

GENDER, WELLNESS, AND SPIRITUALITY:
AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MIDWIVES

by
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ABSTRACT

Historically, African American midwives held leadership roles in their communities, nurturing and establishing Black womanhood through shared cultural heritage and stability. Religion and spirituality played an essential role in African American wellness and birth, and during enslavement, this role most often included forms of conjure. This magical tradition which invoked spiritual powers for healing and protection, is best illustrated through the crossroads ritual that signified the embodied power created through ancestral connections. Archaeologists can identify this past spiritual behavior through testing behavior models. A comparative analysis of crossroads ritual deposits recovered from three nineteenth century southern plantation sites indicates modifications were made to the crossroads ritual based on the vocation and use of space through time. Applying a Black Feminist framework reveals the gender specific spiritual innovations made by African American midwives. By the early twentieth century, health reform, laws, and regulations further changed midwifery's ritual and spiritual aspects. These innovations are distinctly connected to the sociopolitical context of each period that shaped the unique experiences of Black women and, more specifically, those of African American midwives. Research and questions about African American spirituality should explore ritual practice as more than religious acts and focus on how these behaviors and beliefs encompassed identity and personhood through everyday life.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

What broader insights we might glean through this object about the histories and experiences of Black women, about racialized and gendered regimes, and about imaginative resourcefulness of a resilient people who transformed utilitarian things in bonds of kinship and carriers of feeling.

— Tiya Miles, *Pack Sacks and Pieces Quilted*, 2020

Historically, African American midwives were symbolic mothers to their community.¹ They guided women and families through pregnancy and childbirth while serving as significant influencers of tradition and culture. Midwives acted in women's health, nurturing and establishing Black womanhood through shared cultural heritage and stability (Luke 2018). Through this "motherwork," midwives held leadership roles in their communities as transmitters of history, spirituality, and culture.² Religion and spirituality played an essential role in African American wellness, and during enslavement, this role most often included forms of conjure. Conjure was a magical tradition in which spiritual powers were invoked for various purposes such as healing and protection (Chireau 2003). This specific belief system resulted in a relational vision of health that "placed healing in the context of a broadly conceived community that included living persons, ancestors, spirits and God" (Fett 2002:56). After emancipation these beliefs and traditions were modified, shaped by the changing ideologies of religion, health and gender. Through historical, ethnographic and archaeological data, this research explores the experiences of African American midwives after emancipation to the early twentieth century to better understand these changes.

Although scholars have identified patterns of African American spirituality for this period, the cultural processes are not fully understood. Archaeologists develop models to test for deviations and similarities within material culture across sites to identify behavior changes in these patterns. These models have been tested at several plantation and urban sites across the Southern United States, identifying a distinct cultural continuity in spirituality. Historian Yvonne P. Chireau³ explains this spirituality:

Conjure is a magical tradition in which spiritual power is invoked for various purposes, such as healing, protection and self-defense. The relationships between Conjure and African American religion in particular, Christianity, is somewhat ambiguous. Conjure is usually associated with magical practices, unlike Christianity, which is seen as a religion, a dichotomy that suggests that they are in conflict with one another. Yet from slavery days to the present, African Americans have readily moved between Christianity, conjure and other forms of supernaturalism with little concern for their purported incompatibility (2003:12).

Conjure invokes spiritual powers for various purposes such as healing and protection and is believed to obstruct oppression through resistance in the otherwise controlled environment of enslavement (Chireau 2003). The cosmogram or crossroad symbol illustrates this concept. It signified power created through connections to one's ancestors, and when embodied, it drew spiritual power to that specific place or person. Anthropologist Gertrude Fraser⁴ states, "African American medical belief emphasized the external environment, disturbed social relations, and malevolent spirits, all of which could negatively affect the health of a women and her unborn child" (1997:220). Therefore through time, "like other African American healers, midwives mediated between the physical and metaphysical concerns of their clients, employing a

combination of motherwit, medicinal herbs, and sympathetic magic” (Wilkie 2003:121). Seen as religious women of great faith, midwives engage with the spiritual world on behalf of mothers, infants and the sick using material objects often employed by conjurers.⁵ For this reason, changes in midwifery practice are closely related to the religious and spiritual ideology within African American communities. This study aims to better interpret this relationship and argues archaeological models, like the crossroads model, should be further employed to understand the implications and relationship between spirituality, wellness and gender.

This is articulated through an analysis of archaeological data on nineteenth century African American midwife Agnes Wade. This comparative study reveals the innovation of gender and vocation specific ritual practiced by Agnes Wade to create insightful data for greater understanding of the changes in midwifery through the twentieth century. Inferences from this information provide insight into the life of Ella Davis, an African American midwife who lived with her family in the Independence Heights community during the early twentieth century. Ella was born in captivity in Mississippi, and as a young child taken with her mother to Louisiana by 1860, where they lived on a plantation until freedom. Her family later journeyed to Texas and settled in the Independence Heights community in 1912, where Ella became a midwife and a founder of the Greater New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. In 1915, this community became the first Black municipality in the state of Texas. Community oral history states the congregation of Greater New Hope held services at the Davis home, making her homesite interesting for archaeological investigation due to its dual spiritual nature. Additionally significant is the era of Ella Davis's midwifery practice which negotiated the health reform and regulations of the early twentieth century. Through comparative analysis of historical and archaeological data on African American midwives and conjure, this study examines the changes

in spirituality and healing that occurred after emancipation to explore how Ella Davis's identity as a Christian informed her midwifery practice.

With a Black feminist inspired approach, this study explores the sociopolitical context and intersectional experiences faced by African American midwives during this period to better illustrate how these forces shaped and impacted gendered spiritual and birthing practices. This begins with acknowledging the historical context of institutionalized, socialized, and structural oppression through the historical and contemporary voices of Black women. This approach emphasizes how African American women navigated motherhood and womanhood, further shaping cultural reproduction. Midwives Agnes Wade and Ella Davis are essential contributions to this field of study. Archaeological data on Agnes Wade implies a new testable model for identifying cultural processes in African American spirituality, while Ella Davis's dual role as a midwife and Christian church leader offers a new example changes and the gendered connectedness with wellness and healing.

Research Intentions

Research for this thesis began in 2018 when I traveled to Louisiana to visit the homesite of Agnes Wade. She resided on the Magnolia Plantation during the late nineteenth century as a mother and midwife. Her story, primarily untold and unknown, led me to the path of historical archaeology and African American history. That same year I began an internship for Independence Heights, a historically black community in Houston, Texas. I worked with community members on oral history and historic preservation projects during my internship, which led me to Ella Davis. The study initially included a planned archaeological investigation at the Ella Davis homesite. Her home is no longer standing, but the land is clear and not

bothered from new development and the years of gentrification taking hold of the neighboring streets. The Davis family no longer owns the site, but the current property owner was contacted, and negotiations began for archaeological inquiry. An investigation was planned for the summer of 2021, beginning with ground-penetrating radar (GPS) and ariel photography leading to possible test pit excavations in the fall depending on these results. However, we were denied access to the property just days before our scheduled testing.

Due to these circumstances and limitations, focus on previous archaeological research on African American midwifery and spirituality will be utilized for comparative analysis. This shift in focus allowed me to revisit the life of Agnes Wade and the archaeological and historical data from the Magnolia Plantation midwife's cabin in Natchitoches, Louisiana. This data is part of a larger comparative project by archaeologist Kenneth Brown⁶ which tests the crossroads model at four plantation sites in the Southern United States. My analysis of material culture found at the Agnes Wade homesite reveals changes in conjuration ritual and practice, providing a comparative approach to explore Ella Davis's spirituality and midwifery practice. This data and discussion can provide greater insight for the interpretation of material culture from other midwife sites.

This study accepts previous and extensive research that constructs a spiritual pattern and the predictive models developed from that pattern. Both archaeological and historical scholarship provides evidence and understanding of these behaviors. The following section presents this data. Instead of challenging these methods, I aim to create discourse for how these tools can be applied through feminist perspectives by engaging new questions and inquiry. How can models of spirituality be developed to recognize the specific role of women, and how can those models further identify gendered roles within religion? Can a model be developed for

identifying African American midwives at sites of African descent, and help answer questions about the changing spirituality within their practice throughout time and space? This study offers no definitive answers to these questions but hopes the inquiry will contribute to further discovery on how gendered experiences provide insight into cultural processes.

African American health, religious and gender ideologies from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century were researched to develop context. To further illustrate the development and changes in these ideologies, an intersectional approach inspired by Black Feminism is employed. This approach provides perspective on the collective and individual experiences of Black women during this period. This data allows for a greater understanding of the innovation and modification of spiritual and ritual aspects of midwifery practice over time.

The current chapter explores the archeological framework used, which defines an observable pattern in African American spirituality of the past, and the models used by archaeologists for testing material culture for this pattern. Chapter Two reviews the existing literature and scholarship for Feminist Archaeology and Black Feminist Archaeology to explore what a Black Feminist inspired archaeological method is and how it can be applied in discussion with my positionality. Chapter Three offers a brief historical background on African American midwives from nineteenth century enslavement to the post-regulation practice of the early twentieth century. In this historical backdrop, explicit attention is given to the changing relationships in midwifery between wellness and spirituality. This chapter closes with the introduction of African American midwife Ella Davis. These first three chapters outline the theoretical approach and background for the study.

Chapter Four introduces the methodology and data analysis of the research. The life of African American midwife Agnes Wade and the archaeological data from Magnolia Plantation is explored. This case study is a relevant analysis of archaeological data within the framework of existing models of African American spirituality. This chapter aims to create a discussion about how recognized patterns and models in archaeology can be explored and applied even when no archaeological data is available. Chapter Five discusses the significance and implications of this research, and reflects how a Black Feminist inspired archaeological analysis shaped questions, outcomes, and data interpretations within this study.

This study is significant for several reasons. It continues discussion within archaeology on the role of gender ideologies within the spiritual practice by focuses on the changing relationship between magic and religion through time. Further and future attention to this study or those with similar structures will provide a deeper knowledge of the African American religious systems which developed across time and space. This thesis encourages new questions on the subject and argues for further investigation. What can be learned about the observable innovations in the conjuration practice of midwife Agnes Wade? What can this data infer about the possible innovations and modifications of Ella Davis's midwifery practice? More importantly, how did the shared experiences of racism and sexism shape midwifery's spiritual and ritual practices, and what impact did these innovations and changes have on communities? Although this study cannot fully answer these questions, it does provide data and thought on the possibilities.

Archaeological Framework

In 1941, anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits argued that the hegemonic conclusion that captive Africans had assimilated to European or American culture was false and that complex social, political, and religious systems persisted. Archaeology and research on the African Diaspora and people of African descent began in the 1960s through activism to uncover the untold story and history of the Black experience (Singleton 1999). Scholars began to critique and test Herskovits's acculturation theories. Much of the focus in these early studies was on identifying ethnicity, class, and race on plantation or enslaved sites which developed approaches in Africanism. However, this did not account for the various modifications which create a new culture or the changes through time in meanings of objects. Creolization resolved early critique by accounting for individuals as active agents. However, it lacked the necessary explanation for why individuals made choices, or agency. By the late 1980s, further activism and critique influenced archaeological approaches of critical theories and public archaeology to consider the relationship of archaeology and the descendant communities (Leone, et al 1987; Orser 1987; Fergusons 1991; Singleton 1998). Studies then shifted towards research of emancipation and early twentieth century sites of people of African descent (Agbe-Davies 2011; Barnes 2011; Battle-Baptiste 2011; Brown 1994, 2004, 2011; Leone, et al. 2005; Mullins 2002; Wilkie 2003). More recently, studies specific to African American religion and spirituality have aimed to refine creolization theory and the models used for testing (Brown 2004, 2011, 2015; Fennell 2007; Wilkie 1997).

Historical archaeologists can establish the meaning of objects through documentation and then create models for identifying behavior patterns across time and space. “The artifact-document relations might be best conceived as a core of raw archaeological data surrounded by

layer upon layer of context, the whole providing a detailed and lucid image.” (McKee 2001:220)

However, historical archaeology must go beyond the written word to uncover and interpret objects because these objects hold meaning and symbolism, often unavailable in written documents. African American written history is a largely undocumented, neglected and a forgotten past. In addition, many aspects of African American spirituality and symbolism during enslavement were multivocal or hidden in plain view. These traditions and practices were passed down generationally by word of mouth and through performance, often not documented.

Ethnographical and biographical sources about African American religion, healing, and spirituality during enslavement and after; provide insight into the traditions, beliefs, and everyday experiences of this time which fill in the gaps found in historical documents. These sources have helped to establish cultural continuities in African American folk religion with West African cultures. Anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston’s ethnographic and literary work associated with American Hoodoo, Voodoo and conjure challenged stereotypical narratives of African American spirituality. Chireau (2003) explains that the "magic-religion" dichotomy of African American spirituality set Christian and non-Christian traditions against each other with little regard for the relations that existed between them. Hurston’s *Hoodoo in America* (1931) and *Mules and Men* (1935) sought to validate these essential spiritual and cultural practices.

Although regional variations exist in conjuration practices, there are evident continuities in African American health experiences across the plantations of the Southern United States. Rooted in African and West African tradition, influenced by Christianity and Native American beliefs, and developed under the restrictive conditions of slavery, the genealogy and definition of spirituality and religion found throughout the African Diaspora is complex. Methods for

identifying behavior patterns can include ethnographic analogy and quantitative analysis. Many archaeologists have tested ethnohistorical analogy as a method for determining spirituality. This method compares and contrasts information concerning a specific cultural system with material culture evidence found at relevant archaeological sites. In most of these studies, the source of analogy begins with the Bakongo religion and culture found in West Central Africa.

Archaeologists have also explored the Yoruba, Fon, and other cultures' intersecting belief systems in diaspora religious studies. Art historian Robert F. Thompson⁷ (1983) was the first to propose the Bakongo Cosmogram to explain the recurring symbol. Archaeologist Leland Ferguson⁸ (1992) first applied West Central African ethnographic data to material culture in attempt to explain the “X” symbol observed on Colonware vessels in South Carolina.

Archaeologist Christopher Fennell⁹ explains why these comparatives are possible:

European colonization and Christian missionary activities from the late fifteenth through late nineteenth centuries failed to destroy this rich belief system expressed in the Bakongo. The Bakongo people converted to Christianity and adopted its beliefs only in a highly selective manner. The extensive body of evidence concerning the Bakongo culture in West Central Africa provides the elements for constructing an ethnohistorical analogy. A predictive model incorporating that source of analogy can be employed to analyze and interpret the possible meaning, significance, and use of artifacts of spirituality created by members of the Bakongo diaspora (2008:63).

During the 1990s, archaeologist Mark Leone¹⁰ and his colleagues excavated materials from a site of people of African descent in Annapolis, Maryland. The artifacts were identified as a cache of protective charms and thought to be related to West African spirituality. To define a possible religious pattern, the team analyzed biographies, folklore literature and ethnography for

reference to conjuring or magic tradition. This data identifies relationships between conjure items and archaeological material. Archaeological occurrences were observed when conjure related materials were found in specific locations representing a cosmogram symbol. The continued recovery of artifact assemblages in any temporal or spatial context would represent a persisting religious tradition. Archaeologists have since applied models to other sites throughout the Southern United States to explore mechanisms of development and change.

