

“It’s All in de Tale”:

Politics of Narration in Joel Chandler Harris

and Charles W. Chesnutt

by

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Abstract

Joel Chandler Harris og Charles W. Chesnutt formidler og utforsker afroamerikansk muntlig fortellertradisjon og andre deler av den afroamerikanske folketradisjonen i sine tekstsamlinger *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880) og *The Conjure Woman* (1889). Måten historiene blir fortalt på, og sammenhengen de settes inn i, avslører holdninger og etnisk- og kulturpolitiske standpunkt, og fungerer som vindu til generelle samfunns holdninger og kulturfordommer i forfatterens samtid. Strukturen av samlingen og (gjen-)fortellingen av historiene er hovedfokuset i denne oppgaven, og de hensynene som tekstene viser i forhold til forskjellige grupper lesere og kravene fra forlagene blir vurdert i sammenheng med politikken som teksttaktikken avslører. Fortellingene blir analysert med hensyn til tekstpolitikken, og forfatterens intensjoner blir vurdert opp i mot det som tekstene kommuniserer. Tekstsamlingenes videreføring av de afroamerikanske folkeelementene samt deres tilnærming til folketradisjonen utforskes i dette studiet. Tradisjonelle ideer og termer fra afroamerikansk folkekultur blir inkorporert i tolkningen for å tilnærme afroamerikansk materiale med deres egen terminologi, og for å vurdere forfatterens egen inkorporering av tradisjonell tro, karakter og terminologi og dermed være i stand til å avdekke eventuell politisk ukorrekthet.

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Introduction: Contexts, Texts and Concepts

Narration is based on the human need to tell stories, to share experiences and knowledge, or to affect or inspire the audience or listeners. Telling stories allow people to get to know each other, to educate each other and to vividly present images and contexts to each other. Narrativity is a process of telling as well as a performance. The stories say something about the storyteller and the narratees, because they are told by some, and directed toward others. Oral storytelling and performance are historically embedded in the African American tradition, and in Zora Neale Hurston's understanding, performance is a fundamental characteristic of "negro expression" ("Characteristics" 1041). Different forms of performance permeate the African American tradition, and the form of narration or storytelling is the focus of this study.

Saidah Namayanja sees performance as "a way of using language, action and gestures that differ from one performer to another in relation to their cultural and traditional expectations," and acknowledges its value as an action which allows narratives to be "actualized, understood and interpreted" (113). Namayanja, furthermore, argues for the importance of an audience in the act of bringing meaning to oral literature, and sees the audience as an element that would be missing if the oral narrative were to be transcribed into a written form (113). The question remains whether performativity as a feature of oral storytelling can be fully transcribed to paper when oral tales are written down. The transition from orality to literacy is treated in Walter J. Ong's *Orality & Literacy* (1982), which addresses the problems that may arise in the process. Ong's treatment of the oral and the written raises the question of whether one should accept that

aspects of orality are lost when an oral folktale, for instance, is written down, and whether oral material depends on its recording in writing to stay “alive.”

Joel Chandler Harris and Charles W. Chesnutt represent two different ways of incorporating the oral, traditional African American elements in their collections *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880) and *The Conjure Woman* (1899). Folk elements and folktales function as the core tales in their collections, and the authors build a context or a frame around them. Even though the authors published these collections of stories in written form, they still manage to include the element of audience, and work to keep some of the oral aspects intact in their written representations. The two authors treat the oral storytelling tradition in writing, in order to inspire their readers, and to carry on the oral tradition. It is the way in which the stories are narrated that is of interest to this thesis.

Harris is presented firstly, and Chesnutt secondly, according to the chronology of their writing and publications.¹ The two authors are chosen because their political motivation is evident through their storytelling, and their differing backgrounds invite a further examination of their political aims and textual tactics. Although the authors have been treated comparatively by critics previously, their politics of narration needs to be explored further in a way which respects and includes elements and terms from the African American tradition. An engagement with the traditional beliefs in a comparative study opens the door for new interpretations both in and on the African Americans’ own terms. A critical literary approach of this kind detects the texts’ own engagement and meeting with the African American orality, character and tradition, which in turn makes it possible to assess political correctness or the possible lack thereof.

¹ Harris’ first Uncle Remus-story appeared in *The Constitution* in 1876. Chesnutt published “The Goophered Grapevine” in 1887 as a first publication in *Atlantic Monthly* before publishing *The Conjure Woman*.

