offered with the sober and straightforward delivery of blunt truthfulness.⁵

Observers corroborate the facts of bodily infestation. Ex-slave Nathaniel John Lewis of Tin City, Georgia, declared that he had been witness to an infestation of serpents in his wife's body. "My wife Hattie had a spell put on her for three long years with a nest of rattlesnakes inside her," he insisted. "She just lay there and swelled and suffered." Other reports of *Hoodoo* related afflictions describe the invasion of the body by worms and worm-like amphibians such as snails, salamanders and tadpoles. In the early 1900s, sociologist Newbell Niles Puckett spoke to an ex-slave in Mississippi who suspected that he had been "tricked" by an enemy who put poison into a glass of whiskey. "He held the glass in his right hand and in a short time that had began to swell," stated Puckett. "Great was his astonishment, on slitting open the palm of his hand with a small knife, to find that the inside...was alive with small black-headed worms." Similar depictions, related in graphic detail, create a visceral picture of the pain and horror that was believed to be experienced by victims of bodily infestation.⁶

Accounts of *Hoodoo* sickness routinely testified to plagues of snakes, lizards, and other creatures in the body. Former slave George Little, a "root" doctor skilled in domestic medicine from Brownsville, Georgia, observed the deadly consequences of such infestations. "Frawgs an lizuds and sech tings is injected intuh people's bodies an duh people den fall ill an sometime die," he said. Such matter-of-fact statements were always relayed with the firm conviction of their truth. "...since I came to talk with such good old Christians who I know would not tell a lie," declared one writer in a late-nineteenth century account, "...they told me they have seen ground puppies (salamanders) jump out of folks feet, and lizards and snakes." Another eyewitness stated that he had viewed a *Hoodoo* doctor who had cured a

patient by taking “out of her right arm a spool of thread, and out of her leg a lizard...this is the truth,” the witness professed, “what I saw with my own eyes.” Ex-slave Estella Jones of Augusta, Georgia, also insisted on the veracity of her version of events. “Some folk don’t believe me, but I ain’t telling no tale about it,” she maintained. Jones said she had been an eyewitness to several cases of *Hoodoo* poisoning, and admitted that it was easy for other persons “to put snakes, frogs, turtles, spiders, or most anythin’ that you couldn’t live with, crawlin’ and eatin’ on the inside of you.” Finally, in a 1940 Federal Writers Project interview, another Georgia resident described a relative that had been poisoned while drinking alcohol with a spiteful and jealous neighbor. After he got sick, she said, “He told everybody that asked him...about the frogs in his stomach:”

The bigger these frogs got, the weaker he got. After he had been sick about four months and the frogs had got to be pretty good size, you could hear them holler every time he opened his mouth. He got to the place where he wouldn’t talk much on account of this. His stomach stuck out so far, he looked like he weighed 250 pounds. After these frogs started hollering in him, he lived about three weeks, and before he died you could see the frogs jumping about in him and you could even feel ‘em.⁷

I have found accounts of *Hoodoo* infestation to be peculiar to the illness narratives of blacks in the United States. *Hoodoo* affliction first came to the attention of writers in the post-Emancipation period, when the former slaves, their sons, and their daughters began to reflect publicly on the lives that they lived. Newspaper articles, oral histories, autobiographies, and short story collections drew upon the words of African American informants and sometimes circulated as interest pieces in the popular press, occasionally providing unique data for social scientific studies. *Hoodoo* narratives (also known as Conjure tales), emerged as a mixed genre of African American literature, as they included both oral and written sources, fictional and non-fiction texts, and vernacular and academic prose. One of the earliest bodies of collected *Hoodoo* illness narratives, for instance, was a compilation of letters submitted to the school newspaper at Virginia’s Hampton Institute in the late 1870s. African American student members of the Hampton Folklore Society gathered the information for a folklore and ethnology project that was believed to possess both scientific and social value. An excerpt from the following essay, which is adopted almost verbatim from the student papers,

describes African American *Hoodoo* practices and beliefs with great trepidation. To be sure, the co-authors of the piece, two white women of the northern liberal Protestant establishment who had become teachers at the freedmen's college, viewed *Hoodoo* as a "backward" and "primitive" survival practice from the descendents of African heathens. In the article they document the processes by which victims believed the human person to be afflicted by *Hoodoo* with the intrusion of animal entities in the body:

