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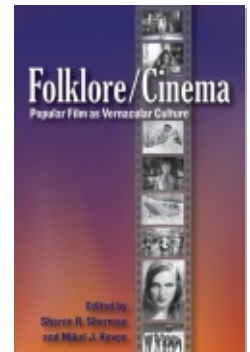
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The Three Faces in *Eve's Bayou*

Recalling the Conjure Woman in Contemporary Black Cinema

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KASI LEMMONS'S NEOCLASSICAL (re)visioning of the conjure woman in her film *Eve's Bayou* (1997) not only reinforces the idea of this archetype as the place where West African and early African American spirituality and consciousness melded to formulate one means of a people's psychical mediation and survival; it also reinvigorates the tendency of black women griots to cling to the past as a means to determine the present and the future. In creating this film, Lemmons joins a distinguished cohort of African American women storytellers who return to the traditional image of the conjure woman to discover and celebrate their unique identity as women of African descent in America.

The conjure woman has long been a source of mystery and mayhem, as well as healing and power, in the African American oral tradition and literary imagination; *Eve's Bayou* introduces her to filmic discourse. In the southern African American literary tradition, the idea of the conjure woman is widespread. She has appeared in everything from folktales and classical black fiction to children's fairy tales (Buckner 2001; Hamilton 1995). The potency of her incarnation traverses the anthropological musings of Zora Neale Hurston, the art of Romare Bearden, and now the film work of Kasi Lemmons. *Eve's Bayou* is the tale of the conjure woman and the way she both safeguards and creates history through memory. She functions in much the same way as the traditional griot, only the conjure woman has second sight along with hindsight, and this second sight enables her to interpret memory as well as document it.

Set in early 1960s Louisiana, *Eve's Bayou* relates the story of the Batiste family. Philanderer Louis (Samuel L. Jackson) is the charming local doctor whose beautiful wife and children are not enough to keep him at home. The film's protagonist is ten-year-old Eve (Jurnee Smollett) who, like her Aunt Mozelle (Debbi Morgan), has the "gift of sight." The story begins when young Eve accidentally witnesses her father involved

in an illicit affair. She shares her secret with her older, sister Cisely (Meagan Good), who, like all the women of the town, worships Louis. Eve is placated by Cisely's dismissal of what Eve saw as a bad dream until Louis wounds Cisely. Hurt and enraged by her father's betrayal, Eve uses her gift to seek revenge and sets in motion the destruction of the Batiste family.

Eve's Bayou is evidence of the African American woman's fascination with and simultaneous need to fashion and reclaim her personal identity through revisiting mythic identities. In "African American Literary Criticism as a Model for the Analysis of Films by African American Women," Gloria Gibson-Hudson writes that "throughout the centuries, slave narratives, poetry and novels have exhibited formative power, shaping texts from an interplay of social forces and personal creative expression...black film has continued this same tradition" (1991, 44). *Eve's Bayou* continues this tradition by referencing the image of the conjure woman, specifically as it has appeared within the African American literary tradition.

The Conjure Woman in the African American Tradition

The figure of the conjure woman is a complex part of the African American folk tradition. She was born in the antebellum south, a kind of mediation between African religious and spiritual customs and Christianity (Johnson 1997, 168). Although it was denied for years, it is now quite common knowledge that African captives retained their indigenous spiritual beliefs in various forms in the new world. Even when many of them were converted to Christianity during the Great Awakening, African slaves subscribed to a hybrid of West African and Anglo-American spiritual beliefs of which the conjure woman is one (Hine, Hine, and Harrold 2000, 60–61).

Historian Lawrence Levine warns that an archetype like the conjure woman must be understood as a conglomeration of circumstance, history, and culture: "We must be sensitive to the ways in which the African world view interacted with that of the Euro-American world into which it was carried and the extent to which an Afro-American perspective was created" (1977, 5). If Christianity offered the African slaves salvation and peace in the next world, then the conjure woman represented immediate benefits. She functioned as hope within their present conditions. For a people who had no legal or even moral defense against forced labor and persecution, the conjure woman or "root worker" was the last line of defense. Calling upon memories of African mysticism and magic and

combining them with practices rooted in the Judeo-Christian religion, she seemed like a witch to so-called civilized society.