Archaeologically, the cosmogram or crossroads symbol has been found throughout the southern states, with signifying artifacts dating 1790 to the 1920s. This pattern is represented as assemblages or cache bundles buried in a crossroads pattern beneath structures within sites of African descent. The crossroads symbol marks a “point of intersection between the ancestors and the living” (Thompson 1983:109). Scholars have aimed to identify and reconstruct this religious ideology with syncretism to traditional West African practices. (Chireau 2003, 2006; Hurston 1931, 1981; Thompson 1983) Many archaeologists acknowledge this historical African American religious pattern found throughout the Southern United States and have created and tested models explaining development, continuity and changes. (Brown 2004, 2011, 2015; Brown & Cooper 1990; Fennel 2000, 2007; Ferguson 1992; Leone and Fry 1999; Orser 1994; Wilkie 1997) Additionally, scholars have specifically researched conjure and magic in relationship to African American midwifery, wellness and healthcare. (Brown 2011, 2015, 2017; Chireau, 2003, 2006; Fett 2002; Fraser 1997; Wilkie 2003, 2004, 2013)

Archaeologists have tested the Bakongo cosmogram and other possible crossroads models to interpret the complexity and functions these behaviors served in communities. Brown’s comparative research of four southern plantations aims to explore this model further. In 1986, Brown began excavation at the Levi Jordan Plantation in Brazoria County, Texas. Brown

and the team identified crossroads deposits based on cardinal location beneath the sites later identified as the Conjuror/Curer's Cabin and at the Praise House/Church. Later excavations at the Frogmore Plantation in South Carolina, the Richmond Hill Plantation in Georgia and the Magnolia Plantation in Louisiana produced similar deposit patterns. Brown's ongoing study has revealed significant evidence for a better understanding of spiritual performance's process, developments, and function in these settings. The cultural practices involved with these deposits were hidden from outsiders. Therefore, the "shared knowledge of their presence, function and meaning helped build and solidify social relationships and a sense of collective identity among members of these communities...becoming part of broader-social control mechanisms that helped regulate behavior within the enslaved community" (Brown 2015:184). Additionally, by testing the cosmogram model, the analysis shows the differences and discrepancies across time and space. He argues that the Bakongo cosmogram was modified in ways that differ from the original West Central African meaning while maintaining the significance of a crossroads.¹¹

Brown explains:

These adaptations were built with both traditional West African and Christian European elements, and they were combined in a way that was neither West African or European, but rather has a distinctive pattern that was both creative and successful within the contexts of life for people of African descent within the diaspora (2015:186).

Brown employed Fennell's framework for defining symbols which states "cultures evolve core symbols that serve within a culture to express fundamental elements of a group's cosmology and sense of identity with a world" (2007:7). Fennell's model of *entheogenic bricolage* defines core symbols as emblematic to represent a whole group identity and instrumental versions utilized by individuals and smaller groups like conjurers or midwives. The

approach taken by Brown for the comparison of plantation sites across the South proposes a focus not on material retentions, but instead on the development of a culture within a New World context that “redefines the Bakongo cosmogram into a broader concept of crossroads” (Brown 2015:166). Brown’s analysis reveals two distinct patterns of crossroads ritual observed in the comparison of public church or praise house sites and the private spaces utilized by conjuration practitioners. These innovations represent resistance and resilience observed through individual and collective agency. Religion created internal hierarchy systems that offered individual support and behavior control mechanisms within these communities through traditions and beliefs which structured cultural identity and continuity among generations (Brown 2015; Wilkie 2000). The practice of conjure or magic specifically addressed the restraints of slavery and the oppression of race and gender that followed. Chireau explains:

Conjure spoke directly to the slaves' perceptions of powerlessness and danger by providing alternative, but largely symbolic means for addressing suffering. The conjuring tradition allowed practitioners to defend themselves from harm, to cure their ailments, and to achieve some conceptual measure of control over personal adversity (1998:239).

What the existing cosmogram and crossroad models lacks is greater attention to the relationship and influence of Native Americans. It accounts for Euro-Christian and West African influences to African American spirituality and wellness but does not specifically connect any possible cultural contribution from Native Americans who were either enslaved or enslavers during the nineteenth century, although oral history from African American practitioners and midwives confirms these contributions.¹² Alabama midwife Onnie Lee Logan confirmed, “In those days the doctors didn’t tell them what to do. They used the old home remedies, mostly come from the Indian remedies” (Logan 1898:53).¹³ Additionally, existing ethnography

confirms that a similar symbol to the Bakongo Cosmogram was an important symbol in some Native American cultures.¹⁴ The extensive scholarship on Hoodoo and Voodoo does include data on these connections, and Fennell's model of entheogenic bricolage accounts for the development of this variability, but it has yet to be fully explored and defined in the field of archaeology. Questions about how relations with Native Americans shape identity and spirituality, how this impacted African American gender ideologies, and midwifery practices should be further explored. This thesis does not intend to analyze this thought further, but it is essential to note the necessity of future research to acknowledge and better define these relationships.

Additionally, archaeologists must be careful when linking specific ethnic or racial identities to objects and be aware of the unintentional stereotypes this can create. As Fennell and others argue, African Americans "were not the only group to practice magic in the United States in colonial and antebellum America" (Fennell 2000:285). However, this became a racialized campaign after emancipation. Avoiding negative impact begins with the research questions archaeologists develop. Archaeologist Whitney Battle-Baptiste¹⁵ explains:

Placing African American spirituality in a broader context removes it from the narrow notion of only being coupled with religion, specifically Black Christianity, and expands our thinking to include how Africans experienced and practiced in ways far beyond the gaze of the enslaver overseer or historian (2013:91).

Research and questions about African American spirituality should explore ritual practice as more than religious acts and focus on how these behaviors and beliefs encompassed identity and

personhood through everyday life. This thesis hopes to raise broader questions about how Black womanhood performed and embodied this spirituality through a focused study of the midwife.

CHAPTER TWO

Feminist Archaeology

One need not be a Black feminist in order to take a critical stance, one dedicated to exposing the pervasiveness of racism and sexism in the past and with the practice of archaeology itself.

— Maria Franklin, *A Black Feminist-inspired Archaeology*, 2001

How can feminist scholarship and feminist politics contribute to archaeology? How does one *do* feminist archaeology? Archaeologist Alison Wylie explains, “to recognize what this means in practice will be as diverse as what it means to be a feminist and as situationally specific as the fields in which feminists have undertaken science” (2007:211). In other words, there is no one way to do feminist archaeology. This thesis utilizes a feminist framework as defined by several scholars¹ which states that all research should be situated and contextualized within lived experiences. Researchers should all be held accountable to subjects studied and those affected by the research results with an informed *standpoint* on knowledge production through critical reflexivity. For this reason, theory and approach must vary according to the subject studied, just as feminism varies in relation to the feminist. Therefore, research on the African American diaspora and history would benefit from a Black Feminist inspired approach.

In 1991, archaeology’s “year of the woman,” Joan Gero and Margaret Conkey raised gender representation and interpretation questions in the archaeological record.² The following research emphasized the critical identification of gender biases in disciplinary practice and interpretations and the attempt to recognize women in the archaeological record (Wilkie & Hays 2006.) This fueled research on identity and agency (Dornan 2002; Franklin & Fessler 1999), household structure (Delle 2002; Hendon 2006; Lawrence 2013; Spencer-Wood 2013), and

children and child-rearing (Baxter 2005; Kamp 2005; Wilkie 2000b) which all contributed to gender studies. Feminist approaches developed methods for class-gender-race studies within archaeology through standpoint theory and intersectionality (Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Galle & Young 2004; Scott 2004; Wilkie & Hays 2006; Wylie 2007).

A feminist perspective in archaeological interpretation questions the assumptions about women and gender while challenging the political and theoretical presuppositions about the past. Defining the intersectionality of individual experiences allows for a holistic approach to the interpretation of culture. By combining these approaches with Black Feminist Thought in a historical contextual model, archaeologists began to analyze the agency and cultural development of women of African descent in the past with a better understanding (Battle-Baptiste 2007, 2011; Burnett 2021; Flewellen 2018; Franklin 2001, 2020; Wilkie 2003). However, even during a time of increased research on the African Diaspora, "the vast majority of literature produced in historical archaeology on gender focus(ed) on the experiences of white women" (Wilkie & Hays 2006:249).

Over the past decade, there has been significant increase in BIPOC archaeologists and the founding of the Society of Black Archaeologists.³ This developed representation for archaeologists of different backgrounds who are explicitly engaged in anti-racist scholarship and activism (Franklin et al., 2020). This engagement is evident in the growth of public archaeology, partnering with Black communities in heritage and preservation projects, field training of BIPOC students, and raising awareness of Black history through public education. (Dunnavant et al 2018; Flewellen et al. 2022; Franklin & Lee 2020; Franklin 1997; Franklin et al 2020)

Defining Feminist Archaeology

Archaeologist Elizabeth Scott⁴ (2020) notes that a feminist approach should include the goal of producing scholarship that leads to social change situated in the current culture because the role gender played in past structures is relevant to current socio-political contexts. All research outcomes of past societies impact present-day communities and people:

Feminists use archaeological evidence to argue that gender and other inequalities have specific historical, economic, and political reasons for their existence; those inequalities are culturally constructed, not natural, and what is constructed can be de-constructed.

Thus, our work can show the roots of our inequalities and how our society came to be the way it is, which implies that we can make changes in our society to remedy those inequalities (2020:319).

Archaeologists have employed several feminist theories and methods of research. Early works (1970-1990) influenced by the second-wave feminist standpoint theory focused on identifying gender bias in practice and interpretation, critiquing gender-specific models of sexual division of labor or activities. This critique also includes the contrasting values often placed on this division of labor, with men's roles seen as more critical for survival or societal success. This approach aimed to go beyond determining roles to explore the relationship between gender systems and social life to change stereotypes of labor division and activities, placing women at the center of the analysis of power and influence.

Intersectionality is a concept coined by Kimberle' Crenshaw⁵ (1989) to define the dynamics of identity in the context of anti-discrimination and social movement politics within critical race and legal studies. However, the framework of gender, race, and class concerning

power and oppression which make up intersectional identity was first introduced by Black women in reaction to the white domination of the women's suffrage movement in the late nineteenth century. The concept crystalized with The Combahee River Collective¹⁶ and further expanded through womanism⁷ and Black feminism of the 1970s. By the 1980s, feminist analysis placed greater importance on defining intersecting identities. Feminist scholars applied the concept to explore gender, agency, and personhood concerning social structure (Butler 1990; Giddings 1984; Spelman 1988; Collins 2000).

This approach goes beyond analyzing gender focus specifically on embodied experiences because gender identities emerge, shift, and vary. This theme influenced post-processual archaeological theorizing to understand status and life cycle change within an intersectional context (Clark & Wilkie 2006; Joyce 2000). Research on identities like mother or motherhood produces data on individual lives and sites, but draws focus to wider society through evaluating shared experiences and similarities. Emphasis on personhood explores how people identified as women, men, or other genders and how those individuals were active agents in their lives and communities. Identity is not universal and is shaped by the social and political contexts individuals and groups share. This analysis explains how past behaviors relate to differences in power, oppression, and social contexts and how behavior is understood through material culture.

An intersectional analysis requires an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power.⁸ Better explained, "This framing, conceiving of categories not as distinct but are always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power, emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is" (Cho et al. 2013:795).

Archaeologists have developed several methods for applying intersectional analysis to material culture. For example, archaeobiography introduced by Bonnie Clark (1996), is a method of intersectional analysis utilized to uncover the complexity of identity and agency by exploring all aspects of identity and applying these perspectives and experiences to material culture. This approach “allows us to shift from considerations of gross categories, such as woman, to a consideration of socially constructed roles that incorporate gender, such as mother, ” focusing on personhood during different life stages (Clark & Wilkie 2007:1). The use of narrative or storytelling by feminist archaeologists has become a powerful tool for bringing nuance and texture to women's experiences by providing a multivocal presentation of the interpretation and material culture.

In archaeology, the intersectional approach can have limitations due to the institutional politics of knowledge production. How knowledge of the past is produced shapes the context researchers use to develop intersectionality of subjects. The lack of archive or pertaining perspective in materials used impacts research outcomes and data. Methods such as archaeobiography and storytelling address some of these concerns through comparative analysis and inferences which go beyond broad historical accounts to individual agency as a cultural identifier. The question remains, what determines “the number of categories and kinds of subjects stipulated or implied by an intersectional approach; and the static and fixed versus the dynamic and contextual orientation or intersectional research” (Cho et al. 2013:787)? How do archaeologists decide on which categories to build context when identities can go beyond race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, *et cetera*⁹, and does that determination limit the historical narrative and interpretation of material culture?

Black feminist critique addresses some limitations within archaeology specific to the African Diaspora and people of African descent. In 2001, Maria Franklin first raised the question, *A Black Feminist-inspired Archaeology*, to challenge the discipline to acknowledge and correct “the neo-colonialism, imperialism and oppression of women and minority groups the subfield of historical archaeology” potentially shared with anthropological tradition (2001:116). Franklin further explains, “the work of Black feminists who speak from their own experiences as a means for working towards their own liberation, continues to offer perspectives relevant to archaeology that are not reproduced in other third-wave feminist scholarship” (2001:111). Exploring Black feminist thought as an analytical model for acknowledging the relationship between oppression, consciousness and activism expands the understanding of the women of African descent’s experiences, agency and cultural importance in the past. Black feminist archaeology is a method that centers on the intersectionality of race, gender and class in a more considerable discussion of archaeological approaches to interpreting the American past.

Black Feminist Archaeology

Saidiya V. Hartman¹⁰ argues that blackness and womanhood are performative as "enactments of social struggle and contending articulations of racial meaning" exercised in everyday activities (1997:57). Archaeologist Ayana Omilade Flewellen¹¹ (2018) further defines Black womanhood as a “constructed identity that moves fluidly over regions and shifts over time, like other identity formations, is constructed in alignment and disjunction with hegemonic ideas,” of femininity and womanhood (2018:139). To understand and interpret these historical forms of practice, researchers must contextualize the oppression and restrictions of slavery to uncover the significance of behaviors. These behaviors of resistance that formed community and identity were usually “subterranean,” or hidden from the surveillance of slave life.¹² Therefore,

these experiences are generally lost in dominant narratives and archive. This recovery work demands that scholars of African American history bring race and gender more prominently into the analysis of power.

Black feminist scholars bring a defining perspective for understanding the structure of family and motherhood under slavery concerning the impact of trauma and memory.¹³ This knowledge defines the conceptualized notions and ideologies within African American communities and families. Collins argues these “commonalities of perception are shared by Black women as a group.” However, the “diversity of class, region, age and sexual orientation result in different expressions of these common themes. Black women’s standpoint is created by Black women from observations and interpretations about womanhood that describes and explains the different expressions of common themes” (Collins 1986:16). Although feminist theory has influenced the practice and politics of historical archaeology, Maria Franklin argues that Black feminist theorizing can fill the “problematic gaps” that remain (2001:109). This approach is essential for interpreting societies shaped by colonialism and slavery that left “a legacy of structural hierarchies based upon socially constructed difference along lines of gender, race and/or ethnicity” (Franklin 2001:109).

Whitney Battle-Baptiste presents *Black Feminist Archaeology* (2011) to open an honest dialogue about how archaeologists and historians interpret women of African descent.¹⁴ Her combination of theoretical approaches centered on Black feminist thought provides a deeper understanding of African American cultural production. This approach draws from the canon of Black feminist scholars and literature to develop context to better understand historical connections between gender and race while engaging with contemporary Black women writers.

This approach develops insight into how people of African descent remember the past to address themes of generational memory production.

As Battle-Baptist states, a significant factor of Black Feminist Thought is the common experiences of Black women due to race and gender because being black and female in the United States continues to expose African American women to certain common experiences.¹⁵ She further explains “the very foundation of Black Feminist thought is linked to the degendering process experienced by Black women during slavery throughout the African Diaspora” (2011:42). This framework argues that a Black women’s collective standpoint is “an integral part of how different responses to classic questions and challenges can highlight and incorporate important aspects of Black women’s knowledge” (Baptist 2011:63). Hazel Carby¹⁶ argues the importance of black literature as a historical context because the works engage the race and gendered experience of the period. “Novels by Black women should be read not as passive representations of history but as active influence within history ...not only determined by the social condition within which they were produced but also as cultural artifacts which shape the social conditions they enter (1987:95).