The disease...may be recognized in its early stages, in the first place the suddenness of the attack. The victim is seized with a sharp pain in some part of her body; later, swelling and other symptoms follow, but the beginning of the attack can usually be traced to a pain which followed directly upon handling, stepping over, or swallowing a charm...As the disease develops itself the symptoms become more severe and terrible in their nature. In many cases snakes and lizards are seen running up and down under the flesh, or are even known to show their heads from the sufferer's mouth. One example is given of a woman possessed by a lizard that "would run up and down her throat and hollow (holler) when she would be a talking. Another case is of a man whose food did him no good. The conjure doctor told him that he had been conjured and that inside of him were a number of small snakes which ate up the food as fast as he ate it. Another woman who had lizards crawling in her body was obliged to eat very often to keep the lizards from eating her. This possession by reptiles of various kinds seems to be a part in almost every evil wrought by the conjurer, and instances are too numerous and too horrible for a more detailed review of them in this paper.⁸

The detached, almost clinical style of presentation here contrasts with the personal *Hoodoo* stories that were told and retold by black Americans in the early twentieth century, although the structure of the accounts is the same: an individual, clearly afflicted by some inexplicable ailment, complains of great pain while experiencing other symptoms, such as the inability to eat or drink. Then, some unpredictable physical disability occurs. The acute distress of the afflicted person— who is nearly always kin, a neighbor, or a member of a local community — is made real as their pain is rendered in spectacular form by concerned observers. To the reader, many of these illness accounts display a kind of visual empathy, in that they communicate the immediacy of a victim's suffering as well as an awareness of the larger context in which the crisis emerges.⁹

Hoodoo

What is *Hoodoo*? *Hoodoo* is a complex of ideas and actions that originated among enslaved African Americans for purposes of personal empowerment, healing, and physical protection, as well as retaliation, aggression, and defense against perceived oppressors. *Hoodoo* uses symbols, rituals, and language adopted from Christianity, indigenous African faiths, and other cultural sources, including Native American and European traditions. As a practice with religious referents, *Hoodoo* mediated spirituality and embodiment through the enactment of harming *and* healing – that is to say, *Hoodoo* was believed to both afflict and to cure affliction. Also known as Conjure, *Hoodoo* was widespread among slave populations in the United States during the 1800s, and later among freedpersons. With *Hoodoo*, some African Americans believed themselves able to manipulate spiritual forces and influence the destiny of other human beings.¹⁰

Hoodoo sicknesses always produced visible side effects, the most unusual of which was bodily infestation. The incursion of animals within the body – small, teeming creatures of a lower order - is viewed in African American sickness narratives as clear evidence of *Hoodoo* affliction. The effects of supernatural harming are seen in the painful physical symptoms and the visible "proof" of the intruding presences, worm-like entities that move about without restriction within the body of the afflicted individual. But how was it thought that these invasions of the body came about? Black Americans believed that *Hoodoo* brought harm to victims by causing misfortune, sickness, or death with supernatural maleficia. Practitioners utilized a variety of measures in order to afflict, including ritually-empowered artifacts and objects, elaborate oaths, curses, and prayers – these were common practices in *Hoodoo* traditions. However, bodily infestations were most often believed to be triggered by one of two specific methods: they were either caused by substances that were activated by eating or drinking them, or they were brought about through forces that required indirect contact with the intended victim. "A bottle in which a lizard has been put is placed on the road," states one source, "...and if the unfortunate victim shall step over that bottle...the lizard miraculously hops into him, and he ends his days in agony." One of the most well known methods of *Hoodoo* poisoning involved a kind of sympathetic magic that was brought about by ingestion. One witness described an African American man that had been

made ill, he believed, due to the malevolence of his enemy. "Every time they tried to give him soup or anything to eat, something would come crawling up in his throat," stated the narrator. After the victim died, witnesses explained that a "turtle come up in his throat and choked him to death." Whether the aftermath of poisoning, or just as often the result of a charmed object hidden somewhere in the proximity of the victim, *Hoodoo* infestation was always accompanied by great physical suffering.¹¹