The conjure woman's job was to connect the people to the spirit world to protect them from harm. Drawing from the remnants of the West African traditions of the Igbo and Yoruba people, she made charms and *gris-gris*, root potions and *mojos* (Johnson 1997, 169). Although her powers were not absolute, she was entrusted with everything from keeping the members of slave families from being sold separately to sustaining interest in wayward lovers. The talismans that she created were weapons used to combat the cruel reality of slavery and, later on, the capriciousness of fate.

When slavery ended, the conjure woman continued to be a potent member of southern black society. While she still offered protection, in keeping with the needs of the people, she morphed to also become fortune-teller, spiritual healer, and life advisor. Many in the black community sought her expertise to help them with health problems, financial advice, willful family members, lost loves, and even revenge and retribution. The potency of the conjure woman was directly connected to her clients' faith in her powers. Her abilities were dependent upon her knowledge of the human spirit and her skill at manipulating innuendo and superstition. Carol S. Taylor Johnson writes that the "transformative power of words combined with symbolic acts is at the heart of the 'magic' of conjuring" (1997, 169). In short, the conjure woman's conjuring relied upon her ability to alleviate desperation with prescriptive action. Johnson asserts,

She is expected to provide a diagnosis, identify the source of the problem, cast a spell upon a selected victim through the use of charms and/or poison for the purpose of avenging the malignant deeds of the enemy, provide counteragents to remove a spell that has been placed maliciously upon a victim, provide a protective "hand" or charm for a client to help him control antagonistic circumstances, give advice on the management of daily affairs, and predict future events. Conjurers assist in matters related to health, love, and social, economic, and personal empowerment. (1997, 168)

People who felt helpless against great odds usually sought out the conjure woman's services. They hoped the conjure woman could provide them with a sling and a stone against Goliaths like slavery, sickness, poverty, unrequited love, uncertain future, and even death.

In addition to all of these duties, the conjure woman in the literary tradition also served as a site of collective memory. In the epic poem "Molly Means" by Margaret Walker, Molly is both a feared conjure

woman and the object of the community's collective mimetic force. Tomeiko Ashford, in her essay "Performing Community: Margaret Walker's use of poetic 'Folk Voice,'" writes, "Molly Means's character, however, remains mythic since she becomes forever a part of the community's shared memory" (2001, 151). As such, the conjure woman is a coalescing agent for the community; she is one of the things its members have in common that make them a unique cultural entity, and she is further evidence of the multitudinous ways these women functioned in the African American community.

Calling upon the Image

In keeping with the way that she functioned in life and literature, the image of the conjure woman in *Eve's Bayou* serves several narrative and structural purposes. First, she mimics the role she plays in the African American literary and oral traditions as one who helps to establish identity and define the way the culture works. According to literary critic Karla F.C. Holloway, the very nature of African American women's literature is the writer's desire to script those things that "reflect the community—the cultural ways of knowing as well as the ways of framing knowledge in literature" (1992, 1). The conjure woman's narrative presence establishes a link with the social, historical, and political life of a people. Because her way of healing or hurting, living and dying, defies Western ideological interpretations of space, time, and spirituality, the conjure woman is a marker for differentiating cultural practices. Holloway also maintains that this continued reworking of the conjure woman, or what she calls in her work the "ancestral presence," is purposeful and may be compulsive: "I believe that far from being a coincidental selection of a metaphor, the ancestral presence in contemporary African American women's writing reconstructs an imaginative, cultural (re)membrance of a dimension of West African spirituality, and that the spiritual place of this objective figuration is fixed into the structures of the text's language" (1992, 2).

Holloway is describing not only a tendency in black women's fiction to recall an ancestral presence but the life cycle of conjure-woman iconography. Invoking the conjure woman (whether consciously or subconsciously) bespeaks a desire to reframe knowledge, language, and interpretive practices. In this case, Lemmons's calling forth the conjure woman definitely informs both the narrative and cinematic structure of the film. Since conjure women populate *Eve's Bayou*, we can expect Western ideals of logic and order in textual language to

be disrupted or even expanded in keeping with narrative practices by black women writers—and filmmakers.

From Holloway's perspective, black women's texts want to recall lived experiences metaphorically, in all their richness, through what she calls "the screen of language" (1992, 3). Since I'm extrapolating texts to include filmic ones, I can also take liberty with the concept of screen of language and infer it to include the "language of the screen." While Holloway is dealing with written words and concepts, I believe Lemmons is on a parallel mission using cinematography, landscaping, and character presentation as a type of language that also pays homage to the complex and diverse folk experience recalled in *Eve's Bayou*.

Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers write in *Conjuring: Black Women's Fiction and Literary Tradition* "that part of the conjure woman's power is her ability to tell stories" (1985, 14). Thus, not only is Lemmons using film techniques to join the canon of black women writers, but her characters themselves live out the legacy. In addition to their other primordial functions, the conjure women in the film tell stories. Mozelle is constantly weaving the narrative of her life as a gift for Eve. The adult Eve does the same for the audience as she narrates the film. Positioned at her fortune-telling booth in the marketplace even Elzora (Diahann Carroll) is a storyteller.

In addition to following in the footsteps of black women whose texts engage communal identity, Lemmons is also in line with a tradition that seeks to negotiate, reaffirm, and promote individual identity. Whatever the media, black women who tell stories often return to an ancestor image as a way of remembering themselves in a social and political system traditionally designed to disregard and disremember them. In *Conjuring: Black Women's Fiction and Literary Tradition*, Barbara Christian says that, during the 1970s and 1980s, black women fought an inner battle to write about themselves. She surmises that the kind of self-focusing and self-awareness black women writers needed to solidify a literary tradition concerned with naming themselves was often interpreted both inside and outside of the black community as selfishness rather than self-actualization (1985, 233–34).

Yet the concern for self depicted in the texts of black women has rarely produced self-indulgence. In fact, many of the texts are "dynamic, not static, as they communicate and integrate a discourse of African American culture, history and politics" (Gibson-Hudson 1991, 53). Texts by black women often are consumed with identifying their heritage, position, and legacy in actual history and cultural memory. However, the very nature of this anthropological work rightly yields priceless

information about the totality of culture, community, and history—both “real” and (re)membered. As Gibson-Hudson notes, “African American women writers and filmmakers are artists interpreting women’s experiences with the hope that the readers or viewers will examine their own consciousness and develop a clearer vision for the future. Their work functions as participatory, not escapist art, because the works invite dialogue and activism” (1998, 53). Gibson-Hudson refers here to films by black women whose primary audiences are people of color and those who want to accept the challenge to engage actively with the films. *Eve’s Bayou* straddles a strange fence because many of its viewers belong to mainstream audiences.

Lemmons’s summoning of the conjure woman may also be read as her endeavor to remember who she is. It may be that *Eve’s Bayou* is the filmmaker’s attempt to go home, to understand this strange, rich, historical place from which her familial roots spring. In an interview with Ann Brown (1997), Lemmons stated that although she was not reared in the South, her parents, who hail from Louisiana and Georgia, described life there to her. It is clear that Lemmons has an understanding of, and an appreciation for, the iconography of the southern black folk tradition. She does not present the conjure woman as an exoticized Other. She is instead part of the family, part of the landscape, part of the memory—a part of the whole culture. Indeed the conjure woman is the foundation of the culture we see in the town of *Eve’s Bayou*. She is not only the founder of the Batiste bloodline but also the progenitor of the ability to conjure in its women. Thus, in watching *Eve’s Bayou*, audiences may understand more about the black woman, her art, her community, and the way in which she herself understands all of these. There also exists the potential for mainstream audiences to encounter the continuing complexities of a slave system which begat founding mothers and fledgling daughters like both of the Eve Baptistes.

The Dawn of Eve

In the diegetic space of the town of *Eve’s Bayou*, folks still have need of the conjure woman to provide protection and prophecy, insight and inspiration much the same way their ancestors did. They still battle a physical world bent on destroying them or their dreams by engaging an intercessor who has power in the spiritual world. Rather than sculpting a conjure woman who embodies all the various facets of the archetype, Lemmons rather wisely chooses to break the conjure woman into pieces. Like a fractured mind, the conjure woman in this film dwells in the



Young Eve Batiste.

lived experiences of three characters, each of whom plays one or more of the roles of the traditional icon. Through the narrated memories of the young Eve Batiste and the characters of Aunt Mozelle and the witch woman Elzora, we come to understand the conjure woman herself, not only as the site where identity is reclaimed but also as the very process of negotiating myth and memory.