Battle-Baptiste claims this knowledge creates an intersectional dialogue for archaeologists and is an integral aspect of Black Feminist Archaeology:

A Black Feminist Archaeology is not a formula. It is a methodology that combines aspects of anthropological theory, ethnohistory, the narrative tradition, oral history, material culture studies, Black and African-descendant feminisms, and critical race and African Diaspora theories. It allows for a larger dialogue or how these theoretical

approaches can be combined and used as lenses through which to understand the intersectionality of race, gender and class in the past (2011:29).

Battle-Baptiste also offers a detailed and personal reflection of her experiences excavating a plantation site to understand the role positionality plays in the research process:

All the archaeology was amazing, but sometimes the down times were difficult. I was on a real plantation, and for me the energy was intense. There were times when I would think about the people who labored at the site, who lived, loved and died there as captives. It was really overwhelming at moments; I felt things that were hard to explain to my colleagues. I did not really understand how to process these feelings (2011:33).

This experience in the field highlights the contradiction Battle-Baptiste felt as a part of the larger descendant community by birthright and simultaneously as a researcher of that descendant community. Although she states her racial and gendered position do not make her opinions or interpretations more valid than other archaeologists, her positionality allowed for different perspectives and research questions by connecting the personal to the political. As she explains, “it is really not my individual experiences that should be the center of the work I do; it should be how these experiences shape the approaches and methodological details that I bring to the conversation” (2011:167).

Black feminist influenced theorizing can produce reflective, politically aware narratives by focusing on the past's historical and material conditions. This approach calls on archaeologists and researchers in all fields to critically engage in dialogue about intersectionality as an approach to better understand how forms of oppression shape experience and personhood. Battle-Baptiste states that a Black feminist archaeology centers the intersectionality of race,

gender and class into a larger discussion of archaeological approaches while considering “the direct connection of the past with contemporary issues of racism and sexism that allow researchers to see how the past influences and shapes contemporary society and perhaps forces us all to be more sensitive to the larger implications of our research” (2011:69).

A Black Feminist Inspired Archaeology

Anthropologists train in reflexivity and positionality to recognize the context for personal influence on research and outcomes. In this period of self-awareness, a researcher should address and recognize why a subject was selected and how it relates to them. What can my positionality and perspective bring to the voices I want to uncover and stories I am eager to tell if I lack the direct personal experiences, family histories and collective memories a researcher of another race could bring? As a white archaeologist, I cannot relate to African American women based on race and community. Although I would like to say I can relate as a woman, as a daughter and as a mother this is not relevant when gendered experience and motherhood are situational. And in womanhood and motherhood, these experiences do not always unite us for “motherhood has been seen by some as a universal and unifying experience for women, a place of common ground for the feminist movement, but feminist critique emphasize that the experiences of middle-class heterosexual women have been privileged in these discourses” (Wilkie 2003). We must first identify these connections or disconnections to keep our personal experiences from persuading the outcomes of our work. We must remember that all subject positions can face oppression or empowerment, although in different ways, no more or less meaningful, just different. However, our role in those situations must be recognized, especially when much of racist and sexist oppression towards humans has occurred in the name of white womanhood (Pratt 1983).

This is far too evident in analyzing the past and historical constructions and performance of womanhood and motherhood. As researchers, acknowledging our positionality and experiences with race, class, gender and sexuality, we can begin to examine the relational difference and interdependence that drive racism and sexism, which shaped past experiences while engaging with today's sociopolitical conditions. The race and gender relations we see today are directly related to race and gender relations of the past. Archaeologists should contextually define these relations because the “absence of recognition” further obscures differences among groups.¹⁷ Scholar Elsa Barkley-Brown¹⁸ explains the fact that these histories exist simultaneously, in dialogue with each other, is seldom apparent in the studies we do because:

The overwhelming tendency now is to acknowledge and then ignore differences among women. Or if we acknowledge the relationship between Black and white women's lives, it is likely to be only that African American women's lives are shaped by white women's but not the reverse. The effect of this is that acknowledging difference becomes a way of reinforcing the notion that the experiences of white middle-class women are the norm. (1992:300).

A Black feminist inspired archaeology provides greater context and holistic interpretations to studying the African Diaspora and people of African descent. This approach must acknowledge and recognize Black women and their historical and contemporary experiences. This development begins by exploring the literary canons outside our level of comfort or what might be offered during training and education to recover what is lost in historical narratives and archive. The exploration of Black scholars, feminists, writers and archaeologists offers insight and understanding into lived experiences we could never experience

ourselves. A Black Feminist inspired archaeology should generate research agendas and questions that address methods to include or benefit communities of African descent. "The public archaeology becomes an engaged and activist archaeology when there is a connection between the archaeological methods and issues important to contemporary communities" (Baptist 2011:71).

Laurie Wilkie's *The Archaeology of Mothering* (2003) explores African American midwifery during the late nineteenth century and addresses aspects of motherhood during enslavement and the changing ideologies of motherhood after emancipation. This work offers a methodological framework for a Black feminist inspired approach by a white female archaeologist. Wilkie explores concepts of mothering and family from her positionality and that from Black feminist scholars, historical interviews and literary works, all which guide the research questions and conclusions combating forms of negative stereotypes and images historically imposed on Black womanhood. Specifically, Patricia Hill Collins's (1994) concept of "motherwork" inspires this research to consider the full diversity of women's mothering experiences. Collins states, "motherwork goes beyond ensuring the survival of one's own biological children or those of one's family. This type of motherwork recognizes that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival empowerment and identity" (1994:47). Defining ideologies of motherhood is possible by examining both the hegemonic constructs of white womanhood and the Black ideologies which shaped Black womanhood and mothering in response to or impacted by systems of oppression. This analysis is essential to considering past gender systems in the United States because the two were interdependent.¹⁹

Understanding the forces and agency behind identity formation and personhood is essential to interpreting the meaning of behavior. Feminist theories are tools for understanding

this better by analyzing women's oppression and experiences. By identifying these differences, which are shaped and related to oppression, theory should destabilize the "white, Northern, middle-class heterosexual experience of gender" that is constructed as normal (McCann & Kim 2010:5). This homogenization of the category "women" privileges white heterosexual feminist identities. To write and uncover the history of Black women, researchers must define and acknowledge racial constructions of gender. This provides insight into the socially constructed and performed aspects of womanhood. White and European ideologies of womanhood constructed in the nineteenth century formed from the cult of domesticity, which defined white middle-class women and mothers as the standard, further defining Black womanhood and motherhood as the other or different.²⁰ This imposed difference fueled stereotypes and excuses for the inhumane treatment of enslaved Black women. Wilkie's (2003) research and review of WPA Federal Writers Project uncovered many strong associations with motherhood. These narratives of mothers from children's perspectives reveal:

The embodiment of love and protection lost, a longing, and a reminder of helplessness and tragedy. Mother was a face for the unspeakable outrages and suffering of slavery. Yet mother was a kinship, determination and strength in adversity (2003:73).

Following Maria Franklin's call (2001) archaeologists have begun to utilize Black feminism for developing methods of investigation and interpretation of material culture in African Diaspora studies. (Agbe-Davies 2007; Battle-Baptiste 2013; Flewellen 2018; Flewellen et al 2021; Wilkie 2003) Patricia Hill Collins (2000) states that black feminism cannot flourish isolated from the ideas and experiences of all groups. By advocating Black feminism, all women (and men) can support and contribute to its development, providing a richer and fuller analysis of the American past. Additionally, "archaeologists can collaborate and create inclusive dialogues

equipped with engaged research agendas to produce incredibly activist-oriented outcomes that appeal to a multitude of audiences” (Battle-Baptiste 2011:36).

This thesis draws from Black Feminist scholarship to focus on motherhood in analysis to address stereotypes specific to gender roles and labor for a better understanding of shared experiences. In the research of African American midwives, this is crucial because "the campaign against African American midwives drew on representations of Black womanhood that departed significantly from those of white womanhood” (Fraser 1998:97). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) identified three stereotypes of black women constructed during slavery that she argues continues to shape discourse and influence perceptions of black womanhood and mothering today: the mammy, the jezebel and the matriarch.²¹ Wilkie elaborates:

While the controlling images of black womanhood shaped the experiences of mothering for enslaved women and the generations that followed them, these images were imposed from outside the African American community. African American women struggled with and acted against these stereotypes, but they also balanced images of mother and motherhood that were constructed and held within the African American community during and beyond enslavement (2003:59).

Collins further argues, "a generalized ideology of domination [produces] stereotypical images of Black womanhood which take on special meaning" (2000:70). Those individuals responsible for creating these stereotypical images tend to occupy powerful and influential groups. As a result, such groups while being granted the authority to define societal values also "manipulate ideas about Black womanhood" (2000:70).

Additionally, mothers (and fathers) could not make fundamental decisions about child care and forced labor was an imposed priority. The child labor and financial strategies of slavery divided families and mothers from their children. Wilkie argues, “perhaps because archaeologists are typically white and middle class, they have been reluctant to dwell on any kind of violence endured by enslaved people and certainly have not looked at the unique effects that enslavement had on parenting” (2003:9). Dunaway further argues that any research on the culture and resistance of African Americans must have some emphasis on “human pain of family separation” (Dunnaway 2003:285). This family network included fictive kin networks of several households, collective responsibility for parenting, and women-centered domestic production²² all of which shaped ideologies and performance of motherhood. For these reasons, family and motherhood are a core theme of analyzing historical and archaeological data within this study.

This thesis also draws from existing research of African American midwives, which specifically applies an intersectional analysis. Anthropologist Gertrude Fraser’s (1998) ethnographic work on southern Black midwives analyses the lasting impact of medical reform and regulations during the late nineteenth and early 20th century on gender and wellness. Fraser’s study emphasized the juxtaposition between the two worlds of meaning, African American ideologies and the political-medical. Historian Sharla M. Fett’s (1998) *Working Cures* explores how racism shaped ideologies of motherhood and womanhood, contrasting narratives of black women as mothers and healers, stereotypes. These contradictions “obscured the broad extent of slave women’s healing work and rendered invisible the bonds of affection and care within slave families” (1998:137). Fett’s research explores the social relations of slave health and healing as they emerged in daily interaction among residents of nineteenth-century southern plantations. Historian Jenny Luke provides an extensive analysis of the “devastating barrier of race that

African American women, lay midwives, and nurses encountered" in her *Delivered by Midwives* (2013:8) research. Luke examines how racism shaped medical reform and regulation and the transition in midwifery from enslavement to regulation. Her work draws from sources of women's health activists, anthropologists and memoirs and oral histories of Southern African American midwives. Chapter 3 will explore these themes through a brief history of African American midwifery during the nineteenth century through the post-regulation era of the twentieth century.

Although many Black feminist scholars and archaeologists encourage the theorizing of Black feminism by others, we must also be conscious of the impact our efforts may have. What happens when Black feminist thought becomes institutionalized by white scholars? White feminists can choose to critically engage in this scholarship, but "feminists of color often experience them as a paradigmatic of intellectual marginalization and academic exclusion" (Coogan-Gerh 2011:90). Black women developed black feminism for Black women. If white archaeologists utilize this approach, does it run the risk of colonizing it to further our own interests?²³ "Theories provide instruments, not answers and our work must be evaluated less as a solution than as a program for more work" because the methods we use should not offer easy solutions but instead raise more questions through different ways of thinking (McDavid 2007:80). Archaeologists must understand the more significant impact methods and outcomes of their research have on contemporary society.

Historians, writers and Black feminist scholars began the cultural recovery work of midwives many years ago to address historical notions of Black motherhood.²⁴ This "evolving cultural icon" has been developed through folklore, autobiography and literary texts to combat racialized stereotypes.²⁵ Historian Valerie Lee²⁶ explains how writers use the figure of African

American midwife “for multiple purposes: to place in the foreground the politics of race, gender and class; to affirm a history of resistance; and to offer a counter discursive practice that problematizes notions of health, healing and wholeness” (1996:3). So how can archaeology contribute to this work which emphasizes the “the politics of told and untold stories” central to the contemporary narrative accounts of African American women (Craven & Glatzel 2010:342)? Archaeology provides a method for uncovering the untold stories and experiences often silenced. A Black feminist inspired approach pushes us to ask questions beyond the function of behavior and meaning objects to understand the shared racialized and gendered experiences of African American midwives that resulted in these cultural processes. Archaeology can contribute to revealing “the imaginative resourcefulness of a resilient people who transformed utilitarian things into bonds of kinship and carriers of feeling” (2021:215 Miles).

CHAPTER 3

Historical Background

Rather conceived through violence or love, motherhood was an overwhelming terror as birth fueled the institution of slavery.

— Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 2000

This chapter offers a brief historical background of African American midwifery in the Southern United States from nineteenth century enslavement to the post-regulation era of the 1930s. Midwives acted as healers and spiritual advisors for most enslaved communities through complex practices based on the community's specific beliefs and needs. Although not all midwives were conjurers and not all conjurers were midwives (as many conjure practitioners were men), this analysis focuses specifically on the African American midwifery that used forms of magic and conjure in practice during the nineteenth century and beyond.

This analysis discusses the relationship between midwifery and spirituality utilizing primary and secondary sources from inter-disciplinary literature and data to explore how these practices were modified. Some of the oppressions, restrictions, and conflicts which influenced the development and transformation of these beliefs and practices are presented with emphasis on motherhood and womanhood. Anthropologist Gertrude Fraser (1998) argues that gender, class, and race discrimination shaped the material and symbolic shifts in birth and wellness in African American communities. Through these shared experiences, midwives actively negotiated and navigated these social and political constraints to maintain cultural and spiritual authority in their communities. Therefore, reconstructing patterns of African American

midwifery in archaeology requires recognition of racism, sexism, and class discrimination during and after enslavement.

There is extensive literature on African American midwives. However, much of this historical information is limited, written by medical associations, government organizations, and white or European medical professionals, which enforced the era's racial hierarchies and authoritative knowledge. However, current scholarship explicitly combats the stereotypes driven by public health reform rhetoric. This study draws from the works of anthropologist Gertrude Fraser (1998) and historians Sharla Fett¹ (2002), Jenny Luke² (2018), and Yvonne P. Chireau (2003), all which specifically apply an intersectional analysis to the social relations that shaped African American spirituality and midwifery. Additionally, the research by Black scholars on African American women's history is explored. This thesis is inspired by the extensive works by Darlene Clark Hine³, Saidiya Hartman, Deborah White Gray⁴, Tiya Miles⁵, Valerie Lee and others. This research also engages oral history and autobiography by African American women and midwives.⁶ These combined sources establish the context of shared experiences for African American midwives throughout the Southern United States during this period.

Brief History of African American Midwives

During the nineteenth century, two views of health operated on plantations. Fett explains that this competing vision of health resulted in differential diagnosis and remedy. More profoundly, it defined "how black and white southerners perceived the boundaries of their communities" (2002:58). The concept of "soundness" formed in the early nineteenth century after legal participation in the international slave trade ended and the medical establishment's professionalization. Soundness defined the material property values and labor production based

on the wellness of individuals. However, these experiences were very different for women, "for female slaves soundness also related to their ability to reproduce," further asserting enslaved women and their children as property (Luke 2018:19). Birthing became a business with concerns of profit over health and wellbeing as slaveholders tried to assert control over all aspects of enslaved women's health and reproductive lives. This intrusion and reiteration of the captive body often included sexual violation and abuse. The experiences of Black womanhood during enslavement significantly shaped spirituality, just as midwifery and spirituality significantly shaped motherhood. Within these shared experiences, midwives would transmit and "mother" the culture of African American womanhood as generational mediators. Grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and granddaughters through shared experiences understood the "essence of what it was to be an African American woman."⁷

Comprehending the history of slavery is essential to understating African American health and wellness because it was within this experience that visions of health and healing were developed and embodied. Enslaved African Americans engaged power through healing rituals by defining health as a community enterprise and healing knowledge as spiritual empowerment. "This relational vision of health linked the wellbeing of the individual to the health of the larger community and the health of the community to its spiritual life" (Fett 2002:198). Additionally, "conjure vividly illustrated the connecting of an individual's wellbeing to his or her conduct within a community" (2002:88). Chireau further explains how conjure addressed these needs:

More precisely than Christianity, conjure articulated an epistemology that African Americans could understand and address their afflictions. In its elaborate rituals, its therapeutic orientation, and its multiple expressions, Conjure advanced the prospect of directly resolving one's own suffering (1997:238).