Hoodoo sickness narratives generally conform to a pattern in which the body is conceptualized as a site of disease, organic dysfunction and/or pathology. Even as it is porous within, the body external is also open. Permeable by nature and supernature, the external body, the material self, continually interacts with innumerable invisible forces and powers. Although black Americans generally understood the sources of many common diseases, many also believed that specific disorders could only be caused by spiritual practices such as witchcraft or *Hoodoo*. *Hoodoo* was suspected when an ailment was chronic or unresponsive to treatment; when sickness manifested especially unusual symptoms; or when the illness was dramatic, sudden, and unanticipated. In reviewing the instances of victims and observers who had witnessed bodily intrusions of worms, reptiles, and insects, one is struck by the futility of conventional medical techniques and practitioners in alleviating the suffering of victims. "They's lots of those kind of cases the ord'nary person never hear about," said former bondsman William Adams when questioned. "You hear of the cases the doctors can't understand, nor will they 'spond to treatment." "...the medical doctors aint no good for nothing lak that," asserted Jasper Millegan, an ex-slave whose uncle had been poisoned by a Conjuror's charm, he claimed. "He nebber did get any better and he died." *Hoodoo* afflictions, some blacks believed, could not be corrected by conventional medical means. In general, while healing with herbs, roots and other natural remedies was practiced for common physical ailments, supernatural healing was implemented when other methods were perceived as inadequate. A former bondswoman in Yamacraw, Georgia, for example, argued for the effectiveness of supernatural remedies in especially stubborn cases of sickness. She believed herself to have been "tricked" or *Hoodooed*, and ordinary medicine had failed her: "I call a regluh doctuh," she declared, "but he didn seem tuh do no good." She was encouraged by the treatment that the folk healer provided for her. "...three weeks ago I went tuh

a root man," she stated hopefully, "He gimme sumpm tuh take an sumpm tuh put in muh bed...I guess I soon be well."

Hoodoo narratives appear to be much more than idiosyncratic descriptions of disease and illness symptoms, for more often than not they provide alternative explanations for undeserved physical suffering. The idea that spiritual causes and effects are at the heart of affliction reflects a personal cosmology. In African American *Hoodoo* practices and beliefs, sickness by infestation was understood to be the outcome of deadly intent and malicious human motivations. The direct products of *Hoodoo* were physical, the means, spiritual. The worldview out of which such ideas emerged was certainly archaic, transcending religious particularity and sectarian beliefs. As part of this traditional vision, the body was envisioned as a battleground in which good and evil forces fought for sovereignty, while pain and infestation exhibited the carnage of a greater war which manifested within the self. In African American understandings of *Hoodoo*, conceptions of illness, disease and other ailments were joined to non-physical sources, such as the acts of an evil, ill-willed enemy, or the destructive powers of witchcraft or sorcery. Illness, misfortune and adversity were never random, but were explicable within the broader scheme of cultural beliefs. Some ailments were believed to be the product of malevolent forces, and some were thought to be sent from God. But many afflictions found their source within the realm of human relations.¹²

It is true that social factors figure prominently in the ways that African Americans experienced and interpreted bodily infestation. In this scheme, illness and disease encompassed social and spiritual processes. Many black folk, for example, indicated that *Hoodoo* illnesses was the result of specific conflicts, tensions, dissension, and stress that engaged community members. Significantly, *Hoodoo* attacks usually manifested in the wake of disputes between individuals. The narratives also suggest that *Hoodoo* poisoning followed the lines of kinship and family relations, striking members of the same household, individuals who had been romantically involved, or persons taking part in a particularly competitive activity or endeavor. The physical and spiritual consequences of *Hoodoo* allegations were eminently social, and in nearly all of the cases I have reviewed, *Hoodoo* illness and affliction ensnared both victims and witnesses in a web of allegations, anxieties, and suspicions of jealousy, anger, and revenge.