Young Eve Batiste is the film's protagonist. She reconciles both of the contradictory aspects of the conjure woman. She has the same second sight as her Aunt Mozelle and a desire for the darker side of conjuring represented by Elzora, the character who uses the gift to avenge and destroy. Although the story takes place in the Louisiana of the 1960s, the ghost of the slave woman Eve haunts it from the beginning. The original Eve won her freedom and, therefore, the freedom of her children because she used "powerful medicine" to save the life of her owner. The first Eve was a conjure woman, and during the film, we learn the fate of her daughters.

The film begins with a voice-over that establishes the grown-up Eve as both diegetic and nondiegetic narrator. As a principal character, she functions as a diegetic narrator but in the person of her past, young-child self. We do not interact with the adult Eve as a nondiegetic narrator. Eve

recounts the history of the town: "The town we lived in was named after a slave....I was named for her." While the film is a reflection on the ability of memories to transform themselves into history and a treatise on the entities that act as bridges between these memories and history, it is also quite obviously a female-centered *Bildungsroman*, a commentary on black middle-class life in the 1960s, and a murder mystery.

At the opening party scene, we see Eve as the middle child. She is jealous of the affection her father showers on her older sister and angry about her mother's obvious favoring of her younger brother. While clearly the daughters are rivals for their father's affection, both Eve and Cisely unite wholeheartedly when their perception of their father is endangered. Shortly after Eve's father chooses to dance with Cisely, Eve runs away to hide in an old carriage house. She is awakened by the sight and sound of her father having sex with Matty Mereaux. Stunned into silence, Eve cannot confront her father. Later in their room when she shares her secret with Cisely, the camera does what it will do throughout the film. It moves the viewers from the diegetic present into the past. Eve and Cisely are suddenly transported into Eve's memory. There we see the two girls as observers in the carriage house, where Cisely rewrites what her little sister has seen. The audience becomes privy to a new reading of the scene; instead of Louis Batiste and Matty Mereaux engaged in the sex act, we see an innocent embrace. While Eve is sure about what she saw, she prefers Cisely's reinterpretation, and this is the way memory continues to be reconfigured throughout the film.

Eve's Bayou is a film that takes advantage of the language of the screen, the cinematic apparatus that facilitates a visual perception of the multilayered storytelling that began orally and then became part of the written tradition. In much the same way that artisans like Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor capture the essence of the polymorphic word on the page, the technology of film becomes the great catalyst for this newest dissemination of the folk tradition. For instance, *Eve's Bayou* begins with a recollection that sets the precedent for the way that memory (and psychic vision) is juxtaposed with diegetic reality throughout the film. Because the first shot shows us things we have yet to see, or remember, we cannot make sense of it. It only becomes clear as we learn to look through young Eve's eyes that we are sharing her perspective. We are remembering and understanding the story through her.

One of the ways logic and order are expanded in the film is through mirrors and memories. Drawing from the legend and lore of African American literature and culture, the film addresses myth against

memory by repositioning them as mirror images of each other and implies that it is in their amalgamation that identity is discovered. For example, because of the voice-over narration, we know that the film depicts a memory. What is the function of a mirror except to reflect what is before it, to make the reflected readable and discernable? The adult Eve is remembering the summer she was ten years old. As the audience enters Eve's memory via the film, we also see the memories of other characters. Often the cinematic depiction of these memories utilizes mirrors or reflections in water.

As already mentioned, the beginning of the film is actually a memory; it is shot in vignettes in grainy black and white to differentiate it from the film's real time. It is difficult to describe the film's time continuum. We hear the adult voice of Eve narrating action that took place in the past. Thus, the audience is never quite sure what time it is because the film is a memory and within it are more memories.

In one of the many memory scenes in the film, Eve brushes Mozelle's hair in front of a large antique mirror. Mozelle's reaction to her reflection makes Eve think her aunt is upset at the distressed way she looks in her mourning. The bond between Mozelle and Eve is strong not only because she is an out-of-place middle child but also because they share the blood and the abilities of the conjure woman. It is Eve who pulls Mozelle from her stupor after Harry's death and reminds her that she has "clients coming" and work to do in the community. It is Eve who says to Mozelle, "It's not your fault they die." However, Mozelle's concern in this scene is otherworldly because she sees the images of all three of her dead husbands reflected in one of the mirrors attached to her wardrobe. "I swear I loved them," moans Mozelle as if she is being haunted by the men she has betrayed by marrying them. The abilities of a conjure woman come at a high price. While Mozelle is able to dole out help and advice to those who come to her, she cannot see clearly into her own life. She seems fated to marry and then bury her husbands.

