

African American Women and Struggle for Survival
Malika Bousoulalim & Pr. Yamina Déramchia
Department of English
University of Algiers 2

Abstract

This paper examines the role of women to guarantee their survival in the African American community against the restrictions of slavery and racism and, sometimes, even against gender discrimination. Women challenged restrictions and attained public roles either through direct or indirect struggle in antebellum and post-bellum America. This paper shows that while women in urban centers achieved important community and social functions in the fields of religion and education, some rural women challenged restrictions through the mastery of rhetorical games or through resource to magic and divination or hoodoo practice.

Key words: African American women, education, religion, rhetorical games, hoodoo.

Femmes Afro-américaines et la Lutte pour la Survie

Résumé

Cet article examine le rôle des femmes pour garantir leur survie dans la communauté Afro-américaine, malgré les restrictions de l'esclavage et du racisme, voire même de la discrimination et des préjugés sexistes aux Etats Unis d'Amérique, avant et après la Guerre Civile. Ces femmes avaient contesté les restrictions et avaient aussitôt atteint des rôles publics par la lutte directe ou indirecte. Cet article montre que tandis que les femmes dans les centres urbains avaient joué un rôle essentiel au sein de leur communauté ainsi que dans leur société dans les domaines de la religion et de l'éducation, certaines femmes rurales avaient contesté les restrictions à travers d'autres moyens comme la maîtrise des jeux rhétoriques ou le recours à la magie et la divination ou les pratiques hoodoo.

Mots-clés: Femmes Afro-américaines, éducation, religion, jeux rhétoriques, hoodoo.

المرأة الإفريقية الأمريكية وكفاحها من أجل ضمان البقاء

ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى إبراز دور المرأة الإفريقية الأمريكية وكفاحها من أجل ضمان البقاء رغم الحد من مظاهر الرق والعبودية والعنصرية الجنسية، وحتى التهميش المطلق خلال فترة ما قبل الحرب الأهلية وما بعدها. ويتجلى ذلك أساساً في تحدي هذه المرأة القيود عن طريق مواصلة نضالها، إما بطرق مباشرة أو غير مباشرة. وانطلاقاً من هنا، جاءت هذه الدراسة لتبرز أهمية تحدي بعض النساء الريفيات للقيود العنصرية المفروضة عليها من خلال تنبيهها لألعاب البلاغة أحياناً، ولجوءها إلى السحر والشعوذة وممارسات الهودو أحياناً أخرى، بالموازاة مع نجاح النساء الأخريات في اعتلاء مراكز اجتماعية مرموقة في مجالات التعليم والدين، وذلك في المناطق الحضرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: امرأة إفريقية أمريكية، تعليم، دين، ألعاب البلاغة، هودو.

Introduction:

Despite the restrictions of slavery, racism, and, sometimes, even the restrictions of gender discrimination, African American women achieved an important role in antebellum and post-bellum America. They participated widely in the public life of their community. They were active community members who could attain public roles either through direct or indirect struggle. In urban centers, they achieved important community as well as social functions through their roles in the fields of religion and education. In rural areas, women challenged restrictions through the mastery of rhetorical games or through resource to magic and divination or hoodoo. The study tends to show that while most rural women sought spiritual and emotional release through religion or through resource to magic or even through rhetorical games, greed for education permitted many women in urban centers to overcome the hardest obstacles and the double prejudice of racism and sexism.

Urban Centers: Educational Functions:

The tenacity and strength of black women in the cause of education could be traced back to slavery time. Witnesses about the efforts to acquire the forbidden ability, to write and to read by slave women, were among the most admirable. Some women learned reading and writing by “using their wits, by stealth, deceit and the most ingenious cooperation among themselves”⁽¹⁾ wrote Gerda Lerner. Thus, some were very smart as they were capable to acquire knowledge through contact with the white masters, who were completely unaware about the intellectual capacities of those they were trying to dehumanize. Others acquired the forbidden knowledge via the most ingenious cooperation, through secret meetings where one among the few literate slaves would share his knowledge with other slaves greedy to learn. The demand for education was also the battle of black mothers to guarantee learning for their children. In *Women in White America: A Documentary History*, Gerder Lerner collected admirable examples about the slave women’s quest for education. One of these examples was that of the slave woman Milla Granson, who ran a midnight school under very hard conditions:

[In Natchez, Louisianan, there were] two schools taught by colored teachers. One of these was a slave woman who had taught a midnight school for a year. It was opened at eleven or twelve o’clock at night, and closed at two o’clock a.m....Milla Granson, the teacher, learned to read and write from the children of the indulgent master in her old Kentucky home. Her number of scholars was twelve at a time, and when she had taught these to read and write she dismissed them, and again took her apostolic number and brought them up to the extent of her ability, until she had graduated hundreds. A number of them wrote their own passes and started for Canada⁽²⁾.