The most fascinating and unique element of African American *Hoodoo* tradition is the metaphor of infestation that is articulated and embodied in the narratives. Patterns in the stories of infestation suggest that witnesses sometimes collapsed distinctions in their attempt to give form to the experience of the afflicted. For example, “snakes” were described as “miniature” and sometimes “larval,” conceptually displacing the more prominent and imposing serpent, a creature that appears very frequently in American folklore as a symbolic agent of sin and danger. In some cases, the graphic images of worms, maggots, and salamanders seem to be conflated as generalized descriptors, irrespective of the particular characteristics of their different species. It is challenging to identify the origins of these diverse styles and types of infestation since so many *Hoodoo* stories assumed local explanations. In North Carolina, for instance, author Charles Chesnut believed that stories of animal intrusions originated with members of rural populations, who might have analogized their own suffering as victims of burrowing subcutaneous insects and parasites with the more extravagant claims of Hoodoo infestation. In Mississippi, Newbell Puckett identified a potential source of these ideas in the visual and metonymic associations between common intestinal parasites and tapeworms. Likewise, popular science writers in the nineteenth century noted parallels with respect to patients who endured the pain of bowel infections, such as giardiasis. One comment, from an amateur naturalist at the turn of the century, insisted upon the visual proof of such an infestation, a case that had “reconciled animals of the coldest and most meagre habits to the enjoyment of the warmth and luxuries of the human stomach.” Like a witness to a *Hoodoo* consultation, the writer recorded the events “as they actually occurred.” “On my arrival, I found that she, (the patient,) had puked up two ground puppies and was labouring under a violent sick stomach, with pain, and syncope:”

These animals have, since, been shown to me: they are not the ground puppy, (gecko,) as they are vulgarly called; they resemble it very much, but are easily distinguished from it; they belong to the same genus, (lacerta, or lizard,) but are of the species " salamander ;" these animals though oviparous, hatch their eggs in the belly, like the viper and produce about fifty young at a birth. The inference is irresistible, that the patient had, in her frequent draughts of swamp water, swallowed, perhaps thousands of these animals in their nascent, or most diminutive state of existence, and a few only survived the shock; their being, and for which, they were constituted by nature, they should bear this sudden transportation to a situation so opposite in its character, and grow into vigorous maturity, unannoyed

by the active chemical and mechanical powers to whose operation they were subjected, but it is matter of astonishment, that from the icy element in which they had commenced.¹³

Other observers characterized the presence of entities inside of the body as the outward manifestation of a victim's inward mental and emotional state. A Mississippi police chief told a folklorist in the early twentieth century of an African American woman who had experienced "great agony" because she believed that she had been 'Hoodooed.' "She was screaming and hollering," he said, "[as she] imagined that she had lizards and various other things creeping under her skin and flesh."¹⁴

While adopting metaphysical categories in order to explain affliction, African-Americans relied upon both conventional and unusual techniques for healing. Since the powers that were believed to have caused creature intrusions were diverse, they could only be controlled by individuals possessing the requisite skills and techniques for curing. The removal of an afflicting supernatural force or power could occur by several means. "I saw a root doctor cut out of a man's leg a lizard and a grasshopper, and then he got well," claimed the renowned root doctor of Columbia County, Georgia, Braziel Robinson. In North Carolina Charles Chesnutt recounted a story of a man who required surgical intervention after he had been poisoned by a lizard. "This lizard, according to the "doctor," would start from the man's shoulder and pass down the side of the body to the leg," Chesnutt wrote. "When it reached the calf of the leg the lizard's head would appear right under the skin. After it had been perceptible for three days the lizard was to be cut out with a razor, or the man would die."¹⁵ For some *Hoodoo* doctors, a modified form of leeching or cupping extraction was the only way to remove offending animal entities. One writer described the process as she witnessed it on the South Carolina Sea Islands in the late nineteenth century:

There are one or two herb doctors on the island who profess (with the aid of a magical cow horn and certain herbs) to be able to remove the witchcraft out a the person bewitched; and so credulous are the people on this subject that, when the doctor pulls old lizards, etc., out of the horn (previously put there by himself) and asserts that he has drawn them from the sufferer, they not only firmly believe this to be the case, but will describe in extravagant language the feelings experienced during the operation.

A similar account, recorded by a skeptical but bewildered witness in early twentieth century Charleston, SC, describes the process in nearly identical terms. The afflicted patient sent for a Conjure doctor, who immediately took charge. "Get me two plates of salt," he commanded the surprised caregiver. "He pricked the back of [the patient's] neck, drew blood, and ...put his cupping horn to it...He took it off, and dropped out of a young snake and a lizard, dropped them into the salt. They squirmed about – lizards and snakes don't like salt."¹⁶ The dramatic and often elaborate protocols involved with removing infestations from the body demonstrate that treatment was seen to be as complicated a practice as magical poisoning and supernatural affliction. Together, healing and harming formed the most prominent expressions of the expertise of African American *Hoodoo* practitioners.