Historically, the three types of practitioners who offered conjuration practices in African American communities were midwives, root doctors, and conjurers.⁸ Anthropologist Zora Neal Hurston observed a hierarchy of healing roles during her 1920s research of Hoodoo and African American spirituality. In some communities, the midwife was a root doctor, or a root doctor was a conjurer, but "not all were Hoodoo doctors."⁹ The practice of magic or supernatural ritual in midwifery often differed from conjure and hoodoo practitioners. "Their work did not necessarily exclude knowledge on conjuration, but daily sick care bore a different relationship to plantation production and structures of power than did the clandestine practice of antebellum hoodoo" (Fett 2002:112). Wilkie further explains:

Midwives used a combination of spiritual and physical techniques to treat illness and attend delivery, while conjurers provided a range of magical services that typically were related to social control of some kind (1997:84).

So, although midwives performed magic rituals in their healing, the role altered the spiritual nature of these traditions because midwives often worked under the surveillance and scrutiny of plantation owners on real illness, unlike most conjure or Hoodoo doctors.¹⁰ Medical, natural, and supernatural remedies were combined, for example, "to help women through delivery pains, midwives used a variety of physical and metaphysical methods that explicitly drew upon the spiritual strength of men and women" (Wilkie 2013:280). Midwives performed birthing rituals to protect the child and bind newborns to the physical world. Children and adults would wear protective charms of coins, buttons, or beads to ward off bad luck and spirits. Midwives also utilized medicinal herbs and substances to make teas, salves, and bitters used in healing and birthing. Spiritual rituals were often used in conjunction with medicinal treatments to protect the mother during childbirth and later in child development.

The midwife offered physical health protection and spiritual protection through these rituals. Rituals served many purposes, including healing and curing, and were also employed to mediate the relationships between the sexes. Additionally, this spiritual protection was a gift, and "only those who knew how to connect with and read the supernatural world were reliable during childbirth" (Fraser 1998:187). Midwives received their knowledge through different modes of transmission, often after revelations described as a "calling."¹¹ This calling was inherited through kinships, with knowledge about birth and healing passed down from older women to younger ones.

Conjure practitioners, midwives and Black church ministers held equal authority serving different spiritual needs in their communities throughout the nineteenth century. These religious practices were both separate and in syncretism with one another, each communicating the distinctness of the group. Yvonne Chireau explains that "as religious traditions, both conjure and Christianity provided unique resources that addressed diverse cultural needs and interests within African American life" (1997:227). At the same time, these roles often moved between magic and Christianity in spiritual negotiation. Often modified rituals with sacred symbols from Christianity were used as charms for protection and prediction.¹² Zora Neale Hurston observed that the bible was considered by many conjurers to be the "greatest conjure book in the world."¹³ Additionally, archaeology has provided evidence of cosmograms or crossroads buried beneath churches/praise houses in the nineteenth century and early twentieth-century sites.¹⁴ The features uncovered at these sites illustrate "magic and religion were symbiotic, two compatible perspectives that relied on each other" and that "...the authority of conjurers and the authority of Christian ministers often overlapped" (Chireau 2017:230).

With emancipation, African American women gained autonomy and control over their bodies. However, the emergent fields of obstetrics and gynecology reasserted authoritative knowledge by promoting hospital births through healthcare and hygiene reforms. Healthcare reform centered on invalidating other systems of belief and explanation and targeted the African American midwife. However, midwives continued oversight of childbirth and women's wellness in most Black communities through the end of the early twentieth century due to the inequalities in segregated hospital care. Additionally, "African American women in the Jim Crow South had no expectation of medical care for pregnancy and childbirth. Moreover, they were suspicious of the motivation of white physicians and had little confidence in their skill and knowledge. The profound level of distrust did not have its origins in neglect but rather in the dehumanized attention given to enslaved women by doctors during slavery" (Luke 2000:13).

Forces of Change

Physicians and women's advocate groups believed that physician led hospital births would result in a decline in mortality rates. By 1910, statistics and reports emerged by these physicians attributing the high infant mortality rate to African American midwifery. In 1917, a publication by the federal Children's Bureau of Health triggered a government response to the physician debate of midwifery, leading to the 1921 Shepard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act. This Act enforced government regulations, training, and supervision of unlicensed or lay midwives, forever changing the practices of generational traditions and procedures. A fundamental aspect of policing poverty, these movements created stereotypes around cleanliness or the lack of, and targeted African American communities (Hartman 1997).

This campaign against midwives claimed superstition led to dangerous and unsanitary practices. The movements promoted sanitation and personal hygiene as part of the growing preventative medical measures to stop the spread of disease. This led to a growing literature on etiquette and societal housekeeping standards for cleanliness, nutrition, and behavior. It also emphasized a new gender identity for women through their role in the home. The movement significantly influenced both white and Black society. This scientific mothering promoted proper motherhood and became embedded in African American social movements to improve public health and status.¹⁵

African American progressive movements promoted scientific mothering to combat negative stereotypes and inequalities in healthcare. The National Association of Colored Women along with Booker T. Washington campaigned to raise awareness of the African American public health crisis. Through this, rural African American women and midwives were often faulted for the “race problems.”¹⁶ Additionally, the The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and W. E. B. Du Bois encouraged women to have hospitalized births to strengthen Black hospitals and medical training at black colleges.¹⁷ The rise in opportunity for training African American nurses and doctors further shifted community views of wellness. Darlene Clark Hine explains:

Without the parallel institutions that the black professional class created, successful challenges to white supremacy would not have been possible. The formation of parallel organizations proved to be far more radical, far more capable of nurturing resistance, than anyone could have anticipated in the closing of the nineteenth century and opening decades of the twentieth (2003:1279).

These combined factors shaped new ideologies of wellness and healing shifting authority to physicians and hospitals. The spiritual and cultural roles once held by African American midwives was drastically changing, and so were the rituals and traditions practiced.

With exclusion from the Women's Suffrage Movement, the Black feminist movement of the nineteenth century developed and offered new opportunities for women. The National Association for Colored Women (1896) created social uplift for middle-class African American women through resistance to the dominant culture. Locally, Black women's clubs associated with community churches were combating racial stereotypes to empower women by promoting new gender ideologies aligned with modern societal views and domesticity.¹⁸ The changing practices in child-rearing and mothering within communities forced innovations and modifications of midwifery. At the same time, the "New Negro Movement" influenced by W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey advocated cultural consciousness, economic autonomy, and education, focusing on family.¹⁹ The cultural authority midwives obtained as teachers and healers was further impacted by the changing gender ideologies forcing negotiation of that role through modification of traditions. Many midwives asserted themselves into new community roles such as progressive women's clubs, civic organizations, and church leadership.²⁰ Clark Hine argues the movement inspired the spirit of resistance for future decades:

Tens of thousands of women who organized into black women's club movement, a truly remarkable phenomena that became virtually the sole provider of social services to the black community [and] became the training grounds for political action. (1999:166)

African American magic and superstition became a common trope in literature, music, and poetry by the early twentieth century. Both white and Black societies exploited the once sacred and private spirituality of healing.²¹ Folklore and folk traditions became a topic of

academic inquiry as slave culture or slave religion was used to define historic African American culture through religious primitivism. The commercialization of African American spiritualism further enforced racial and gendered stereotypes developed during slavery and would forever impact the practice of midwifery. These images centered race in conjunction with gender as the primary argument for debating the African American midwife and further positioned the medical hierarchy of white physicians and nurses.

These constructions of race and gender closely linked Black women to superstition and uncleanness,²² to draw women out of home births; yet "the primary source of domestic labor, African American women, sanitized the homes of Southern white families. They were the ones who performed the work associated with achieving a properly clean, sanitized domestic sphere. Those same women were also expected to nurture and attend to the children" of white families (Fraser 1998:91). As domestic workers these women were often seen as extensions of the employer, so qualities of nurture and cleanliness were imposed, not considered natural or practiced away from place of employment.²³ These views emphasized how "midwifery control and regulation were predicated on the assumption of a social and political hierarchy in which racial difference was the defining factor" (Fraser 1998:31).

Observing Change

Midwives often employed African American conjurer traditions of healing and protection through supernatural involvement before regulations. During enslavement, midwives created a sacred health culture grounded in authority outside the realm of white society. This allowed black motherhood, otherwise controlled and dominated by slaveholders, a sense of self-regulation. The adaptations and modifications to traditional West African and Native American cosmologies resulted in a church-based faith with supernatural beliefs embedded in the lived

experiences and expression of those experiences. African American midwifery was an expression of Christian and non-Christian beliefs representative of the collective spirituality within their community. Christianity provided the moral guidelines to live, and conjure tradition was a way to enforce it, resulting in a unique African American spiritualism (Chireau 2003). Through this spirituality and guidance, midwives could educate women on their bodies, health, and parenting to continue culture and tradition.

By the late nineteenth century, an observable change in spiritual beliefs and practice is evident due to shifting regulations and ideologies on women's health and spirituality. The changing relationship between conjure and Christianity was shifting with pressure and influence. Fraser observed that the symbolic changes surrounding childbirth were primarily understood as necessary to progress, "if progress and inclusion were associated with scientific knowledge and medicalization, then previously held perceptions of health, illness and treatment had to be dismantled" (1998:118). Fraser concludes that medically managed births were more suitable for younger women as there had been a fundamental change in ideologies, altered so that they no longer responded to traditional techniques and remedies. The result was that traditional knowledge, beliefs and customs were no longer transmissible from one generation of women to another. This changing notion of the body reflects the religious and spiritual changes of the time. Fraser further explains:

Just as the community had changed and become more modern, so, too, had the bodies, minds, and sensibilities of the younger generation for whom older medical rituals, treatments, and forms of knowing have no power to influence, heal, or inform (1998:168).

The convergence of beliefs that commonly occurred between African American conjure or magic tradition and Christianity continued well into the early twentieth century, but the symbolic meaning and uses changed. How and why these changes took place are essential questions that this study aims to explore. During the early twentieth century, wellness spirituality shifted emphasis from magic and conjure tradition to Christian beliefs, including God and prayer. These shifts are evident in oral history and interviews of post-regulation African American midwives:

Lula Rousseau learned much about herbs, charms and birthing under her mother's instruction. The maternal lineage of healing abilities merged with special birth signs and the sense of divine calling to form the foundations for her legitimacy as a healer (2002:53).

While the African American midwife had emphasized her practice as a spiritual calling, the new rules, and regulations imposed after 1921 focused on the "secular and ultimately medical nature" of a midwife's practice.²⁴ Midwives remained bodies connected to the supernatural, but the source of that power shifted to Christianity. This connection was their motherwit, "a blend of God-given wisdom, common sense and the instruction of older women"²⁵ (Fett 2002:196). This shared system of intuitive knowledge and common sense was essential for a midwife's practice. Whether they inherited their skills in a direct line of descent from female kin or were the first in their families to practice, twentieth century African American midwives envisioned themselves as "simply the vessels that God had deigned worthy to fill with a practical and spiritual knowledge about women's bodies and childbirth" (Fraser 1998:191).

How can archaeologists test for and identify such a shift in spiritual practice and belief? Laurie Wilkie's *Archaeology of Mothering* (2003) explores these shifts in African American midwifery practice through the life of Lucrecia Perryman of Alabama. Wilkie's research offers insight into the shifting ideologies and practices during the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century before midwife regulations by the federal government began. Although excavation was not conducted to test the crossroads or cosmogram model specifically, extensive ethnographic and historical research was conducted for contextual analysis of material culture from the site trash pile/well. The artifact interpretation and life facts reveal how Perryman "juggled traditional ways of understanding the physical and spiritual nature of the maternal body, as well as her attempts to treat her patients with knowledge acquired from the sanitation and hygiene movements of the later nineteenth century" (2013:273). The material culture demonstrates the active negotiations to maintain authority of women's health and wellness even before the supervision, restrictions and licensing of the Shepard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act was imposed. The relationship between magic and Christianity continued through the twentieth century although it changed through time. A similar "calling," modified from slavery days, is also evident in conjurers during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Zora Neale Hurston describes a conversation with a hoodoo doctor from Florida who claimed he was summoned by God to be a healer.²⁶ This differed from the authority understood of conjurers, healers and midwives during enslavement which drew their power and position for their connection to the ancestral world.

By exploring her identity as a Christian and midwife, Ella Davis could answer many questions about the changes to spirituality and ritual in midwifery. This begins by acknowledging and defining the restrictive pressures, oppressions and regulations of the era that

shaped the shared experiences of African American women. The following section will present Ella Davis's story followed by a review in the next chapter of the historical and archeological data of midwife Agnes Wade and the Magnolia plantation. Chapter Four provides evidence of innovation in conjuration practice and offers a comparative approach to understanding for how these practices might have later changed through greater emphasis on Christianity by the early twentieth century. Does Ella Davis represent a deviation, and can this data create new models for testing spirituality at sites of Africa American descent? To understand this fully, Ella Davis's life and identity must be further explored. This study offers a brief biography of her life to begin that discussion but acknowledges that family descendant and community interviews will provide a richer story. It is hoped that future research will allow for this interaction. For now, this story takes shape through the existing oral histories and community archive of the Independence Heights which piece together the census and historical records found. The extensive work by historians and archaeologists on the subject supplement missing data; however, I take no liberty in storytelling at this point to fill in the gaps, and instead focus only on available facts.

Ella Davis and the Independence Heights

The story of Ella Davis begins with her mother. Liddy Washington was born around 1830, enslaved on an unknown plantation in Georgia. She may have lived on a rice plantation in the coastal low country or inland in the cotton crops. Little is known about her life, but she eventually married or partnered becoming Liddy Miller and a mother to six children. Liddy appears to have been sold away or separated from her family and taken to Mississippi where she gives birth to her daughter Ella around 1858. (Figure 3.1) The dehumanizing system of slavery separated mothers from children, and disrupted families. What happened to Liddy's spouse and

other children is unknown, unrecovered from archive. In 1868, Liddy and Ella are listed on a Freedmen's Bureau work contract with Anderson Pickens as owner of the Pickens Plantation in Bienville, Louisiana. Pickens purchased this 319-acre cotton plantation in 1860. Located about 50 miles north of Natchitoches, Bienville was a small undeveloped parish during this time. It had no cities or real established townships and consisted of mostly sprawling cotton and corn farms. After emancipation, the population was less than 11,000 and included about 5000 formerly enslaved African Americans.



Figure 3.1: Photograph of Ella Miller Davis likely around 1915. (Adapted from Diamond Jubilee Booklet, *Town of Heights Collection*. Houston Public Library. The African American Library Gregory School)

Before moving to Bienville, Pickens was a teacher in Rankin City, Mississippi, and married Mary Stewart in 1851. Although the archive offers no specifics, it is possible that Liddy was enslaved by Mary's father Alexander Stewart, and this is what brought her in contact with Pickens. Mary gave birth to three children in Mississippi before moving with her family to Louisiana. Based on the Freedmen's Contract signed eight years later, Liddy and her daughter Ella were also taken to live there. In 1862, with start of the Civil War, Mary Stewart had a fourth child in Bienville where Pickens served as a Captain for the Confederate army. After the

war, the only work contract Pickens signed was with Liddy Miller and her daughter Ella. Based on this information, it is likely Liddy served as midwife or childcare provider for Mary Stewart and Pickens while in Mississippi. When they moved to Louisiana in 1860, Liddy was taken there to continue this care. After the war and emancipation, Pickens and Liddy signed a contract, and she continued to work for the family in the same capacity. However, in 1869, Mary Stewart died during the birth of her fifth child and Liddy and Ella embarked on a new path.