After emancipation, even in a segregationist racist sexist society, women had higher hopes to be accomplished by education. Black women played the most significant role for the advancement of the newly emancipated black community through education.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Dubois designated four decades of work in Southern education after the Civil War; each had its own characteristics. The first decade started from the end of the Civil War until 1876 and witnessed, more importantly, the appearance of the ideal of “book learning.” Then, the next decade, which lasted ten years after 1875, was characterized by the construction of the public school system in the South. Finally, the main feature of the two last decades was the evolution of industrial schools, which were supported by the Industrial Revolution⁽³⁾. The role of black women was very noticeable during the four decades.

The foundation of the public school system in the South was inspired by the experiments of the Freedman’s Bureau in the field of education, at the dawn of freedom from 1861 to 1872. Before the Civil War, the South had no public school system. During the war, the whites were faced with the need of educating the slaves, who joined the union army. A rudimentary school system for the freedmen was first adopted. This set the pattern for the

great social experiment in the field of education led by the Freedmen's bureau, helped by philanthropic associations and volunteer effort. This experiment resulted in the instruction of nearly one quarter of a million black children in over 4,300 schools within five years after the end of the war. The success of the Freedmen's Bureau schools laid the foundation for the state public school systems. "By 1869, there were 9, 000 teachers for the freedmen in the South. Over 45 per cent of these were women," wrote Gerda Lerner who added "there are no accurate figures available for the number of black women who taught the freedmen, but their number was great and increased rapidly after 1870"⁽⁴⁾.

Surprisingly enough, many ex-slave women taught the freedmen. Susie King Taylor (1848-?), who was born a slave in Savannah (Georgia) and had acquired learning secretly, served as a teacher to the union army. In her memoirs, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd United States Colored Troops*, she wrote "I had about forty children to teach, besides a number of adults who came to me nights, all of them so eager to learn to read above anything else." She then added: "there were about 600 men and women and children [...], the women and children being in the majority"⁽⁵⁾.

Unfortunately, the great social achievement was soon hindered by the racist machine and the Jim Crow rule during the second decade. The schools for black children were eventually taken over by states to become part of the Southern public school system, which institutionalized segregationist schools. Obviously, the schools for blacks were underfinanced, poorly equipped and overcrowded, and teachers were underpaid. Gunnar Myrdal summed up this situation in the following comment:

The insufficient support of Negro schools in the South is reflected in a complete lack of schools in some rural areas, an insufficient number of schools in other areas, a grave lack of equipment, a lack of enforcement of the truancy laws for Negroes, an inferior quality of teacher training, differential payment to teachers, and miserably poor standards all around. The situation has been so bad that Southern Negroes have lost much of the faith in education they once had⁽⁶⁾.

The deteriorating condition of segregationist education was similarly reported in the witnesses of school teachers. Septima Poinsettia Clark, who worked as a school teacher in a state financed school for blacks, described her experiences:

Here I was, a high school graduate, eighteen years old, principal in a two-teacher school with 132 pupils ranging from beginners to eighth graders, with no teaching experience, a schoolhouse constructed of boards running up and down, with no slats in the cracks, and a fireplace at one end of the room that cooked the pupils immediately in front of it but allowed those on the rear to shiver and freeze on their uncomfortable, hard, back-breaking benches [...] In those days the state financed the schools, but sometimes the counties provided small supplements and Charleston County was one of them. Soon I was getting a supplement of five dollars, which make my salary \$35 a month. But right across from me [...] was the white teacher getting \$85 a month and teaching three—yes, three— pupils⁽⁷⁾.

To save the great achievement, and to overcome the inadequacies of the segregated school system, blacks built their own educational institutions, which were supported by white industrial philanthropists. The great majority of these schools followed the Tuskegee⁽⁸⁾ model as they were dedicated to self-help, uplift, and industrial and agricultural training, preparing a work force ready to fill the needs of Southern industrialization. Handy work was given priority and importance over classical subjects in these schools. With tenacity, faith, talent and dedication, many women fought the battle in the field of education as founders of vocational schools for blacks.