Meaning

Hoodoo beliefs assigned cultural significance to sickness by mapping the body, both literally and metaphorically, beyond the self. The body, as an infested container of sickness and disease, marked the boundaries between physical disorder and order, spiritual imbalance and wellness. As such, the Hoodooed body mediated the visible and the invisible realms. African American stories of affliction can be thus read as compelling and original interpretations of physical and spiritual dysfunction, much like conventional medical interpretations that posit the invasion of millions of microscopic foreign substances as the source of an illness. In the case of *Hoodoo*, the foreign substances are given explicit form, and the body becomes something of a living menagerie. African-Americans have historically maintained distinctive ideas concerning the meaning of infestation-related sickness, its origin and its cure. These particular notions of illness are expressed with a language of supernatural causality. In their characterization of affliction, blacks paid particular attention to the spiritual dimensions. This does not mean that they dismissed as meaningless physical etiologies in their quest for explanations of disease. It is, rather, that their views of illness were more inclusive of external agencies. In other words, illness was identified by its specific physical symptoms and linked to other sources that were in turn

situated in the relational context. Illness, in many cases, was believed to hold social implications.

Nevertheless it is clear that with *Hoodoo* infestations, affliction is much more than the physical symptoms that are so incisively described as bodily states. Affliction represents an attack by an invisible agent, motivated by human intent and action. Social conflict, then, is expressed in the bodily state. The body, in this scheme, reflects a cosmology by which experience (the physical and social realm) and the spiritual world (invisible and visible) gain manifestation. The metaphysical realm enclosed and was enclosed by the body, but paradoxically, it was inclusive of the world in which persons lived and acted. *Hoodoo* affliction was thus located at the nexus of spiritual perception and physical experience. These ideas point to what might be considered dual social and spiritual etiologies of illness in African American life.

Anthropological theory may help to explain the persistence of these ideas in black communities since slavery. Like witchcraft allegations across cultures, experiences of Hoodoo reveal frayed areas in the fabric of social relations. Allegations of Hoodoo affliction become more salient when persons find themselves grappling for power in circumstances that are defined by finite means and limited autonomy. Given the history of American racial oppression, concerns for economic mobility, protection and safety were foremost for African Americans since their sojourn as an enslaved people in the United States, and *Hoodoo* was often allied with achieving or not achieving these goals. For instance, infestation illnesses emerged in relation to accusations that were based in economic rivalry, property disputes, and sexual competition, and these were often directed against persons who were viewed as attaining opportunities at the expense of others. In black communities that perceived themselves to be under siege, greedy and ambitious individuals may have represented a discomfiting threat to others – particularly when all were expected to share resources in the struggle for advancement. Ambition itself was not an evil, but striving for individual, selfish gain – as opposed to group uplift and communal progress – may have fostered resentments that led to supernatural affliction and Hoodoo accusations. Hoodoo, then, may have functioned as an expression of social control for African Americans in a world in which personal aspirations vied with collective interests, and where cultural forces and religious attitudes shaped community norms.

The infesting creatures themselves may also provide a clue to the meaning of *Hoodoo* affliction. The usual species of animal invaders described in *Hoodoo* stories included worms, turtles, spiders, scorpions, frogs, ground puppies (salamanders), and snails – all animals associated with mud, water, or slime. Their presence beneath the skin, infiltrating the cavities without restraint, overwhelmingly present in the body but very clearly not of the body, suggests an image of a human container. Porous, without boundaries, the inner person is overrun and corrupted by that which is alien to it. The Conjured body is open to powerful external forces, even as these forces are manifested and enclosed from within. It might be possible, then, to view African American bodies that were afflicted by Hoodoo as symbolizing defilement by an unseen - and particularly dangerous - trespasser. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, the human body reveals a terrain of "natural symbols," a site of complex social codes and metaphysical commitments. But it is her view of impure and offensive transgressors that is most interesting here. The "unclean animal," she notes, "is that which creeps, crawls or swarms...whether we call it teeming, trailing, creeping, crawling or swarming, it is an indeterminate form of movement..." The religious association between unclean creatures and impurity suggests that African Americans might have classified certain types of illness in analogous ways, viewing infestation as a moral sign. Sickness and disease embodied pollution. In the cosmology of sickness, then, infestation from Hoodoo might have signified social decay and cultural disorder – and a threat to communities and relationships whose boundaries were perceived as dangerously unstable or vulnerable to the outside world.