As Mozelle and Eve continue to stand before the mirror, Mozelle recalls how she lost her first husband. Behind the two, reflected in the mirror, are her first husband, Maynard, and his lover, Hosea. Mozelle tells the story in sync with the action in the mirror's background reflection. As her tale reaches its climax and the lover who has confronted her husband threatens to kill him, Mozelle moves from her position beside Eve into the mirrored image. While the apparent feat is in fact simply Mozelle walking back across the room and cast as the mirror's background reflection, the effect is dramatic. Like Eve and Cisely, who earlier moved into Eve's memory, Mozelle has literally (re)inhabited her



Aunt Mozelle.

recollection of her first husband's death. Eve remains close to the mirror in the foreground of the shot. In this exchange, she learns the power of the conjure woman to reshape interpretation, reinvigorate memory, and rewrite history.

Geta J. LeSeur suggests that the journey that the protagonist in the Western *Bildungsroman* must take to fulfill his or her destiny manifests itself as a break with the family and/or community when the writer and subjects are black (1995, 30). Eve can no longer ignore the painful truth of her father's infidelity against her mother and the family can no longer be ignored when she believes he has assaulted her sister. In the moment of that realization, Eve breaks with her little-girl self, with her dutiful daughter image, and becomes the avenging conjurer. She sets out to right the wrong against her sister and the rest of her family and believes that the affront calls for no less than her father's life. Once she makes the decision to seek out Elzora rather than Mozelle, she leaves her innocence behind and is on her way to becoming a conjure woman.

Eve is clearly the union of Mozelle and Elzora. She is the intermediary or reconciling figure between the conjure woman as healer and one who can do harm. Not only does she reconcile the two sides of the

conjure woman, but she ties this role to the griot as well. Eve is responsible for passing on both the letter and spirit of memory. The problem is that for all her precociousness, she is still a child and one who reacts to her sister's pain and her father's betrayal with vengeance. She cannot yet dispassionately wield the weight and responsibility of the gifts she has been given.

The highest power of the conjure woman in the literary and folk tradition lay not in her charms or gris-gris, her potions or instructions, but her ability to manipulate people—for good or ill. We witness Mozelle and Elzora changing the way their clients interact with the world on the power of their words alone. Eve's conversation with Mr. Mereaux (Matty's husband) is the perfect example. Mr. Mereaux has not allowed himself to hear the rumors or see the evidence of his wife's liaison with Louis Batiste. Eve's words to him and her manner are superficially innocent, but underneath are consequences for which Eve herself is not prepared. She plants a seed in the heart and mind of Lenny Mereaux that will flower in death.

Reflecting the idea that Lemmons's work is an evolutionary movement in black women's texts, Annis Pratt writes in *Archetypal Pattern in Women's Fiction* that among the replicating themes are the "green world epiphany" and the "rape trauma" (1981, 170–78). Each of these themes reverberates with Eve. The green world epiphany theory argues that the female protagonist in women's texts is spurred on in her development by submersion in a luxuriant green land. Lemmons uses the landscape as almost another character in the film. The bayou is represented by marshland and the moss-hung trees; it is lush, green, and fertile. It is also a landscape haunted by the original Eve Batiste because the town bears her name. One of the opening shots of the film depicts an African woman framed by sugar-cane fields as the story of the slave owner, Jean Paul Batiste, and his slave woman, Eve, unfolds. Because Mozelle's visions of the future always appear as reflections on the waters of the bayou, we know that the conjure woman's power and the place where she lives are tied tightly together. Many of the scenes of Eve show her playing in the bayou. We see Eve pushed to her breaking point when she and the other Batiste children are forbidden to leave the house because of one of Mozelle's premonitions. We even see her seek solace in the arms of a huge oak tree as she mourns her father. In the end, it is the waters of the bayou that drown the secret of Louis and Cisely and reflect the surviving daughters, Eve and Cisely.