Women, such as Lucy Laney, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Anna Julia Haywood Cooper, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and McLeod Bethune among others, played important roles as founders of schools. Lucy Laney was the founder of Haines Normal Institute in Atlanta, Georgia in 1886. Charlotte Hawkins Brown founded the Palmer Memorial Institute, which

stressed the arts, cultural subjects and theatre; it was conceived by the founder as a school for black girls. Then came Nannie Helen Burroughs and Mary McLeod Bethune; the former founded the national Training School for Women and Girls, in Washington D.C., which offered industrial training to working women and girls, and Bethune was founder-president of Bethune-Cookman College. Their efforts to run schools successfully permitted thousands of black children to acquire vocational proficiency, as they permitted thousands of women to obtain more important positions in the industrial firms⁽⁹⁾.

Most women educators, who engaged in vocational training, were also social activists. In "On Classical versus Vocational Training. The Educational Ideas of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs," Karen A. Johnson explains that the two famous educators Cooper and Burroughs, who played a key role in the struggle for education and vocational training, integrated with their mission, as educators, other forms of struggle aimed to guarantee the overall progress of the Black civil society. Commenting about the efforts of Cooper and Burroughs, which were not different from the efforts of other women educators of their time, Johnson writes,

Similar to many African American female educators of their time, Cooper and Burroughs integrated their roles as educators with social and political activism. [...] Therefore, their social and civic advocacies included the founding of various institutions, social service programs, clubs, and other organizations that were centered on ameliorating the social plight of African American communities; programs such as literary clubs for adults and youth, settlement houses, kindergartens, orphanages, medical clinics, and homes for the elderly, and so forth. They were also involved in anti-lynching struggles, and women's rights; and most importantly, they were involved in establishing educational institutions that offered vocational and liberal arts curricula⁽¹⁰⁾.

Examining Black women's support to education, Patricia Hill Collins considers this role as an important dimension of Black women's political activism. She writes, *Education has long served as a powerful symbol for the important connections among self, change, and empowerment in African-American communities. [...] The commitment to the value of education by prominent Black women [...] goes far beyond the themes of gaining the technical skills essential to African-American employability, or mastering the social skills required for White acceptance (Barnett 1978). [...] Like their anonymous slave foremothers, these women saw the activist potential of education and skillfully used this Black female sphere of influence to foster a definition of education as a cornerstone of Black community development⁽¹¹⁾.*

Nevertheless, vocational schools were harshly criticized by many black intellectuals. The most severe opposition against those schools was structured by William Edward Burghardt Dubois. W. E. B. Dubois stressed the importance of classical and higher education for blacks, and he criticized those industrial schools saying that they "reminded black folk that before the Temple of knowledge swing the Gates of Toil."⁽¹²⁾ Another famous opponent of those schools was Kelly Miller, who, though praised the ideal of self-help and initiative underscored by vocational education proponents, opposed the exaggerated claims made on behalf of industrial education and advocated the need of higher education for black Americans⁽¹³⁾.

Despite their limitations, these schools were fitted for that special period, where the battle against economic insufficiency could not perhaps be as successfully won without the support of those vocational schools. Additionally, it was thanks to these vocational schools that many black women could help themselves and their families escape poverty and economic insufficiency, which were the lot of Blacks in racially segregated America. While these women educators choose a pragmatic means, namely vocational education, to struggle for the development of the Black community, other women choose less rational spiritual means to help secure the survival of their community.

Urban Centers: Religious Roles:

Black women's role in the field of religion has been largely influenced by the same zeal and patience that motivated women's struggle in the field of education. Actually, strengthened by deep religious faith and convictions, women challenged custom, authority, ignorance and institutional racism and sometimes sexism in their determination to make available positions that were denied for them in the field of religion. Women, therefore, were able to achieve very important religious roles through participation in various denominational programs. They worked as evangelists, missionaries, stewardesses, deaconesses, ministers, founders and supporters of churches, or lay readers. It was religious faith, which supported most black women against different kinds of hardships.

Before the Civil War, many organizations, which labored for black established churches, were headed by women and for women. Between 1824 and 1827, Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and its first bishop, organized the first missionary society for women known as the Dorcas Society in Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. His wife, Sarah Allen, organized the Daughters of the Conference, which was the second missionary society organized before the Civil War⁽¹⁴⁾.

In churches, women achieved different tasks. They ministered to the sick and poor, helped win converts, and raised money for their churches; some even founded churches. Many women struggled to preach the gospel in churches, which was denied to women. Jarena Lee was one of those who defied the custom, which forbade women from preaching in churches. She, thus, became a preacher as a result of what she described as a direct call to a religious vocation in her journal, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs Jarena Lee*, first published in 1836 and expanded in 1849. The journal was an account of her justification of the right of women to preach. Jarena Lee was a visionary, who claimed that she received a direct call to preach the gospel. Richard Allen, denied Jarena's call on the basis of her sex. Therefore, she expressed her refusal to accept the argument, which denied for women the right to preach in churches. She wrote: "And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? ...if then to preach the gospel, by the gift of heaven, comes by inspiration solely, is God straightened; must He take the man exclusively? May He not, did He not and can He not inspire a female to preach...?"⁽¹⁵⁾.