One cannot ignore the circumstances of Ella's birth and the potential that Pickens is her father. This is further supported by the 1870 Federal census where Ella identifies as a *mulatto* while her mother is listed as *black*. Where Liddy was before she was taken to Louisiana with her daughter is unknown. It is possible she was enslaved by Mary's family prior to Mary's marriage to Pickens. It is also possible that Liddy was enslaved by Pickens only after he purchased the plantation. Although these details have not been uncovered, the experience cannot differ much from the experience of so many other enslaved women during the period, as rape, violence and separation from family were common. Narratives written by captive women give accounts of the horrors faced. "No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear" (Jacobs 1861:45).

By 1875, Ella met Charles Davis, a Louisiana native and sharecropper of a local farm in Bienville. Liddy moved in with the newlyweds who by 1890 had welcomed eight children. With a growing family and little economic or educational opportunity in Bienville, the couple decided to migrate to Texas in 1895. During this time, many African Americans from Louisiana were moving to Texas for better paying jobs, higher education, and safer communities. (Pruitt 2008) The Davis family settled on a farm in Fort Bend County and welcomed two more children. It was

hoped that a farmstead in Texas would offer a life of economic prosperity and safety. However, crop prices were low and racial violence was abundant in the rural community, persuading the Davis family to move into an urban city with more resources. Before their move to Houston, Ella suffered the loss of four children. While grieving she would suffer yet again with the death of her mother, Liddy.

Charles and Ella bought their property in 1912 located in the Independence Heights community of Houston. Three of their now grown children would also purchase property in the community, including their daughter Ruby and her husband Robert Cloud. It is this period that the historical archive offers more details on the life and experiences of the family. Oral history and church archive indicated that Ella Davis was a leader and founder of New Hope Missionary Baptist church by 1912, suggesting that the family quickly established itself within the community after moving. (Figure 3.1) Church history states:

In 1912, a group of Christians in the community felt the need to extend the Kingdom of God in this area. They met in the home of Sis. Ella Davis to organize the first Baptist church in this area. They chose the name of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church...The first meeting place of the church was the Davis home. After a few months a tent was pitched next door to the Davis home. This served as the meeting place of worship until the tent was destroyed. Not discouraged the small group gathered dried senna bean stalks and built a brush arbor on the corner of 38th and Houston Avenue to continue worship services (Diamond Jubilee 1987).

Residents of Independence Heights voted to incorporate in 1915, becoming the first Black municipality in Texas. At this time the community was just a few dozen families but had

already established Susie Booker's Kindergarten and the Independence Heights School. Christianity was an important part of community life with seven churches organized by 1920. In 1919, Greater New Hope Missionary Baptist Church was constructed on North Main Street. Ella and her family were important leaders of the community. The Houston City Directories during this period list Ruby Cloud, Ella's daughter, as a nurse, which was often a term interchangeable for midwife during this time. (Wilkie 2004) Her son-in-law Robert Cloud was the Independence Heights Street Commissioner, and her son Dallas owned a local well repair business. Ella established friendships with her neighbors, the city's first mayor George Burgess and his wife Desdmona and educators Oliphant and Ella Hubbard. Oliphant Hubbard would later become Mayor of Independence Heights in 1919. Olen P. Dewalt, the president of the NAACP Houston Chapter, and operator of the Black owned Lincoln Theater was also a close neighbor.



Figure 3.2: Greater New Hope Missionary Baptist Church congregation, 1919. (*Town of Independent Heights Collection*. Houston Public Library. The African American Library Gregory

The city offered opportunity for entrepreneurship for both men and women. By the time the 19th Amendment allowed women to vote in 1920, the Independence Heights already had many women owned businesses. Ella Brown's bakery and restaurant on 33rd street, Lorena

Cook's cafe on 31st Street, Susie Booker's kindergarten on 33rd Street, Clarinda Brown's restaurant on 31st Street and Maud Knox's music school are a few listed in the local *Informer* newspaper. Women's clubs and church groups were formed to promote the welfare of the community giving women authority over economic and political issues. The Independence Heights organized a Mother's Social Welfare Club and the Ladies Progressive Club which met weekly.²⁷ These organizations promoted community education, civil rights and the ratification of the 19th amendment allowing women to vote. During this period, the Independence Heights grew to 715 residents and over 200 homes were built. Additionally, Houston's population continued to grow due to the industrial economy and reached around 138,500 by 1920.²⁸ The majority of Houston's Black families lived in Fourth, Fifth and Third Ward. However, during this time communities outside of the city including Independence Heights, Sunnyside and Acres Homes saw growth from both Black and European immigrant families (Steptoe 2016).

It's not until 1920 that Ella Davis is listed as a midwife on Federal Census; however a birth certificate from 1918 lists her as attending midwife. She likely apprenticed many years with her mother Liddy. Along with Ella's daughter Ruby listed as a nurse, this data offers evidence of three generations of women as caregivers, nurses, and midwives. This role was often lineal, passed down through generations of women linking communities and passing along important cultural continuities. A midwife had many roles in the community aside from births. Several of these community roles were established during the time of slavery. Midwives were often curers or healers and promoted ancestral bonds and wellness. They were the female authority of the women's wellness, nurturing and establishing Black womanhood through shared cultural heritage and stability. (Luke 2018) Through this "motherwork" and her leadership in the

church, Ella Davis would have held an essential role in her community as a transmitter of history, spirituality, and culture.

However, Houston was experiencing many healthcare reforms during this time. In 1915, African American physician, Dr. Henry E. Law campaigned to teachers, ministers, and community leaders to educate Black Houstonians on preserving their health and family. In 1919, the Union Hospital was founded in Fourth Ward as a six-bed facility for African Americans. Before this, Houston hospitals only employed white physicians, and many refused to admit Black patients. By 1923, services moved to a larger building, the Union Jeremiah Hospital. During this time, the Sheppard-Toner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act (1921-1929) mandated that midwives be trained in hygiene and practice by public nurses. Some Black women moved hospitals births; however, the 1924 State Bureau of Child Hygiene reported around 4000 midwives were registered and working in Texas. The Houston Negro Hospital opened in 1927, and a few years later the Houston Negro Hospital School of Nursing was founded. (Clark Hine 1996)

Ella lived through many changes over this period. Her midwifery practice would become regulated and altered as she mediated between traditional and new techniques. Her husband Charles, after forty-five years of marriage passed away in 1921. Independence Heights, the city she helped to found, would be annexed into Houston in 1928, altering the social and political structure of the community. Ella continued living in the Independence Heights, serving the community as midwife until her death in 1939. Greater New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, a congregation founded by Ella and her neighbors in 1912, continued to grow and prosper serving the descendants of the community founders still today.

This narrative provides context to better recognize the individual and collective experiences which shaped Ella Davis's midwifery practice. She was influenced by her mother and rural life in Louisiana, but later identified with an urban progressive Christian community. Two distinct perspectives of the Black experience, although nuanced, existed between rural and the urban class, and included a duality for Black women who represented both.²⁹ How might Ella's story and experiences represent midwives shaped by reform, social movements and changing ideologies in large cities? Archaeology would reveal more insight into her midwifery practices and possibly answer some of these lingering questions. Did she utilize conjuration and magic ritual, and if so, how did she innovate or modify these practices to meet the specific needs of new generations in the Independence Heights? How did her identity as a Christian living in a progressive African American community shape these negotiations and innovations? This thesis argues that the testing of the crossroads model could answer some of these questions. The following chapter will present how the testing of such a model did in fact identify observable changes in spiritual behavior as evident from the Agnes Wade homesite on Magnolia Planation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Method, Data & Analysis

You tell them what you want them to know, and what you don't want them to know, don't tell them. You got to use common sense here, because we got a long ways, like a long ways, still to go.

— Margaret Charles Smith, *Listen to Me Good*, 1996

Kenneth Brown's excavations at the Levi Jordan Plantation in Brazoria County, Texas, revealed the spiritual practices and beliefs of the community. By testing the Bakongo cosmogram model, Brown uncovered similar deposits beneath sites located on Frogmore Plantation in South Carolina, the Richmond Hill Plantation in Georgia, and the Magnolia Plantation in Louisiana. Three of these sites, Frogmore, Jordan and Magnolia, uncovered cosmogram deposits utilized by conjures, curers or midwives. This testing produced similar artifact contexts but revealed observable differences and changes in symbolic meaning within different spaces. Occupied at a later period, the archaeological data from the Agnes Wade homesite at Magnolia discloses observable changes in spiritual health and wellness practices through time when compared to the other sites tested by Brown. Agnes's innovations to this ritual practice may be representative of the sociopolitical context of the period and altered for gender specific functions. Fennel (2007) explains that over time people may take components of core symbols and create derived symbols that further develop to function as a summarizing symbol for a different identity and shared meaning system in later social groups in a process of entheogenic bricolage. Fennell further explains:

Ethnogenic bricolage entails a creative process in which individuals raised in different cultures interact in new settings, often at the geographic crossroads of multiple diasporas.

In these new locations, individuals tend to desist from displaying emblematic expressions of the core symbols of the former groups from which they were abducted or compelled to part. Yet, instrumental expressions of those same core symbols continue with vigor and are employed in private, individual spaces as part of invocations for healing, self-protections and prayers for the vitality of loved ones (2007:9).

With this framework, Brown's research redefines the Bakongo cosmogram into a broader concept of the crossroads.¹ Additionally, further modifications or innovations were observed in the crossroads ritual deposits uncovered within plantation church or praise houses, revealing a new pattern associated with private or public spaces. Brown further explains:

The case of the use of the crossroads of the cosmogram and the alteration of the meanings assigned to the cardinal directions, as appears in the meanings of the crossroads features beneath curer/midwife/conjurer cabins and churches/praise houses represents an example of the process defined by Fennell. Importantly, this example also demonstrates the evolution of African American cultural systems, particularly as Christianity and its associated beliefs became increasingly important addition to the spiritual lives of African Americans (2017:192).

Unfortunately, much of what we would like to know about enslaved women will never be known because "they masked their thoughts and personalities in order to protect valued parts of their lives from white and male invasion" (Gray White 1985:24). For this reason, inference and analogy are necessary. This thesis utilizes historical, ethnographical and archaeological data on African American midwife Agnes Wade for inquiry into the changing midwifery practice of the period. The archaeological data from Magnolia reveals a shift or innovation in ritual related

wellness practices after emancipation into the early twentieth century (1870 to 1920s) when compared to Frogmore (1780 to 1870) and Jordan (1848 to 1880s) conjure sites. This allows for a closer look at how midwives innovated conjuration practices as compared to other conjure practitioners over time. This data can be utilized in study of other African American midwives, like Ella Davis to determine similarities and differences in experiences and practice, contributing to a broader understanding of the historical transformations of African American spirituality and wellness during and beyond the period of enslavement. The application of this model in archaeology with a Black Feminist inspired framework allows for the study of adaptive processes to identify the continuum in modes of expressions of African American spirituality across time and space.

Agnes Wade and Ella Davis were both born during captivity in Mississippi, and both lived in neighboring parishes in Louisiana during and after enslavement. Additionally, both were mothers, married with children and later in life acted as midwives within their communities. However, the life differences between these women are also essential to the study. (Appendix A) Agnes was 30-35 years older than Ella, serving as a midwife from at least 1870 to 1920 on a rural plantation. Whereas Ella's midwifery was primarily practice from 1912 to 1939 in a progressive urban environment impacted by health regulation. This difference allows for a generational period of cultural change to be evaluated during pre and post-regulation periods. Additionally, both women were mothers living in and raising their children within a Christian landscape. Despite their differences, both Agnes and Ella had similar sociohistorical experiences due to their position as Black women. Even without archeological data from the Ella Davis site, inferences from the available data can be made to answer and ask essential questions to understanding how her identity as a Christina shaped her midwifery practice.

Agnes Wade and Magnolia Plantation

A brief background of Magnolia Plantation provides insight into the experiences of the enslaved and later tenant farming community. As the Magnolia Plantation, the lands were occupied by enslaved men, women and children beginning during the 1830s and later by their descendants well into the 1960s, offering a great opportunity for the study of development and change in culture across time. There is existing historical and ethnographic work on the Cane River area, providing some detail into life on the plantation. (Lee & Teal 2015; Crespi 2004)

The Magnolia Plantation was established around 1840, but its history begins in the 1750s when French soldier Jean Baptist Lecomte developed a cotton plantation near Natchitoches, Louisiana. Lecomte died in 1825, but the land share continued to grow as his great grandson Ambroise (II) continued land purchases. In 1835, Ambroise (II) purchased 960 acres near the Cane River, which would eventually become the Magnolia Plantation.² By 1845, his holdings included two predominant cotton plantations across the river from one another (Shallow Lake and Magnolia) and other lands within the town of Natchitoches. Around this time, the construction of the 24 brick cabins for the slave quarters on Magnolia began. During enslavement, each cabin housed two families. Each cabin was constructed with two rooms divided by an interior wall with a fireplace, having dirt interior floors and a shared covered porch area. When Ambroise's daughter, Atala Lecomte married Mathieu Hertzog in 1852, Ambroise retired and gave the couple 40% interest in Magnolia. By 1860, the two plantations reported a combined 235 enslaved men, women, and children.³ In 1864, Federal troops burned down the Magnolia Main house. After the Civil War, many newly freed men, women, and families remained on the plantation as sharecroppers and tenant farmers.

During the 1870s, the landscape and community of the quarters began to change. During this period, Agnes Wade first appears on census records and archive. The Hertzogs began to construct and lease cabins along the riverside of Magnolia Plantation and established a general store. The new cabins were part of the new labor relationships located on small tracts of land that tenants and sharecroppers contracted to farm. They paid for the lease with the crops raised that were generally sold to the Hertzogs. Additionally, day laborers were also hired for domestic work and stable work. According to interviewed sources, the brick cabins of the quarters became residences for these day laborers while the sharecroppers and tenants occupied the houses located along the river.⁴ Mathieu Hertzog and his wife died by 1903, leaving Magnolia to their son Ambroise Hertzog (II). He ran the plantation until 1921 when he died, and his son Matthew Hertzog (II) inherited the property. New ownership would bring more changes to the quarters, including converting the two-family houses into single family homes. Some of the cabins changed from residential to community use structures including a schoolhouse for the children living on Magnolia during the 1920s. By this period, the occupants of the community had created a “personalized” community landscape (Brown 2017:10) evident by how each family had modified their cabins and associated yard space making each of them somewhat different despite the almost identical architecture of each. However, this personalization of individual spaces did not disrupt the unified community landscape for those living there.

Religion at Magnolia varied. The Lecomte-Hertzog families were Catholic. In 1910 they had a chapel built in the main house for family use. Catholic events and practices were represented on the plantation. These activities included holiday celebrations and mass services by priests, statues of saints in the fields, and gifting of miraculous medals from the Lecomte-Hertzog family.⁵ The Black community of Magnolia also established a congregation holding

services in a cabin within the quarters (Crespi 2004:57). St. James AME Church was later constructed around 1910 on the property. Some community members also attended St. Andrew Missionary Baptist church (established 1875) across the river. St. James did not have a cemetery; so, members were buried at St. Andrews, creating a relationship between the congregations.

Another religious system was mentioned by informants that recalled someone in the quarters “may” have been an expert with Hoodoo, although the possibility was not fully explored by the researcher. “We learned that someone in the quarters may have been expert with hoodoo, the techniques such as cutting cards, associated with soothsaying or fortune telling, and people mentioned a knowledgeable Upper Can River woman who might have ministered to Magnolia people in the quarters” (Crespi 2004:66). A second ethnography conducted some years later (2015) provides further evidence of conjure tradition in region. “My grandmother was an herbalist and a midwife. Some people looked upon her as a Voodoo lady,” recalls Shirley Small-Rougeau of Natchitoches Parish⁶ (Interviewed August 27, 2015:461). Although Shirley did not live on Magnolia plantation, her oral history is essential for understanding the spirituality associated with wellness and healing in the parish community. She continues:

She knew every herbal healing product or ointment whether it was sassafras or sandalwood. Whatever grew naturally in the environment, my grandmother knew about it. She would mix up her potions and this was the healing side, but I also knew that almost everyone that grew up in my time believed in Voodoo (2015:461).