The green world where Eve thrives is a catalyst for her development and links her to the past. It is significant that the film is set in the

1960s in the Louisiana low country. Eve can embrace herself as a conjurer because she does not live in a time when video games, cell phones, or satellite television could distract her consciousness. In the land where she is free to roam, she is equally free to embrace all that history and mystery allow. Numerous scenes depict her walking alone along country roads, walking alone at night, and having overall freedom to roam the landscape. When Eve takes Cisely's hands at the end of the story to determine what really happened between Cisely and their father, her vision, too, is embedded in the landscape. The moss hanging from the great cypress trees parts and lets Eve into her sister's memory.

D. Soyini Madison asserts the importance of Elzora dwelling in the almost uninhabitable borderland of the green world. She writes, "[Elzora] is not a stereotypical voodoo queen, but a purposeful stock-type. She is a presentational prototype of both ominous black magic and enlivening power. Elzora lives on the swamp, a classic border of outsiderhood and threat" (2000, 326). Eve occupies the beautiful green space of the bayou, while Elzora inhabits the dark, foreboding, and dangerous marshland. Unlike Mozelle's elegant home, Elzora's "office" is a tiny rundown shack perched precariously on the stagnant waters of the swamp. Mozelle sees her clients and does her work in her home, supported by her status as psychic counselor, while Elzora is relegated to the role and accoutrements of a fortune-teller.

The rape trauma element is also present in the film. The two Batiste daughters idolize their father and are particularly troubled by his infidelity. Cisely chooses to see her father's philandering as the result of her mother's inability to please him. She responds by trying to become her mother in Oedipal terms. Eve is not yet sure what to do with her feelings for her father and vacillates between jealousy of Cisely and anger at her father's behavior. Both Eve and Cisely are the woman/child, caught between adolescence and adulthood, memory and truth. As Cisely is on the verge of physical awakening as a woman, Eve is in the process of awakening spiritually, and she will bear the burden, as the conjure woman does, of remaining in the space between memory and truth to mediate it.

The conjure woman can be either an asset or a liability in the community. She can use her powers to help or to harm. Folk tradition does not always recognize the conjure woman as a positive figure in society. Many ideas about her focus on her ability to summon dark magic and work against the community as well as for it (Tucker 1994, 173–88).¹ Charles Chesnutt created one of the first portraits of the conjure woman in African American literature in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure*

Tales ([1899] 1993), a collection of short stories that reveal the complex relationships between the conjurer and the community. In most of the seven stories (narrated by Uncle Julius to the white landowner, John, who in turn narrates them to the reader), Chesnutt depicts the way that the conjure woman protects and avenges the black community. For instance, in "Mars Jeem's Nightmare," the plantation master is transformed into a slave. Mars Jeem then suffers firsthand the malice usually perpetrated against the slave community.

This kind of story demonstrates the conjure woman's capacity to engender hope in the slave community. Chesnutt's other stories illustrate the conjure woman battling the dark force of separation as she tries to keep slave families and loved ones together. Yet Chesnutt is careful to draw a picture of the conjurer as a dark force as well. In "The Conjurer's Revenge" and "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," the conjure woman becomes a conjure man and exacts revenge when he is crossed. In the first story, a slave is turned into a mule for stealing from the conjurer; in the second, poor Dan is turned into a wolf and tricked into murdering his own wife as punishment for killing the conjurer's son.

Continuing the tradition, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) is a conventional tale of a good and powerful conjure woman, but set in modern times. Like Chesnutt's work, *Mama Day* is written *fin de siècle* and demonstrates the multiple facets of the conjure woman. Miranda (Mama) Day is the quintessential conjure woman. She holds the island community of Willow Springs together in the same way the conjure woman did in slave and postslave African American communities. Miranda is healer, educator, and nurturer. She is the link to the power and history that the citizens of her tiny island need to retain their identity in a world that wants to erase them.

In *Eve's Bayou*, the character of Elzora certainly represents the more sinister facet of the conjure woman. In direct contrast to the beautiful and elegant Mozelle, Elzora appears in white makeup, mimicking a death mask.² While Mozelle practices from an elegant home, Elzora works in the marketplace. She tells fortunes in a dilapidated booth, filled with indiscernible mixtures in jars. Elzora is the bearer of bad, albeit truthful, news. She does not soften the impact of her words or offer ways to circumvent them. Elzora is the third member of the conjuring trinity, the side of the gift of sight that can be commercialized and bent to evil.