In addition to Jarena Lee, other women defied restrictions against women's official license to preach. Maria Stewart, for instance, claimed the right of a public role for women defending her claim from the Bible; Stewart said,

What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel? Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declared the resurrection of Christ from the dead? Again: Holy women ministered unto Christ and the apostles; and women of refinement in all ages, more or less, have had a voice in moral, religious, and political subjects. . The religious spirit which has animated women in all ages . . has made them by turns martyrs, apostles, warriors, and concluded in making them divines and scholars⁽¹⁶⁾.

In *African American Religion*, Albert J. Raboteau explains that women, like Jarena Lee and Maria Stewart, achieved considerable success in as much as they were able to change the lives of people in their communities even if they were never able to serve as ordained pastors in black churches. He writes,

Jarena Lee, Maria Stewart, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and other black women maintained considerable religious authority even though they could not serve as ordained pastors within the official structures of the black churches. Despite the opposition of church authorities, these women spoke out in public because they believed that they were directed by the Spirit of God. They defended their actions by pointing to the success their preaching ministry had in changing the lives of many people⁽¹⁷⁾.

While women achieved religious tasks with seriousness and sincerity, they made of religious ceremonies a time for joy and pleasure. During slavery, Christmas holidays, Sundays and Saturday nights offered the slaves break from the usual toil as they offered

moments when freedom could be reinvented. Women and men met in praise-houses, where they could exercise their religion freely mixing traditional African practices with Christian ritual, and where they could celebrate their services through music and song, dance and shout.

The ceremonies were marked by singing and dancing. The secular dancing was replaced by 'ring shouts.' "Ring shouts", or simply possession rituals, were "based on worship that expresses itself in song and dance,"⁽¹⁸⁾ to use Melville J. Herskovitz's words. This ritual was characterized by spirit possession, which is, according to Raymond J. Jones, "a type of highly emotionalized religious and ecstatic experience commonly designated by such terms as 'filled with the Holy Ghost,' 'lost in the spirit,' 'speaking in tongues'."⁽¹⁹⁾ Just like men, women could sing, shout, and dance and, therefore, get 'filled with the Holy Ghost,' or filled with God. During moments of union with God through ring shouts, women could transcend the narrow confines of the world in which they were forced to live.

Therefore, when shouts were forbidden by Catholic priests in Louisiana, women expressed their resentment arguing that "shouting" was necessary for salvation. Catherine Cornelius insisted that "the angels shout in heaven," and she also proclaimed, "The Lawd said you gotta shout if you want to be saved. That's the Bible."⁽²⁰⁾ Similarly, Emma Frazer, an ex-slave from South Carolina, explained that singing must necessarily be accompanied by dance, "But ef I sing an' it doan move me any, den dat a sin on de Holy Ghost; I be tell a lie on de Lord."⁽²¹⁾ These women, therefore, required that the devotee should make his faith manifest through shouting, and God should make his presence manifest and concrete through the body of the saved as an immediate recognition of salvation.

The slaves' insistence on shouting as necessary for salvation through the doggedly claims of women, who adopted a revisionist attitude to the Christian religion, underscores their need for purification through a public recognition of personal failings. Within "But ef I sing an' it doan move me any, den dat a sin on de Holy Ghost; I be tell a lie on de Lord," there is a relation between sin and movement or shout. Shout was necessary to step beyond sin or beyond personal failings, which should be recognized in the presence of the omniscient God, or even as a condition for God's actual manifestation among the shouters. In other words, here, it was suggested that to claim salvation without a voiced, public recognition of failings was "to lie on de Lord." Within this assumption, claimed by a slave woman, the slaves set up a new basis for a much more assertive and alleviating purification, instead of the repressive restrictive purification rituals practiced in the puritan churches.

Celebrating religious ceremonies through music and dance, and, therefore, ring shouts was resumed in the Holiness and storefront churches⁽²²⁾ of the post-Civil War, where the role of women was very significant to release some of the confusion of the post war era. In the midst of confusion, the black woman was once more there to lead her community through new ways of survival. Mahalia Jackson was one of the women, who used religion and gospel songs to soften the confusion of the 1940's. She revitalized and refreshed religion with musical performances that offered high possibilities for emotional release, and that moved her congregation in spirit and body toward the affirmation of folk religious practices. She purposefully sought to awaken those feelings as she literally acknowledged:

I had been reading the Bible every day most of my life and there was a Psalm that said: 'Oh, clap your hands, all ye people! Shout unto the Lord with the voice of trumpet!' If it was undignified, it was what the Bible told me to do.... How can you sing of amazing Grace? How can you sing of heaven and earth and all God's wonders without using your hands? I want my hands, ... my feet ... my whole body to say all that is in me. I say, 'Don't let the devil steal the beat from the Lord! The Lord doesn't like us to act dead. If you feel it, tap your feet a little—dance to the glory of the Lord'⁽²³⁾.