Ethnography confirms Magnolia Plantation had a midwife living in the quarters through the early 1920s. Pregnant women on the plantation were cared for by the plantation midwife who “shared the cook’s home for some time” (Crespi 2004:40). The cook during this period was

Martha Littleton, daughter of Agnes Wade. Agnes was born in Mississippi around 1825. Not much is known of her life or how she came to Louisiana to live on the Magnolia Plantation. Reviewing the census reports for the next 50 years provides clues into her life. On the 1870 Federal Census report, Agnes is as a widower living with six children on the Magnolia Plantation. Her third eldest daughter Adeline was born around 1843 in Mississippi, while her youngest daughter Martha was born around 1864 in Louisiana. This information suggests that Agnes birthed at least seven children during her enslavement and at some point travelled with most of those children from Mississippi to Louisiana by 1864. There is no record of Agnes on slave schedules for the Lecomte-Hertzogs so it remains uncertain if she came to live at Magnolia as a freedwoman or if she had been a previous captive on the plantation.

Agnes is not located again in census reports until 1900. By this time census reports added columns detailing births and children lost. Agnes reports seven children with only four remaining alive. By this time, her daughters Adeline and Martha had both married with children remaining at Magnolia. Martha Littleton becomes the cook for the Hertzog family by 1910. By 1920, Agnes is listed as 103 years old. A photograph of Agnes captions, “Aunt Agnes on Magnolia, died November 9, 1922.”⁷ A second photograph provides some clues to identifying which cabin was her home and insight into her vocation and spirituality.⁸

The photograph shows a diamond shaped object or picture frame hanging on the exterior of the west wall of the south room of the cabin. (Figure 4.1) Brown’s research has identified the diamond shape as an alternate form of the crossroads or cross often used in African American quilts and on modified items including coins and buttons (Brown 2015). Further, the diamond is believed to be associated with women and midwifery so “to people familiar with that system it is likely that the picture frame served as a statement about the services one could find,”

symbolizing “at least one of the activities conducted within the cabin, midwifery” (Brown 2017:65; 2017:188). Agnes placed this object on the exterior of her home as an advertisement for her services. This combined historical and ethnographic data provides strong evidence that Agnes Wade occupied Cabin #1, and was the midwife for Magnolia from at least 1870 to her death in 1922.



Figure 4.1: The 1922 photograph of Agnes Wade standing in front of Cabin #1, with the red arrow pointing at the diamond shaped object hanging on exterior west wall of the southern room (Adapted from the Cammie Henry Collection, Northwestern State University).

Archaeological Data and Analysis

Three archaeological investigations of the Magnolia Quarters were conducted prior to the beginning of Brown’s research. This includes limited investigations beneath cabins #1, 2, 3 and 7. These investigations provided a baseline data set that included the mapping of artifact frequencies across the site; the location of any large subsurface features; along with an understanding of the integrity of the site’s deposits and stratigraphy (Brown 2017:14). Significantly, the earlier excavations of Cabin #1 along with restoration work completed in 1999 within this cabin disrupted the presence and *in situ*, or original placement, of some artifacts. This also includes looting of the western and northern deposit in Cabin #1. Brown’s investigations at

Magnolia began in 2005 and concluded in 2012. The following data analysis will primarily focus on Cabin #1, the midwife's cabin in comparison to the conjure practitioner cabins located at the Frogmore and Jordan plantations.

Excavations around and beneath Cabin #1 were conducted during five of these eight field seasons. The work and research during this time had specific goals for testing the crossroad model for part of Brown's larger comparative project. The prior excavations by others into Cabin #1 did not recover signs of crossroads deposits but Brown explains the previous investigations did not appear to have been extensive enough across the floor space of the south room where the other deposits associated with the ritual sanctification of space should have been placed. Simply put, they didn't look in the right places. Based on Brown's working model tested at the other sites, deposits associated with the ritual sanctification of space would have been placed in a cardinal direction. Furthermore, the disruption by restoration to the floor and hearth and looting in Cabin #1 further distorted the full possibilities of recovered material culture for a northern deposit

The Bakongo Cosmogram is defined by the symbolism of directionality employed through ritual for protection of sacred spaces and person within those spaces. Moving counterclockwise as a circle of life, or rising and setting of the sun, the north signifies power within the living world, the west represents transmission to death, the south represents the world of spirits, dead and ancestors and the east signifies protection, birth and transition to world of the living. (Figure 4.2) The crossroads or fork in the road "can allude to this crucially important symbol of passage and communication between worlds" (Thompson 1938:109). The horizontal line is associated with water as the dividing force between the two mirrored worlds. By applying

this model archaeologically, excavations in the southern room of Cabin #1 revealed deposits buried within this directional pattern.

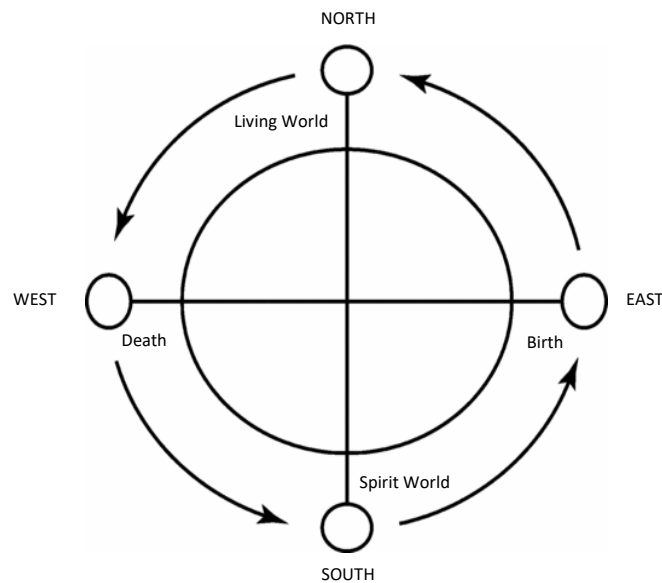


Figure 4.2: A drawing representing the BaKongo Cosmogram (Adapted from Brown 2017:191).

In Cabin #1, the western deposit assemblage was unfortunately disrupted by previous excavations and looting. However, Brown recovered several chicken bones, some intentionally polished, and four metal rods although not *in situ*, but squared around the original feature. The shape formed by the metal bars is like the diamond shape associated with midwifery and crossroads symbolism and might have indicated protection from evil or death (Brown 2015). Similarly, at Frogmore a fully articulated chicken was buried in the western direction and at Jordan a Yoruba *amula* was uncovered from the conjurer cabins. Both deposits have also been interpreted as protective measures for the community. The western deposit in Agnes's cabin illustrates protection but reveals innovation because it is gender specific to women or to the vocation of midwifery.

The eastern deposit of Cabin #1 included a shell and a brass locket. Shells are significant within these contexts for symbolizing the sea of transition.⁹ The locket featured a carved symbol on both sides resembling a *gris-gris* symbol or amulet employed in conjuration practices. (Figure 4.3) More specifically, this carving “bears a striking resemblance to a gris-gris symbol employed by Marie Laveau”¹⁰ (Brown 2017:188). Laveau a famous Hoodoo priestess in Louisiana during the early to mid-nineteenth century, employed this symbol in her practice on the manufacture of objects used in an attempt to gain control of one’s life.¹¹ It is unlikely the locket is in anyway associated directly with Laveau given the time span; however, the similarity between the designs within the archaeological context of placement beneath Cabin #1 deserves attention (Brown 2007). The designs carved into both sides originate out of circular discs that form the center of the design placed on the exterior surfaces of the locket when it was manufactured. The carved alterations radiate out from the center in cardinal directions to define a crossroads symbol.

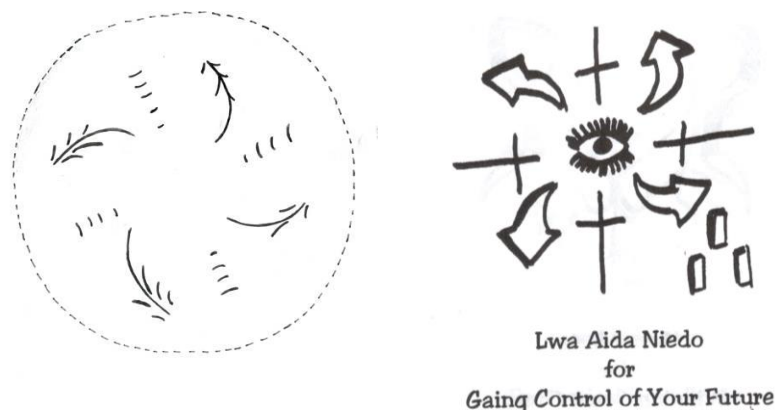


Figure 4.3: The sketch on the left illustrates the carving on one side of the locket. The drawing on the right is a *gris-gris* symbol employed by Marie Laveau (Adapted from Brown 2007:48).

This deposit deviates in meaning from the Jordan and Frogmore plantations where elements from conjure kits were found buried. These conjure kit materials used in the crossroads

ritual likely served as protection for the community during the period of slavery, when health and wellness was embodied as a larger community issue.¹² The eastern deposit uncovered in Cabin #1 at Magnolia reveals a different function better understood in the sociopolitical context of the period after emancipation. The locket was employed in the crossroads ritual during a time when African American women were gaining autonomy over healthcare and mothering. The possible gris-gris symbol carving depicting an attempt to gain or take control of one's life employed by a midwife is significant as a gender specific ritual. The locket and shell uncovered in Agnes's cabin could reveal a spirituality shaped by the shifting ideologies of wellness and gender during the late nineteenth century.

The southern deposit of Cabin #1 included green glass sherds, a broken blue glass bead, ash and charcoal, and a human deciduous incisor tooth from a child. Although green glass, ash and charcoal were found within other southern deposits of tested sites, the presence of a baby or young child's tooth may be very significant, especially when buried by a midwife. Observed in African Diaspora ethnographies, teeth held magical significance. Rituals to signify rites of passage when deciduous teeth fell out were performed. The tooth was thrown onto or over the rooftop of the mother's house, or over a shoulder to bring good luck.¹³ It is possible the tooth symbolized good luck in the delivery of babies in the midwifery practice. Or possibly the deposit represented protection for children that had died and transitioned to the ancestral world.

African American rituals for protecting a child at birth and after involved rooting the child to this world. Wilkie explains that names were often not given until nine days after birth to prevent malevolent spirits from locating the baby as the baby's spirit moved from the ancestral world to this one (2013:277). The belief was that a baby's spirit "was not necessarily wedded to staying rooted in a physical form and needs to be enticed to stay" (Wilkie 2013:277). The

southern deposit with the deciduous tooth could then be a protective charm to keep spirits from harming newborns until they were rooted. Although we cannot know the exact reason, it is possible Agnes innovated the ritual for the function of protecting or bringing good luck to children she birthed. This significantly differs from the southern deposits uncovered at the conjure practitioner sites from Frogmore and Jordan. Those southern deposits include ash, burned sand, shell, and burned metal, consistence with the cosmogram southern representation of death or ancestral world. Combined the three deposits of Cabin #1 begin to distinguish a cardinal direction crossroads deposit which differ from the crossroads deposit at Frogmore and Jordan.

(Figure 4.4)

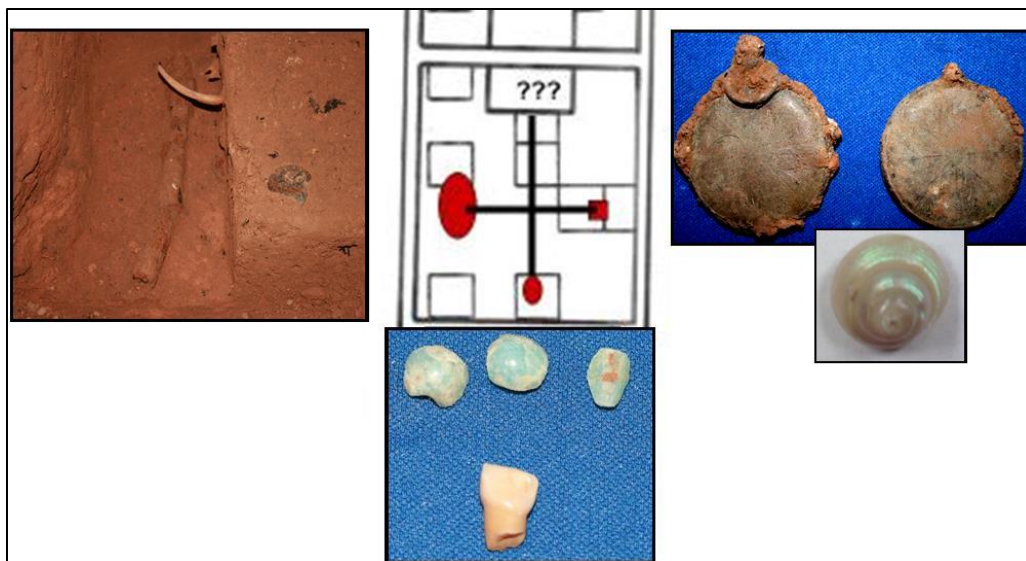


Figure 4.4: The three crossroads deposits discovered beneath the southern room of Cabin #1
(Adapted from Brown 2017:191).

Additionally, two catholic Miraculous Medals were excavated from the northern room of Cabin #1. Both sides of one of the medals had been altered. Brown suggests that the alterations have similar elements found in conjuration practices. These alterations include changes to the

halo and facial features of the Virgin Mary, possibly to make her form more like Hoodoo/Voodoo goddesses. As Huston explains, “while Mary is viewed as the mother of the Church, and praised for her abstinence, Erzulie is the ideal of the love bed...is worshipped for her perfection in giving herself to mortal men”¹⁴ (Hurstons, 1990:121). These Medals were not included as part of the crossroads directionality ritual, but represent the conflicting yet symbiotic relationship between Christianity and magic

Excavations into Cabin #4 revealed additional evidence of conjuration. This space has been identified as the possible location of the plantation church or praise house before St. James AME was constructed in 1910. Important to this thesis, this data represents the shared beliefs within the community and provides evidence for the relation of conjuration practices and Christianity during the period. The western deposit uncovered two bricks buried with traces of white plaster, ash, burned nails and flat mirrored glass. The eastern deposit included two closely placed deposits. The first was a quartz crystal and chicken eggshell. The second was a metal shoe buckle with two unaltered Miraculous Medals placed on either side. Brown explains the shape of the buckle resembles “the distinct shape of the intersecting lines within a circular or oval field that has been interpreted as emblematic of the BaKongo Cosmogram” (2017:142).

The southern deposit featured a small brass rosary box surrounded by four metal spoons which radiant outward in the four cardinal directions. This box had been buried on top of a crucifix which was placed face down. The soil under the crucifix included eggshell and a thin layer of white plaster. The white color found in these deposits is significant because white is associated with death in some West African cultures. The south and west directions of the crossroads symbolized the transition to death and the ancestral world. Importantly, “the western and southern crossroads deposits identified in Christian religious settings in quarters

communities elsewhere in the southern United States are also associated with off-white soil matrix” (Brown 2017:144). This suggests that a similar alterations and changes existed within Christian churches or praise houses on plantations. Excavation in the northern room of Cabin #4 revealed another altered Miraculous Medal. This medal had four holes placed around the circumference in a crossroads or cross pattern, with lines connecting the dots, intersecting the Virgin Mary. The fact that the northern feature was not uncovered in Cabin #4 does not dismiss one from existing. A hearth was located at the northern part of each southern cabin room. It is possible a home altar or shrine was used on the hearth representing the northern feature.