Hoodoo infestation stories are much more than folklore or fantasy. They offer dramatic historical documentation of embodied pain, and tell us something about the underlying perspectives of many African Americans with respect to notions of spirit and body, sickness and wellbeing. Reading these narratives of the body allows us to see how African Americans may have viewed sickness as a multifaceted experience that could be addressed and interpreted in a variety of ways. In the cosmology of *Hoodoo* sickness, pain was not an abstraction, just as personal suffering was rarely attributed to chance or divine will. Unanticipated bad health had broad meanings and manifestations. Intrusion by worms and worm-like invaders was a sign for more complex and insidious experiences of affliction. *Hoodoo* infestation could be the consequence of the destructive powers of witchcraft, or as often

it could be the product of the evil thoughts of a mean-spirited person, or directed through the noxious medium of a Conjuror's charm. *Hoodoo*, I believe, was a shared formulation by which African Americans managed sickness, and by extension, they were able to manage the forces that they believed to have eventuated in the bodily infirmities with which they suffered. In slavery and in freedom, the perpetuation of such culturally-specific ideas of health and sickness ensued largely from the myriad social concerns that they addressed. To take African American *Hoodoo* narratives seriously is to come closer to understanding how healing and health, embodied as knowledge, as spirituality, and as practice - is placed in the service of lived needs and values in every moment and amongst every people.

Notes

1. Anonymous, *Conjure*, Robert Tallant Folklore Collection, 1940
2. Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Vintage Press, 1989), 287–290.
3. There are few studies that treat embodied illness in African American culture, and none that comprehensively treats Hoodoo as an illness system with religious referents. I have been inspired by the writings of Albert Raboteau in this area, especially his “The Afro-American Traditions,” in Ronald Numbers and Darryl Amundsen, *Caring and Curing*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). In another influential text, Sharla Fett examines African American conceptions of health and healing in the antebellum South and treats Hoodoo as a cultural practice that emerged from “a relational vision” of community and health. I would argue, as Fett does, that harming practices also supported this “relational vision” and the social basis of affliction among enslaved blacks. See Sharla Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Power and Health on Southern Slave Plantations*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
4. *Southern Workman* 7, No. 4, April 1878, 31 (*Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams*, 239)
5. On Hoodoo narratives as oral histories, see Yvonne Chireau, “Natural and Supernatural: African American Hoodoo Narratives of Sickness and Healing,” in Stephanie Mitchem and Emilie Townes, *Faith Health and Healing in African American Life* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2008).
6. Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, (Washington DC: Work Projects Administration, 1940), 13; Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negroes* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 252.
7. *Southern Workman* 7, No. 4, April 1878, 31. The variety of animal intruders in Hoodoo narratives is astounding. My research of texts has considered at least twenty varieties of

- species, including worms, spiders, scorpions, grasshoppers, undesigned insects, frogs, turtles, slugs, salamanders, snakes, lizards, roaches, snails, guppies, minnows and other undesigned fish, crabs and leeches. For the multiple uses and meanings of creatures in African American Hoodoo traditions, see the collected works of Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork*, Volumes 1–5, (self-published) 1978.
8. Alice Bacon, "Conjuring and Conjure-Doctors," *Southern Workman* 28, 1895, 210.
 9. On the rise of Hoodoo as a subject of folklore study, see Ronald Waters, *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams, Folklore from the Hampton Institute*, 1983.
 10. For the history of Black American Hoodoo and Conjure traditions, see Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Formations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Jeffrey Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).
 11. Octave Thanet, "Folklore in Arkansas," *Journal of American Folklore*, 1892; George Rawick, *The American Slave: an Autobiography*, Vol. 13, 277. On the religious and historical sources of infestation, see Yvonne Chireau, "Body as Menagerie: Sickness and African American Hoodoo Narratives," *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin*, February 2007.
 12. Charla Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Power and Health on Southern Slave Plantations*, 2002.
 13. Joseph Muse, "Notice of the appearance of Fish and Lizards in extraordinary circumstances," *American Journal of Science* 64, 1829.
 14. Puckett, 253–254.
 15. Roland Steiner, "Brazier Robinson Possessed of Two Spirits," *Journal of American Folklore* 13, 1900, 228; Chesnut, "Superstitions and Folklore of the South," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990) 373.
 16. Portia Smiley, "Notes and Queries," *Journal of American Folklore* 32 1919, 379. I have documented the cupping technique amongst slave healers in the late 18th century, suggesting a possible African source.