What characterized her performances was the mysterious effect of her solemn voice and energetic style evocative of intimacy, of dignity, of human warmth and sympathy, of respect and sincerity, indeed of "human greatness,"⁽²⁴⁾ as novelist Ralph Ellison admiringly

commented. When Mahalia sang, she sought to make her singing functional through the employment of the full expressive resources of the human voice, floating from low to loud, soft to rough sounds and from shrill and grating to the bright and warm tones. She ingeniously combined the resources of her voice with broadly conflicting rhythmic and tonal patterns, creating a polyrhythmic and polytonality inspired by the diversity of the human voice. Consequently, her songs linked glissandi, growl and blue notes and contained borrowings from the most enthusiastic rhythms and tones from different musical styles, as her use of the effects of blues and jazz (syncopation, riff and swing).

Actually, Mahalia diversified her musical and vocal styles to diversify her audiences. Mahalia used all this rhythmic, tonal and vocal diversity for more than the expression of religious feelings, or the reinforcement of emotional impact and communal dignity and unity, which were the direct and immediate effects of her singing. She skillfully stretched her voice and diversified her rhythms to make her singing attractive to other audiences outside the Baptist church. She succeeded to attract diversified audiences when she moved with Black gospel music to concert halls, where she further modified her folk forms (reduction of the rhythmic cycle) to suit them to place and time circumstances, indeed to merchandize them in the great market of white America.

What Mahalia achieved was a further reaffirmation of another folk tradition, which Houston A. Baker, Jr. named “the economics of slavery.”⁽²⁵⁾ Without denying her religious convictions, Mahalia’s performances of a gospel music, sufficiently modified in concert halls, was her most sensible, skillful and triumphant strategy not only to actually move beyond the confines of the severe white hegemony, but to deflect prejudice against Black religion. She unequivocally instilled then imposed her folk culture into the heart of white America. She, furthermore, instructed her audiences into a racial harmony that she had eminently expressed through rhythmic harmony as well as through the following firm instruction to her audiences, “‘Come right in. Pick a seat and sit right down—anywhere.’ Because if you come to hear religious music, you’re not supposed to feel any bigger than anybody else”⁽²⁶⁾.

Mahalia liberated gospel and religion out of the tight limits of church buildings. Accordingly, she doubly claimed that religion should be constrained by no place boundaries and that the sacred and the secular were but one in Black life. This claim was, indeed, suggestive of Mahalia’s sense of the wholeness of life based on a sense of possibility to live everywhere and at any time as cleanly, honestly and sincerely as she aspired to convey through an inimitable expressive contralto, in her performances in and outside the church. When women, like Mahalia, Stewart, or Jarena Lee, choose religion to effect change in their communities, the majority of women, who were not famous, could challenge the restrictions of their lives even if they lacked the kind of eloquence possessed by famous educators or religious interpreters.

Women in Rural Areas and in Some Urban Centers:

Actually, even women, who lacked educational skills and religious devotion, could challenge much of the conventions, which restricted their lives mostly through fun, games and hoodoo. Within the slave community, the sacred and secular were one for women, who, outside the praise houses, made of Christmas holidays, Sundays, and Saturday nights occasions for much fun. After emancipation, basically in the rural south, women found in weddings times for great amusement and joy, but also occasions to challenge Christian matrimonial rites and restrictions imposed on women. Outside ceremonies, many rural women used their mastery of rhetorical games to defy the gendered restrictions that the emancipated black males tried to impose on women in a segregated American society, which offered shallow hopes to the newly freedmen and women. And many other women, who lost religious faith and lacked the eloquence of the masters of rhetoric, found in hoodoo doctors a practical support against the hardships of their everyday life.