Brown argues the presence of an altar is supported by the Catholic cultural landscape in which the inhabitants of the cabin would have been living. Conjuración practices often “took on characteristics of the prevailing religious practices of its immediate vicinity” (Brown 2015:172). Practices in Louisiana specifically “made use of the altar, the candles, the incense, the holy water, and blessed oil of the Catholic church” (Hurst 1931:318). The use of Catholic iconography for magical purposes has also been observed in the Baptist church and other forms of Christianity.¹⁵ Ethnography for the Cane River area informs that these alters continue as household features among the Creole Christian population still today.

Additionally important is the spiritual evidence found throughout the landscape of the plantation quarters. A shell of the same type as found in cabin #1 was uncovered in Cabin #3 only this shell had a carved “X” symbol on it. Other deposits of ritual nature along with symbolic markings were found in the Blacksmith shop on the forge, walls, and door. The Blacksmith held a vital community role like the midwife or preacher. As Brown explains “Considering the various functions of the blacksmith on the plantation as spiritual leader, provider, and liminal

figure, it is not a great leap to suggest that these symbolic concepts might have been intended to encompass the Quarters community, not simply the blacksmith and the shop” (2017:163).

Even with possible missing artifacts due to previous excavations, and the inability to recover a northern deposit, the remaining material culture in Cabin #1 strongly suggests Agnes Wade was a midwife who utilized both Christian and conjuration practices in her vocation within a community who shared similar beliefs and practices. The deposits uncovered in Cabin #4 and symbolism within the blacksmith shop help to define a fuller story of the spiritual landscape within the plantation. The presence of these deposits and symbols reveal the nature and “symbolic importance of directionality in the actions and decisions made by the residents” and reflect a modified and adapted spirituality (Brown 2017:194).

Evidence of the crossroads found throughout the landscape of Magnolia indicates a widely used belief system. Brown’s comparative analysis emphasizes the changing meaning of these deposits within the private and public spheres associated with conjure sites and plantation churches/praise houses because “those who deposited them employed slightly different objects to materialize their intended meanings” (Brown 2017:194). Brown identifies two distinct patterns related to the intended activities conducted at the sites which differs from the original cosmogram meaning, indicating change. (Appendix B) The church or praise house ritual deposits reveal power or protection for the community, with specific Christian or church emphasis on the traditional phases, instead of healing or social control functions found within private conjure practitioner sites. Additionally, this data further supports that conjuration practices were utilized in Christian churches during the early to mid-twentieth century.

Essential to this thesis is the analysis of deposits uncovered from the conjurer, curer or midwife cabins revealing shifts specific to healing and wellness across time and space. These

sites at Frogmore and Jordan were no longer occupied after 1880s allowing for a comparison to Magnolia's early twentieth century practice. The crossroads deposits uncovered in Cabin #1, the home of Agnes Wade, also indicate gender or vocation related innovation in symbolic meaning and function compared to those found at the other conjure practitioner sites that are not specific to the vocation of midwifery. (Table 4.1) This provides evidence for innovation in spirituality specific to African American midwifery during the later nineteenth to early twentieth century, and a third possible model for the crossroads ritual. These observable differences can be useful models for testing other sites to identify similarities and continuation of change which could better define the cultural processes through time.

Site	North	East	South	West
Frogmore & Jordan Conjure/Curer's Cabin	World of Living Power & Healing	Protection Community health	Protection and Spiritual Power	Protection from others
Magnolia Midwife's Cabin	Deposit not found	Taking Control of one's life & future	Protection or Luck specific to children and mothers	Protection or power gender specific

Table 4.1: Shifts in ritual meaning observed from deposits found beneath conjure/curer/midwife Cabins (Adapted from Brown 2017:194).

Agnes Wade was a midwife on a rural plantation before federal and state health regulation interfered with midwifery. However, ethnography states a doctor and nurse visited the planation to administer shots to children, evaluate newborns and officiate birth certificates (Crespi 2004). This would have created direct interference or surveillance to her practice by others, although not as severe as midwives faced in urban settings. Additionally, the Lecomte-

Hertzog religious and daily interference in the quarters during enslavement and after would have shaped community beliefs and ideologies. The alterations to the Miraculous Medals indicate modification and resistance by Agnes and other community members to this outside interference. Agnes is evidence that not all early twentieth century midwives limited revelations to a Christian God alone. She also relied on “spiritual empowerment from past generations and traditions” (Fett 2002:54). However, she modified this spirituality to specifically meet the needs of mothers and women in her community. The crossroads ritual employed by Agnes Wade appears to have been utilized explicitly to protect mothers and children during and after birth, signifying the developed of a gender specific ritual.

Although Brown did extensive work to define the landscape of Magnolia, greater understanding of how spirituality, wellness and gender operated within this space has not been fully analyzed. The deposits confirm a pattern of spirituality and provide observable changes shaped by Christianity and changing sociopolitical context, but there are still many factors unexplored. What else could be telling about Agnes from the material culture recovered at Magnolia? Wilkie (1997) argues the spiritual and magical beliefs studied archaeologically are within the context of family and households, and therefore must be contextualized within these settings. How could toys, ceramics and other household items be tools for understanding midwives from the situation of motherhood? A future analysis of homespace and households would offer this further insight.

Conclusion

This thesis develops some context for understanding the sociopolitical environment that shaped experiences within African American communities. During enslavement the African American model of body and community significantly diverged from the scientific and racial

constructions of the time. Later, the shifting authority from a supernatural wellness shaped the unity of spirit and body (Fraser 1998). Fraser observes these changes and impacts generationally:

Just as slavery had shaped perspectives of womanhood, the body and labor, emancipation and Scientific obstetrics in late nineteenth century to early twentieth century changed cosmologies of the body, cultural perspectives of pregnancy and birthing idea that fetus was a separate entity with separate morality and personhood (1998:229).

This perspective altered the spiritual and physical nature of birthing. Fraser states this is supported by the decreasing periods of spiritual and physical healing of new mothers and baby, because the symbolic and ritual aspect of this activity changed in newer generations of women. Additionally, Wilkie explains:

European beliefs were not as much concerned with rooting the child to the body, as with prescribing that the mother must avoid so as not to harm the body or mind of the child. ...A child's temperament was formed in the womb, whereas the African American view was that the child's spirit came to the infant fully formed (2013:278).

The dualistic nature of wellness embodied with community and ancestors during enslavement was different with relation of embodied self to God. New autonomy for women and the changing ideologies of womanhood and motherhood forced differences in midwifery. Wilkie states the "competing mothering ideologies and controlling images of black womanhood" after slavery led to newer forms of resistance altering spirituality (2003:74). This process is evident in the innovations Agnes Wade made to the crossroads ritual which emphasized a gender specific function of protection and power. Additionally, new forms of resistance practiced by new

generations of African American women impacted birthing practices. Christianity and education became tools of resistance to fight oppression and gendered racial stereotypes. Midwives began adapting traditional conjuration practices with new medicine to meet these needs. This “mixed strategy allowed for internally controlled cultural change” by midwives to maintain authority (Wilkie 2003:141). Evidence supports Agnes was innovating shared community beliefs and spirituality to benefit mothers and their children within her practice, likely shaped by the changing gender and health ideologies of the period.

The story of Ella Davis could provide further insight on how midwives controlled and shaped ideologies within their communities. The historical evidence of Ella Davis emphasizes a progressive Christian community in which she held prominent roles. The outcome for testing the crossroads model at the Davis homesite would answer one essential question: Was she practicing magic-medical traditions or not? The presence of a crossroads deposits would help articulate if she was, and provide insight on how she innovated this spirituality to meet the needs and ideologies of her community. Or, the lack of crossroads deposit could signify a distinct change in the behavior of African American midwives providing a launching point for further discovery.

CHAPTER FIVE

Concluding Thoughts

I am not here to write her narrative, but to place her site, her material, her life in the historical memory of as many archaeologists as possible.

— Whitney Battle-Baptiste, *Black Feminist Archaeology*, 2011

Due to the historic context and cultural setting with which they both lived a distinct point of view, one might even argue feminist, is observed in the stories of Agnes Wade and Ella Davis. Although some differences of time and space exist between the stories, they are similar due to their shared experiences as African American midwives, navigating a spiritual, health and gendered authority in a challenging and transitional period in American history. Inseparable from the narratives is the obvious opposition and resistance performed through their vocation. Agnes Wade innovated her ritual practices to benefit women and children specifically at a time when Black birthing and mothering practices were scrutinized. What could this behavior infer about Ella Davis's midwifery practice and spirituality? Ella Davis likely represents the changing relationship between two spiritual perspectives which took place during the early twentieth century. Her role in founding a church is essential to understanding her role as midwife, especially in an era when the Black women's club movement was influencing women's leadership in local churches for providing crucial social services to their communities.¹⁶

The changes in midwifery practice are better documented for the period after regulation throughout the mid twentieth century. What is less known are the details between postbellum and regulation (1870-1920) which catapulted the cultural changes later presented in autobiographies and ethnographic work. Agnes and Ella could possibly be a stepping stone to

uncovering these cultural processes better. Future archaeological investigation at the Ella Davis homesite could provide insight into how her identity as a Christian shaped her midwifery practice, and if this experience is reflective of other midwives during this period. Applying behavioral models, as Brown has tested, provides supporting data for understanding the changes in spirituality and wellness reported in historical documents and ethnography that occurred after regulations. Due to the secret and sacred nature of this behavior, archaeology can help to better define the practice and performance behind these changes.

The legacy of Agnes Wade and Ella Davis can be observed through the narratives and autobiographies from later midwives like Onnie Lee Logan and Margaret Charles Smith who practiced midwifery from 1940s to 1980s. After decades of regulations, midwives during this era adapted to the restrictive supervision and licensing while still maintaining the essence of the vocation they learned from their grandmothers and mothers. However, these narratives reveal a distinct shift in spirituality. Unlike their grandmothers and mothers whose spiritual practice mediated between two worlds negotiating metaphysical and physical treatments, later midwives relied on Christian based spiritual healing. Their motherwit further reinforced Christian ideologies in their vocation. Fraser explains, “midwifery was part of a moral and spiritual set of relationship between God, the midwife and the pregnant woman, the family and community” (1998:174).

Relevance and Implications

The outcomes produced by historical archaeology have significant implications because this work in the United States has always been about heritage associated with the physical reconstruction of American history.¹⁷ Reconstructing the past situates what is remembered and

what is forgotten through time as “heritage and memory are interlinked because the places, discrete locations on the ground, are imbued with social meaning” (Orser, 2010:148). It is imperative that archaeologists apply a critical framework to ensure that memory is not controlled by dominant ideology through social inequality. Instead, memory and the recovery of history should be emphasized through heritage which actively involves descendant groups and communities. This work includes the critical approaches in conducting research and the delivery of those outcomes to the general public which influence collective memory.

Additionally, this research and public education must be viewed within the context of contemporary American race relations to better acknowledge the needs and interests of the groups studied (Franklin 1997). Franklin (1997) argues that archaeology will not be relevant to communities without research that includes social action. This includes combatting current and past stereotypes and inequalities. The research archaeologists pursue must lend to the creation of heritage and memory which better the communities studied. Franklin states “for many, understanding where they came from is the same thing as understanding who they are, and this knowledge is the legacy that they wish to pass on to future generations” (Franklin 1997:41). Archaeologists play an essential role in knowledge production, but this recovery work must be made relevant to descendant groups.

This thesis employs a Black feminist inspired framework as a critical approach to this knowledge production. Archaeology involves developing context on experiences, including inequalities and injustices, that happened in the past. A feminist approach in recovering these historical experiences provides relevance by asking how this recovery contributes to women’s experiences today. A Black feminist inspired approach allows for the development and understanding of a specific standpoint essential for researching African American women in the

past. Additionally, a Black feminist inspired approach allowed for an analytical perspective essential to understanding these innovations by placing emphasis on the experiences of Black womanhood and motherhood during the period. This approach pushes for a definition of relevance and acknowledgment of any implications to the forefront by asking how does research on midwives impact historical stereotypes or accounts of slavery and what are the implications of this research on contemporary communities?

In the 1930s Zora Neal Hurston aimed to “establish authenticity in the representation of popular forms of folk culture” being produced by white society and Black “high society” of the period (Carby 1994:31). Hazel Carby argues that decades later these works became celebrated in the search for Black culture authority due to conflict and trauma within the contemporary context.¹⁸ Twentieth century African American women writers revitalized folk culture through the representation of the midwife “breathing new life” into their legacy (Lee 1996:3). Authors Christa Craven¹⁹ and Mara Glatzel²⁰ further argue African American midwifery narratives can impact contemporary midwifery and cultural ideologies:

The continued emphasis on the narrative of African American midwives within the history of not only midwifery in the United States but also African American culture and life opens up possibilities for important discussions of race and the effects of a legacy of racism that still affects contemporary midwives in their efforts to become legalized and legitimated throughout the United States (2010:341).

This struggle for legitimacy is evident in Fraser’s ethnographic work and interviews with African American midwives in Virginia. Fraser was often met with silence on issues of magic or past traditions which she attributes to a mixture of shame and hope for progress as members of

the community attempted to distance themselves from the racialized stereotypes used to describe their community (1998:23). However, Craven and Glatzel argue, “the twentieth century African American midwife narrative can be positioned to challenge racial injustices in the tradition of critical feminist historical analysis” (2010:331). Furthermore, archaeology can contribute to these efforts by reconstructing representation of cultural performance through material culture. Tiya Miles (2020) argues for analysis which combines artifacts with documents and oral histories because “physical things push us to think differently, sometimes yielding interpretations that cast new light on how we perceive the lived subjectivity, forced subjection, and crafted resistance” of people from the past (2020:206). These combined efforts create an interdisciplinary and holistic approach to interpreting the past.

This thesis aimed to analyze artifacts from the Agnes Wade homesite at Magnolia Plantation to argue an archaeological model could be tested and provide evidence for innovations in spirituality practices within midwifery. This data provides comparatives for likely inferences into the life of Ella Davis to better interpret how her identity as a Christian shaped her midwifery practice. Although no archaeological data was available from the Ella Davis homesite during the scope of this study, I believe the comparative data of Agnes Wade and the historical resources developed in this thesis contributes to any future investigation of Ella Davis.

There is a significant need for further research to be conducted in the Independence Heights community of Houston, Texas, an area aggressively threatened by commercial and residential development. The Independence Heights is a National Register Historical District yet nearly 30% of all contributing structures to this designated district have been demolished in the past few years due to the impact of gentrification.²¹ The development of a public archaeology program in the community could greatly contribute to the Independence Heights Historical

Association's efforts of heritage preservation and education projects. The Ella Davis homesite is just one of many contributing places that enrich the historical narrative of the Independence Heights as the first Black municipality in the State of Texas.

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER ONE

¹ As defined by Laurie Wilkie, *The Archaeology of Mothering: An African-American Midwife's Tale*. (Routledge, 2003) p. 119; and Jenny Luke, *Delivered by midwives: African American midwifery in the twentieth-century south*. (Jackson University Press of Mississippi, 2018) p. 22.

² “Motherwork”, as termed by Patricia Hill Collins (1994) and used in definition and interpretation of nineteenth-century Black midwifery practices by archaeologist Laurie A. Wilkie (2003:119).

³ Yvonne P. Chireau is a professor of religion at Swarthmore College.

⁴ Gertrude Jacinta Fraser is Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of Virginia.

⁵ Wilkie 2003:123.

⁶ Kenneth Brown is a professor of Anthropology at the University of Houston.

⁷ Robert F. Thompson was a professor at Yale University for African Art History beginning 1965, lasting over fifty years until his retirement.

⁸ Leland Ferguson is currently a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina, Columbia.

⁹ Christopher Fennell is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Illinois.

¹⁰ Mark Leone is a professor of anthropology at the University of Maryland, College Park.

¹¹ See Kenneth Brown, “Bakongo Cosmograms, Christian Crosses and None of the Above: Archaeology of African American Spiritual Adaptations into the 1920s”. In *The Materiality of Freedom: Archaeologies of Postemancipation Life*. Edited by Jodi A. Barnes. (209-227) (The University of South Carolina Press, 2011) p. 211.