It is no wonder that Eve is both frightened by, and drawn to, Elzora. Eve chooses this quality of the conjure woman when she feels she must punish her father for what he has done to Cisely. Although Eve commissions Elzora to kill her father, audiences are invited to draw their own



Diahann Carroll as Elzora.

conclusions. Was it the twenty dollars and the bit of hair from his comb that began Louis's demise, or was it the words Eve deposited into the psyche of Mr. Mereaux? We are left to wonder whether it is Eve or Elzora who casts the spell that kills Louis Batiste. Perhaps it is the combination of the two. Or perhaps it was Louis who, as Elzora predicted, "fell on his own sword."

In Louis's death scene, the three faces of the conjure woman meet. Lenny Mereaux forbids Louis to speak to Matty again and threatens to kill him for his betrayal. Louis, who cannot bear to be anything less than the hero, insists upon saying good night to Matty. As Mereaux fires his gun and Louis pushes Eve to the ground to prevent her from being shot, we see Mozelle's previous vision come to pass. Earlier in the film, Mozelle had a vision of a local child being hit by a bus, but when the body fell, it was near a railroad track rather than on the street. Since Mozelle did not complete reading her vision—she stopped when the bus hit the child—she does not understand that she has also foreseen Louis's death. Thus, the audience is devastated along with Eve. We are all unprepared for the legacy of memory. As Eve lies on the ground screaming for her father,

her work and Elzora's come to fruition. Eve has gotten what she paid for, and Louis has paid for what he was.

Inheritances

At the end of the film, while rummaging among her father's effects, Eve finds a letter that seems to absolve him of his purported crimes against Cisely. During Eve's confrontation with Cisely, she must use her second sight to learn the truth. Eve takes Cisely's hands the same way that Mozelle does with her clients. The mantle has been passed to Eve. She does not use the truth of what she learns to condemn either Cisely or her father. Rather, in healing conjure-woman fashion, she buries Louis's letter and takes Cisely's hand. As the two girls stand mirrored in the waters of the bayou, no definitive answers emerge. We hear the grown-up Eve resume the soliloquy she started at the beginning of the film:

Like others before me I have the gift of sight, but the truth changes color depending on the light, and tomorrow can be clearer than yesterday. Memory is a selection of images, some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain. Each image is like a thread, each thread woven together to make a tapestry of intricate texture, and the tapestry tells a story, and the story is our past.

The story of Eve and the Batiste family is one thread in the long history of conjure women in the African American oral and literary tradition. Celebrated for its stunning cinematography and brilliant casting, *Eve's Bayou* is a film that stirs memories and invokes traditional narrative roles. It is also a testament to the ways that the African American female storytelling tradition wrestles with identity. Black women have established a pattern of (re)membering themselves, their community, and their history. Black female texts often exhume their ancestors even if they existed primarily as types. There is little tension between the ancestor and the archetype because these writers understand the ability of memory to (re)present and to (re)create. In truth, memory can be history, and for a people long stripped of history, it is a justifiable retrofit.

This pattern began in oral tradition and then found its way into writings by black women. Lately, this (re)membering takes place in such films as *Eve's Bayou*. We see the conjure woman in various stages of her existence. We see how she was born, how she has survived, and what happens when she must reconcile all the aspects of her nature. In addition to all of her façades, the conjure woman is a figure for (re)claiming and (re)inventing the African American female self. In *Eve's Bayou*, the black woman is Mozelle the mediator and Elzora the menace. Finally, she

is Eve, the intermediary bridge between the two. The conjure woman is one expression of the power black women writers and now filmmakers invoke to (re)member history and (in)script it for generations to come.

Notes

1. Lindsay Tucker examines the ominous presentations of the conjure woman. Tucker frames her critique of Ruby (who is the antithesis of Mama Day—the good conjure woman) in Naylor’s work with Zora Neale Hurston’s analysis of the conjure tradition in her autobiography *Mules and Men* ([1935] 1978). Tucker sees Naylor and Hurston as having to work against negative images of the conjure woman “distorted by European Eurocentrism” and “Christianity” (1994,175).
2. In the director’s commentary, Kasi Lemmons says that Diahann Carroll was too beautiful as Elzora. She made the decision to cover her face with the makeup as a way of distinguishing Elzora’s brand of conjuring from Mozelle’s.

Filmography

Eve’s Bayou (1997). 109 min. Kasi Lemmons

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