One way or another, slave women found energy to have good time whenever the

opportunity arose. Christmas, Sundays or Saturday nights were the appropriate time for non-religious festivities, as weddings when they used to sing, dance and even play music when they could manage to get a banjo or a fiddle. Fannie Berry of Virginia recalled, "Slaves lived jus' fo' Christmas to come round. Start getting' ready de fus snow fall. Commence to savin' nuts and apples, fixin' up party clothes, snitchin' lace and beads fum de big house. General celebratin' time, you see, 'cause husbands is comin' home an' families is gittin' 'nited agin. Husbands hurry on home to see dey new babies. Ev'ybody happy"⁽²⁷⁾. Women would dance putting their best clothes. Betty Jones, an ex-slave, described a famous dance, "Settin' de Flo' with Jenny;" she said:

Every gal with her beau and such music! Had two fiddles, two tangerines, two banjos, and two sets of bones. Was a boy named Joe who used to whistle, too. Them devilish boys would get out in the middle of the flo' and me, Jenny and the devil right with 'em. Set a glass of water on my head and the boys would bet on it. I had a great wreath roun' my head an' a big ribbon bow on each side, and didn't waste a drop of water on none of 'em⁽²⁸⁾.

Women took a great care to dress up fine for those celebrations. They spent much time and money to look pretty; they "dressed up to death"⁽²⁹⁾ witnessed an ex-slave woman. Much of women's ceremonial clothing came through their own effort. Women either made their own costumes or bought them out of their savings from garden plots or other extra or bonus work. Nancy Williams, an ex-slave from Virginia, explained "Clothes, chile, I done had plenty clothes in slavery days. Christmas time used to wear sometimes three or four different dresses de same day. How I git to buy the clothes? Used to quilt the prettiest quilts you ever see... Used to sell 'em to de white folks; de best ones missus hers'f would buy"⁽³⁰⁾.

After emancipation, weddings were a time of big joy and amusement but also of contest against restrictions. Women and men would dance, sing, play music and practice traditional games. In *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston described a wedding ceremony where women danced, sang, gambled with men and even mocked men's follies. Hurston described the mood of the place noting a woman's scorn of her male companion,

The place was hot by then. Everything was done got loud. The music, the dancing, the laughing, and nobody could say a thing even over the card games unless they made it sound something like singing. Heard one woman playing Coon Can sing out:

*Give mah man mah money, tuh pay Coon Can
He lost all mah money but he played his hand⁽³¹⁾.*

Part of the fun of the ceremony is a mocking of the matrimonial rites when at a given time of the ceremony, one of the gamblers calls the married couple to stand up and to raise the right hands saying:

*Join hands. Alright Cliff, Ahm the preacher-
Here's yo' woman, here's de ring,
Here's de banana, here's de skin
Now you married, go-⁽³²⁾*

Most rural Black women were uneducated, but they were masters of the figurative. Despite their lack of education, they participated in the culture production when they intruded the store porch from which they were excluded after emancipation. Actually, emancipated males tried to reduce women to secondary positions in the community by defining their role and place to be limited to the home⁽³³⁾; women, however, reacted against this exclusion by intruding the most significant public space for meetings in the community, the store porch, where it was a custom for men to meet to tell stories. "The porch was not a place for women, especially young, married black women. Porch conversations could be vulgar and filled with sexual and racial jokes [...] But for single adult black women, the store porch served as a meeting place; many unmarried black women went to the store to see who they could meet and to engage in conversations about possible relationships with men,"⁽³⁴⁾ explained Valerie Grim.

Worth noticing here is that women were active intruders in those male meetings. According to Zora Neale Hurston, women were not passive intruders, but they actively participated in telling stories obliging the majority male audience to listen to what they could create out of old stories. While obliging a male audience to listen, women could use their gift in telling stories to entertain, to teach their audience ideals, morals and cultural values and also to mock men's failures and challenge gender restrictions.³⁵ In *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston, who collected African American folklore in the 1930's, recorded how women gathered with men on the store porch to tell stories, which they called "lies". She witnessed "it was the habit of men folks particularly to gather on the store porch of evenings and swap stories. Even the women folks would stop and break a breath with them at times"⁽³⁶⁾.

In those meetings, women accomplished the art of indirection or signifying. Signifying was a technique, which had been adopted by the slaves to confront their universe indirectly. It consisted of rhetorical games based on "saying one thing to mean something quite other..." "To signify ... is to engage in rhetorical games," which required "the replacement of the semantic register by the rhetorical" according to Henry Louis Gates⁽³⁷⁾. It was also called "playing the dozens," "giving a reading", "de talkin' game" or "specifying". In *Dust Trucks on the Road*, Z. N. Hurston commented on the skills of the uneducated blacks in playing rhetorical games, "The bookless may have difficulty in reading a paragraph in a newspaper, but when they get down to "playing the dozens" they have no equal in America, and, I'd risk a sizable bet, in the whole world"⁽³⁸⁾. Hurston also noted in *Mules and Men* that women were more gifted than men in *de talkin' game*; she witnessed that women tale-tellers possessed the gift of making their male audience admit their power in rhetorical games. In *Mules and Men*, one of the male characters admits "Don't you know you can't git de best of no woman in de talkin' game? Her tongue is all de weapon a woman got"⁽³⁹⁾.