¹² See Fraser, *African American Midwifery in the South*, Cambridge, (MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1998) p. 55-56 for testimonial by late nineteenth and early twentieth century conjurer practitioners on the topic.

¹³ Onnie Logan, *Motherwit, an Alabama Midwife's Story* (Untreed Reads Publishing, 1989) p.53, as cited by Wilkie 2003:126.

¹⁴ As discussed by Leland Ferguson, “The Cross is a Magic Sign: Marks on Eighteenth Century Bowls from South Carolina” In *I Too am American: Archaeological studies of African American*

Life. Edited by Theresa A. Singleton. (University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 24 cited the work of James Mooney (1890) and Charles Hudson (1976).

¹⁵ Whitney Battle-Baptiste is an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Center at the University.

CHAPTER TWO

¹ Specifically, the approach and definition of feminist archaeology by Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey (1991), Elizabeth Scott (2020), Alison Wylie (2007, 2020), Laurie Wilkie (2003, 2006, 2007) and Black feminist archaeology by Maria Franklin (2001), Whitney Battle-Baptiste (2011), and Ayana Omilade Flewellen (2018).

² As stated by Wilkie and Hayes (2006). Joan Gero and Margaret Conkey's edited collection *Engendering Archaeology: Women in Prehistory* brought concern and critique of gender to the forefront, challenging androcentric interpretations and sexism within the discipline.

³ Founded in 2012 by Justin Dunnivant, Ayana Omilade Flewellen, Jay Haigler, Alexandra Jones, and Cheryl LaRoche.

⁴ Elizabeth M. Scott is a former associate professor of anthropology at Illinois State University.

⁵ Kimberle' Crenshaw is a professor at the UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School.

⁶ The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) argued that both the white feminist movement and the Civil Rights Movement were not addressing their particular needs as Black women regarding gender, race, sexuality, and class.

⁷ Womanism was introduced by Alice Walker in 1979 and defined as the umbrella for which all forms of feminism fall.

⁸ As defined by Sumi Cho, Kimberle' Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall's Cho (2013). *Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis*. *Signs*, 38(4), 785–810.

⁹ The "et cetera" problem is addressed by Sumi Cho, Kimberle' Crenshaw and Leslie McCall's (2013) in a discussion on the limitations of intersectional analysis.

¹⁰ Saidiya V. Hartman is a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University.

¹¹ Ayana Omilade Flewellen is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University.

¹² See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 64-66.

¹³ Specifically, Angela Davis, bell hooks and Toni Morrison's works cited by Battle-Baptiste, "In This Here Place: Interpreting Enslaved Homeplaces". In *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora*. Edited by Akinwumi Ogundiran and Toyin Falola. (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2007) p. 234. Also see Saidiya V. Hartman (1997).

¹⁴ Women of African descent or people of African descent: Terminology as used by Whitney Battle-Baptiste to discuss African American or Black women within African Diaspora or historical context.

¹⁵ P. H. Collins (2000:23) as quoted by Battle-Baptist in *Black Feminist Archaeology*. Routledge. (2001:26).

¹⁶ Hazel Carby is the Charles C. and Dorothea S. Dilley Professor Emeritus of African American Studies and Professor Emeritus of American Studies Yale University and a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts.

¹⁷ See bell hooks "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination", in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Edited by Ruthe Frankenberg (Duke University Press, 1997) for more. Quote from (1997:339).

¹⁸ Elsa Barkley-Brown is a Black Feminist scholar and Associate Professor, The Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

¹⁹ See Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999) p. 6.

²⁰ See Wilkie (2003), *Ideologies of Motherhood* page 56-73.

²¹ As explained by Wilkie (2003), p.56.

²² As defined by Battle-Baptiste (2007) p. 234.

²³ This concern was initially raised by Carol McDavid regarding Critical Race Theory in "Beyond Strategy and Good Intentions: Archaeology, Race and White Privilege" In *Archaeology as a Tool of Civic Engagement*. Edited by Barbara J. Little, Paul A. Shackel. (67-88). (United Kingdom: AltaMira Press, 2007). p. 80.

²⁴ See Valerie Lee's (1996) analysis of literature on the African American midwife, specifically conversation about Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and more in *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-dutched Readings*. (United Kingdom: Routledge, 1996).

²⁵ Valerie Lee (1996:4).

²⁶ Valerie Lee is a Professor Emeritus of African American and African History at Ohio State University.

CHAPTER THREE

¹ Sharla M. Fett is Professor of History at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

² Jenny M. Luke worked as a British-trained nurse-midwife before earning advanced degrees in history from the University of Texas at Arlington.

³ Darlene Clark Hine is a John A. Hannah Distinguished Professor of history at Michigan State University.

⁴ Deborah White Gray is the Board of Governors Professor of History and Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University.

⁵ Tiya Miles is a Professor of History at Harvard University and Radcliffe Alumnae Professor at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

⁶ Specifically WPA Interviews and the autobiographies by Harriet Jacobs (1861), Margaret Charles Smith (1996) and Onnie Lee Logan (1989).

⁷ See Jenny Luke p. 27 in *Delivered by midwives: African American Midwifery in the Twentieth-Century South*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018); Also see Wilkie (2003:142) for more as cited by Luke.

⁸ See Wilkie, "Secret and Sacred: Contextualizing the Artifacts of African-American Magic and Religion". *Historical Archaeology*, 31(4). 81-106 (Springer, 1997) p. 84 for discussion. Also Zora Neale Hurston, "Hoodoo in America". *The Journal of American Folklore*, 44(174), 317-417. 1931.

⁹ Yvonne Chireau, *Black magic: Religion and the African American conjuring tradition*. (University of California Press, 2003) p. 96.

¹⁰ Sharla Fett, *Working cures: Healing, health, and power on southern slave plantations*. (Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 2002) see p.112 for discussion.

¹¹ All sources introduced in this chapter discuss the modes of knowledge transmission for African American midwifery and the concept of a “calling”. See Fett (2002:51-59); Fraser (1998:191); Hurston (1931:320); Wilkie (2003:124-126) for more.

¹² As discussed by Chireau, Yvonne P. “Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic”. *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*. 7(2). pp. 225-246. 1997, cited page 235.

¹³ See Chireau (1997:25) for discussion on conjure and bible, as cited by Hurston, Zora Neale. *Sanctified Church*. Berkeley. 1981. p. 16.

¹⁴ See Kenneth Brown (2011) for more discussion on the crossroads deposits uncovered beneath plantations churches or praise houses.

¹⁵ See Wilkie (2003) Chapter 7 for more details on scientific mothering, specifically p. 180-184 for scientific mothering and the African American community.

¹⁶ See Wilkie (2003) Chapter 7, specifically p.182.

¹⁷ See Wilkie (2003) Chapter 7, specifically p. 183-184.

¹⁸ See Wilkie (2003) Chapter 4, specifically p. 79-86 for more on the topic of domesticity.

¹⁹ See Pruitt, Bernadette. “Beautiful People: Agency, Work and the Great Migration Phenomenon in Houston, Texas, 1900-1941”. *The Historical Society*. 2008, for more on African American Progressive Movements.

²⁰ See Luke (2018:36); Also see Wilkie (2003:25) for more on African American club women.

²¹ See Chireau (2003), Chapter 5 for more on the commercialization of African American folk and magic tradition, and specifically p. 141-149 for more on the exploitation by Black society.

²² See Fett (2002:45) for more discussion on superstition and stereotypes.

²³ See more Angela Davis *Women, Race and Class*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) p. 97 as discussed and cited by Wilkie (2003:57).

²⁴ See Fraser (1998:67), Chapter 3 for more on regulation and surveillance.

²⁵ Quote from Fett (2002:196). For more on “motherwit” also see Frasier (1998:26,200-2002); Luke (2018:13-15); Margaret Charles Smith & Linda Janet Holmes. *Listen to Me Good: The Story of an Alabama Midwife*. (Ohio State University Press, 1996).

²⁶ Hurston (1981) as cited by Chireau (1997:232).

²⁷ *The Houston Informer*, Saturday June 7, 1919 page 5, and July 26, 1919 page 5.

²⁸ Barry Kaplan, 1981. "Race, Income and Ethnicity: Residential Change in a Houston Community, 1920-1970". *Houston History Magazine*. 178-202.

²⁹ See Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. (Oxford University Press, 1987), for more discussion on this topic.

CHAPTER FOUR

¹ See Brown for further explanation, "Retentions, Adaptations and the Need for Social Control within African American Communities across the Southern United States from 1770 to 1930". In *The Archaeology of Slavery: A Comparative Approach to Captivity and Coercion*. Edited by Lydia Wilson Marshall. (Southern Illinois University Press, 2015). (166-191)

² Brown (2017:25). See Brown (2017) Chapter 2 for fuller details on history of Magnolia Plantation.

³ As reported by Brown (2017) in *Historical Archaeology in the Magnolia Plantation's Quarters Community: A Final Report*. Submitted to Southeastern Archaeological Center National Park Service, Tallahassee, Florida. and Benny Keel's (1999) in *A Comprehensive Subsurface Investigations at Magnolia Plantation, 16NA295, Cane River Creole National Historical Park, Natchitoches, Louisiana*. Southeast Archaeological Center, National Park Service, Tallahassee, Florida.

⁴ Muriel Crespi's (2004) ethnography project: *A Brief Ethnography of Magnolia Plantation: Planning for Can River Creole National Historical Park*. U.S. National Park Services Publications and Papers.

⁵ See Crespi (2004) for more discussion on Hertzog family and religion at Magnolia Plantation.

⁶ Interviewed by Dayna Lee Bowker and Rolanda Teal's (2015) ethnography project: *Oral History and Ethnographic Interviews with Traditionally Associated People of Cane River Creole National Historical Park*. Earth Search Inc.

⁷ Information from of Cammie Henry's photograph of "Aunt Agnes" and statement of her death. (Cammie Henry Collection, scrapbook 070, page 119, Northwestern State University)

⁸ A second photograph showing Aunt Agnes and a diamond shape hanging on the exterior of the western wall of the southern room of Cabin #1 (Cammie Henry Collection, scrapbook 070, page 119, Northwestern State University).

⁹ For more on seashell symbolism and function within cosmograms see Robert Ferris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. (New York. Random House, 1983) p.135.

¹⁰ Marie Louveau was a famous Louisiana Creole practitioner of Voodoo, herbalist and a midwife in New Orleans during the early to mid-nineteenth century.

¹¹ See Babe Raul Canizares, *The Life and Works of Marie Laveau: Gris-Gris Cleansings Charms Hexes*. (Original Publications, 2001)

¹² Conclusion based on personal conversation with Dr. Kenneth Brown, November 2021 to April 2022.

¹³ As observed by Herskovits in *The Myth of the Negro Past*. (Beacon Press, Boston, 1941) and cited and discussed by Laurie Wilkie (1997:81)

¹⁴ As cited by Brown (2015:183). See Brown (2017:60-64) for more details on the medals and alterations made.

¹⁵ See Wilkie (1997:100) for data on excavations in West Feliciana of African American Baptist households

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¹⁶ As discussed by Hine and Thompson (1999:166)

¹⁷ As discussed by Charles Orser (2010) in *Twenty-First-Century Historical Archaeology*. *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 18(2). (111–150). p.48.

¹⁸ See Hazel Carby (1994) *The "Politics of Fiction: Anthropology and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston"* in *History & Memory in African American Culture* for more on the discussion. p.28.

¹⁹ Christa Craven is Dean for Faculty Development and a Professor of Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies; Sociology and Anthropology at The College of Wooster.

²⁰ Mara Glatzel is a feminist author and podcast host of *Feminist Wellness*.

²¹ The percentage of demolished historical structures is from a study I conducted in 2020 inventorying the contributing historic structures listed on the National Register Historical District application. This percentage is likely increased from that time, and this only represents the nationally recognized historical district not the larger Independence Heights community which also has suffered significant historical loss.

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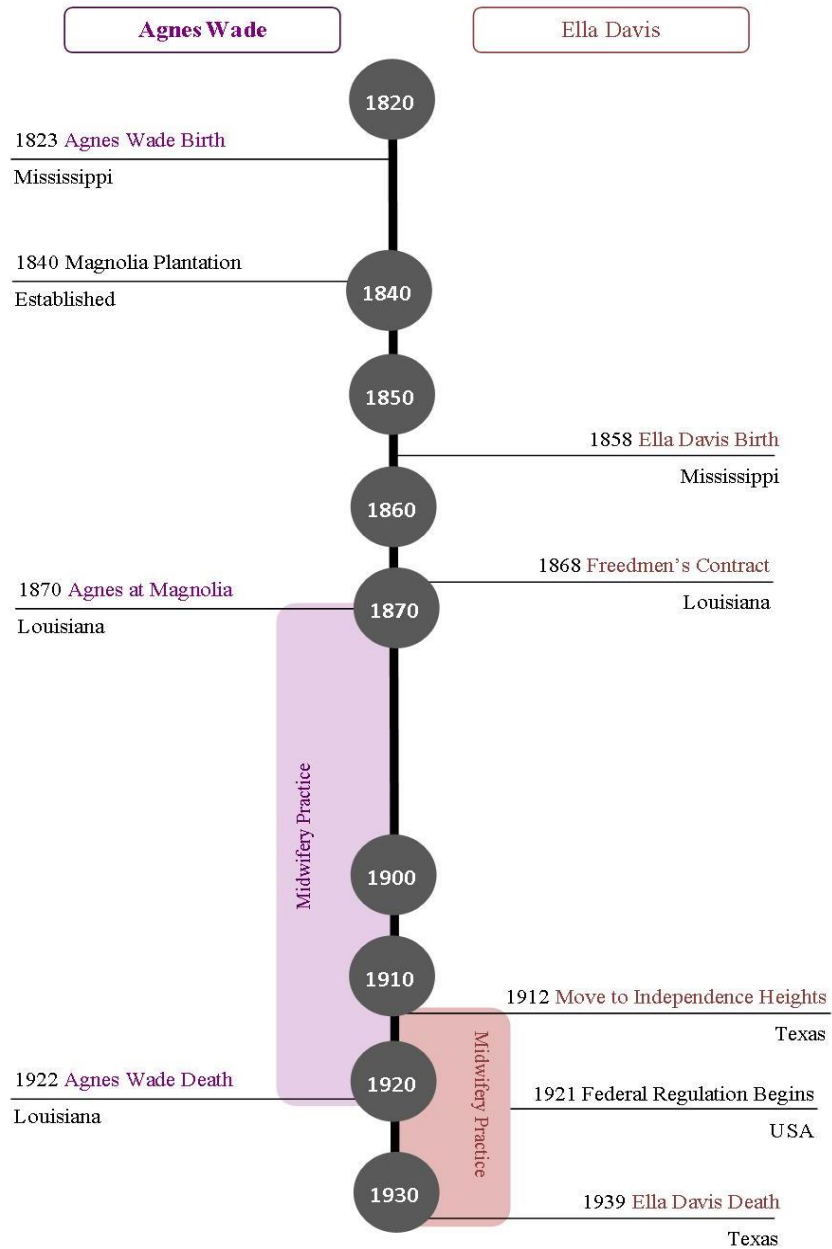
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APPENDIX A

Timeline of Events: Agnes Wade & Ella Davis



APPENDIX B

Chart created by Kenneth Brown showing the two differing patterns or meanings for the deposits found in private healing spaces versus public church sites at the Levi Jordan, Frogmore, Richmond Hill and Magnolia plantations.

Direction	Cosmogram	Healing (c/m/c) (private space)	Religious (c/ph) (public space)
East	birth, dawn	Healer's kit, taking control of one's life	rebirth as an adult in the community
North	power in world of the living, masculinity	power in the world of the living, community	power of the community and one's role in it
West	power and transition of death	protection from the actions of others both living and dead	transition to the world of spirits and ancestors, heaven
South	spiritual power, the world of spirits and the dead	power in the world of spirits and ancestors	power in the world of spirits and ancestors, memory

(Adapted from Brown 2017:193)