The mastery of rhetorical games permitted women, who intruded the store porch to relax and freely express themselves challenging the restrictive conventionalities, which prevented them from a meaningful participation in the community and restricted their freedom. Women, in the African American community, refused social restrictions, which tried to confine them to secondary roles after emancipation. Therefore, those who accomplished rhetorical games were strengthened to challenge men and criticize their sexist behaviors. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston represented a signifying ritual reflecting a power struggle between men and women, and where Big Sweet, a strong tough woman, warns that men could not reduce her to silence not only because she is physically strong, but men should also fear her tongue, indeed her words with the power to challenge and change gender stereotypes; Big Sweet warns her male companion "Lemme tell you something, any time Ah shack up wid any man Ah gives myself de privilege to go wherever he might be, night or day. Ah got the law in my mouth."⁽⁴⁰⁾ In fact, women like Big Sweet "got the law in [their] mouth[s]," and, therefore, they could not be silenced or alienated neither by gendered nor by racist behavior.

While many women were masters of the art of signifying, other women were masters of conjure and divination, which were their means to protect themselves from hardships. During slavery, conjure and divination were used by slaves to protect themselves from the hardships of the system. The black's belief in magic and divination could not be interpreted away from what was known as hoodoo or voodoo, as pronounced by whites. Though it was hostilely banned in most plantations, and was taboo in the whole society, slaves and free blacks never stopped the practice and the belief in hoodoo. "Free blacks and women notably predominated in the practice of the cult"⁽⁴¹⁾ observed Genovese. Generally, slave women used conjure and consulted hoodoo doctors seeking to escape difficult situations as severe punishment. Hoodoo, as Lucy of Kentucky explained, did not prevent master's beating us, but "mebby dey'd a beat um up worser or mebby killed 'em"⁽⁴²⁾.

After emancipation, hoodoo became a major force especially in the Deep South; Florida, Louisiana, and New Orleans, the hoodoo capital, where the majority of black women were

more than ever secret believers of hoodoo, which was critically, severely banned by the authorities. Thus, in an American society heavily burdened by the evils of racism and an African American community weighed down by gender discrimination in evasive attempts to assume responsibility towards failures, many women sought to overcome limitations through resource to conjure and divination. Hoodoo, therefore, became women's secret means to fight against social prejudice, against gender discrimination and, sometimes, even against racism.

Ritually, hoodoo manifested in dancing and singing ceremonies, where marginalized, generally uneducated women, who lost faith in the black Christian churches, could find spiritual release. In those ceremonies, women sought release from their personal torment by participating in the hoodoo dances, which relied on the therapeutic effects of music and dance to alleviate the needy. Then, before a hoodoo doctor, depressed oppressed women could find a voiced expression to the most intimate distressing thoughts. Thus, in addition to dancing, women consulted hoodoo doctors for various and different purposes. They consulted them to cure illnesses, which were thought to be caused by witchcraft. They consulted them in affairs of love and marriage, and they consulted them for whatever would trouble them⁽⁴³⁾.

Hoodoo reached a high level of influence with Marie Leveau, the "queen of conjure,"⁽⁴⁴⁾ who had conjured the spirits of women as well as men to have faith in her powers. Her adherents even looked at her as a prophetess. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston reported the witness of a hoodoo doctor about Leveau comparing her to the prophets then to God; he says "Time went around pointing out what God had already made. Moses had seen the Burning Bush. Solomon by magic knowed all wisdom. And Marie Leveau was a woman in New Orleans"⁽⁴⁵⁾. Then he adds, "Marie Leveau is not a woman when she answer the one who ask. No. she is a *god*, yes. Whatever she say, it will come so [...] But when she put the last curse on a person, it would be better if that man was dead, yes. (*Italics mine*)"⁽⁴⁶⁾.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, while women especially in the urban centers achieved important community as well as social functions through their roles in the fields of religion and education, some rural women challenged restrictions through the mastery of rhetorical games or through resource to magic and divination. It is, therefore, necessary to underline the fact that even if women sought spiritual and emotional release through religion or through hoodoo or even through rhetorical games, greed for education permitted them to overcome the hardest obstacles and the double prejudice of racism and sexism.

References and endnotes:

- 1- Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* [1972] (NY: Vintage Books, 1992), 26.
- 2- Lerner, 32.
- 3- W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk," in *Three Negro Classics*, ed., John Hope Franklin (NY: Avon Books, 1965), 270.
- 4- Quoted in Lerner, 93-94.
- 5- Suzie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd United States Colored Troops* (Boston: Author, 1902), the quote is taken from a selection in Lerner, 100.
- 6- Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma, the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (London , New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1946).
- 7- The quote is taken from a selected text in Lerner, 115-116.
- 8- The Tuskegee Institute was founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington, the advocator of vocational training against classical education for Blacks. The Tuskegee and all other vocational schools were financed by white philanthropists. See Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* in *Three Negro Classics*, ed., John Hope Franklin (NY: Avon Books, 1965),
- 9- See Karen A. Johnson, "On Classical versus Vocational Training. The Educational Ideas of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs" in *Education as Freedom. African American Educational Thought and Activism*, eds. Noel S. Anderson and Haroon Kharem (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2009), 46-66; Carol Perkins, "'Pragmatic idealism': Industrial training, liberal education, and women's special needs. Conflict and continuity in the experience of Mary McLeod Bethune and other

- Black women educators, 1900–1930.” Doctoral dissertation, Claremont Graduate School and San Diego State University, 1987.
- 10-Karen A. Johnson, 48.
- 11-Patricia Hill Collins, *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 210.
- 12-Du Bois, “*The Souls of Black Folk*,” in John Hope Franklin, ed., 274.
- 13-Kelly Miller, *Race Adjustment; Essays on the Negro in America* (New York and Washington: The Neale Publishing Company, 1908).
- 14-Albert J. Raboteau, *African American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).
- 15-Jarena Lee, *Experience and Journal of Mrs Jarena Lee* (Philadelphia: the author, 1849), 10-11.
- 16-Maria Stewart, *What if I am a Woman*, in Folkways Records and Service Corp. 1977.
http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/folkways/FW05537.pdf.
- 17-Albert J. Raboteau, *African American Religion*, 45.
- 18-Melville J. Herskovitz, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 215.
- 19-Raymond J. Jones, “A Comparative Study of Religious Cult Behavior Among Negroes with Special Reference to Emotional Group Conditioning Factors,” *Howard University Studies in the Social Sciences*, Vol. II, no. 2, Washington, 1939, quoted in Herskovitz, 211.
- 20-George Rawick, ed., *S.C. Narr.* II (2), quoted in Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll. The World the Slaves Made* (NY: Vintage Books, 1976), 238.
- 21-Ibid.
- 22-See E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, (NY: Schocken Books Inc., 1974), 58-71 about the history of Holiness and Storefront churches.
- 23-Mahalia Jackson with E. M. Wylie, *Movin’ On Up* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1966), quoted in Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness. Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (NY: Oxford Press, 1977), 184.
- 24-Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, [1964] (NY: Vintage Books, 1972), 214.
- 25-Houston A. Baker, Jr., “To Move Without Moving: Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison’s Trueblood Episode,” in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (NY, London: Methuen, 1984), 244.
- 26-Mahalia Jackson with E. M. Wylie, *Movin’ On Up*, in Lerner, ed., 383.
- 27-WPA *Negro in Virginia*, quoted in Genovese, 580.
- 28-Lester, *To be a Slave*, quoted in Genovese, 572. Genovese explained that “Jenny” was a “code for the dance, the dancer, the unauthorized party, the spirit of the occasion, or all four.”
- 29-Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, quoted in Genovese, 556.
- 30-Nancy Williams, in WPA, *Negro in Virginia*, quoted in Genovese, 557.
- 31-Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* [1935] (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), 187.
- 32-Ibid, 188.
- 33-See Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Woman on Race and Sex in America*. (NY: Vintage Books, 1981), pp. 62-64.
- 34-Valerie Grim, “African American Rural Culture, 1900-1950,” in *African American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950*, ed. R. Douglass Hurt (Missouri: the Curators of the Univ. of Missouri, 2003), pp. 119-120.
- 35-See *Mules and Men*.
- 36-*Mules and Men*, 4.
- 37-Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey, a Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 48.
- 38-Zora Neal Hurston, *Dust Trucks on a Road . An Autobiography* (Philadelphia: J. D. Lippincott, 1942), 217.
- 39-Of *Mules and Men*, 33.
- 40-Ibid., 133-134.
- 41-Genovese, 220.
- 42-Rawick, ed., *S.C. Narr.*, quoted in Genovese, 221.
- 43-See *Mules and Men*, part 2.
- 44-Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 200.
- 45-Ibid, 201.
- 46-Ibid, 204-205.