The authors faced similar obstacles in their struggle for publication, and made structural choices in this regard. Since the publishing houses were located in the North, they were forced to tell their stories in a manner that would suit the white, Northern audience, and hence make the publication possible. It was not easy to publish African American traditional material in a racially prejudiced time. Although the slaves were freed, and racial equality was strived for after the Civil War, there still existed skeptical attitudes among many whites who refused to consider African Americans their equals. The fact that Harriet Beecher Stowe's stereotypical and docile "Uncle Tom" was a character who most of the whites could accept was a factor the two authors had to take into consideration when they created their Uncle-characters. The United States was not ready to greet an independent African American yet, or to appreciate the African American tradition fully.

This study sheds light on the authors' narrative choices and purposes. The authors' expressed intentionality is discussed, while the texts speak for themselves to contrast the authors' own utterances. Discursive politics of presentation are found in both collections, but their manifestations are different. Studying how the authors' communication with their readership is designed allows one to draw conclusions regarding the restrictions placed by the publishing industry, the authors' locations within the publication industry and the role of literary strategies and folk tradition in all of this. A decoding of the narratives is needed in order to understand the author as well as the environment in which he worked. The power of narration or literature in the process of affecting, transforming and captivating the reader is assessed and exemplified.

The two collections are chosen because of their apparent similarities which make it appealing to explore their differences. They are comparable in their themes, their times of

publication, and in their narrative constructions and framings. Harris has influenced Chesnut in his writing, which might explain why their narratives are in many ways similar. Because the collections are connected to local African American culture, tradition, dialect and geography, they can be associated with “regionalist” literary traditions which “emphasiz[e] the setting, speech, and social structure and customs of a particular locality, not merely as *local color*, but as important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting” (Abrams 202). Their realistic aspects are meant to provide truthful images for the reader, images that are supposed to give the reader the sense that the characters presented might exist and that the situations might happen (“realism,” Abrams 269).

The differences lie in their embeddedness in and their use of the local African American folk tradition, the authors’ motivation and backgrounds as well as their attitudes and politics. Their differing political relations to the “plantation myth,” the romanticized image of the slavery days as a time in which slaves were treated fairly by their masters and pleasantly exposed to “white” culture and the aristocracy of the antebellum South, are explored. While the “regionalist” genre is common to both authors, their differing regional origins and backgrounds separate them from each other. Harris has a background as an Irish American journalist from the South while Chesnut is an African American lawyer and political activist from the North. The figures of the two “Uncle”-characters in the collections are also explored, and compared and contrasted to, for instance, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom-figure and Ishmael Reed’s Uncle Robin. The authors’ political motivations are assessed. Through their different narrative strategies, the two authors manage to publish tales based on African American folklore in the white world of publishing.

Different types of folktales are treated in this thesis, providing examples of the variety of stories offered by the African American orature. Examples of types of stories are, among others animal fables, trickster tales, tales explaining “how things came to be as they are,” and tales with lessons about life in “the tough briar patch of the Unites States” (Gates and McKay 131). All these types of folktales are found in Harris’ and Chesnutt’s collections which show evidence of their respective narrative concerns: Harris is mostly concerned with animal trickster tales and tales providing explanations of phenomena, while Chesnutt’s focus lies in the narration of tales of slave tricksters, especially tales related to the art of “conjure.”

The concept of “conjure” refers to the African American folk religion. Elements of folk magic and superstition are central to both collections. Terms related to the African American folk belief need to be defined and addressed initially. “Hoodoo” is a term which is frequently used as a synonym for “conjure” today (Anderson, *Hoodoo* xi), but “conjure” is preferred in this thesis because it is the local and vernacular way of naming the tradition. “Hoodoo” is also often used to describe the brand of African American supernaturalism found along the Mississippi, while “conjure” is used more generally (Anderson, *Hoodoo* xi). “Conjure” is the term which is most frequently used by African Americans like Zora Neale Hurston. In the OED the verb “conjure” means to “constrain (a person to some action) by putting him upon his oath, or by appealing to something sacred; ... to adjure” or to “affect by invocation or incantation; to charm, bewitch” (“conjure”), while the “conjurer” or “conjuror” is “[o]ne who practices conjuration; one who conjures spirits and pretends to perform miracles by their aid; a magician, wizard” (“conjurer/conjuror”). A “goopher” is a term for the object that allows the conjurer to affect his “targets.” To be “goophered” or “goofed” can be understood as “being ‘under the

influence' of a magical agent" (Dundes 371). The OED defines a "goopher" as "[a] witch doctor; a curse, spell, or conjuration; goofer dust: a powder used in conjuration" ("gopher/goopher"). "Goopher" will not be viewed as a synonym for conjure doctor in this study, but as the object which allows for conjuration, as for instance the root used in a magic potion or a doll with pepper feet.²

Chesnutt's character Uncle Julius McAdoo presents his own understanding of the terms in "The Goophered Grapevine": "Well, I dunno whe'r you b'lieves in cunj'in' er not, -some er de w'ite folks don't, er says dey don't, -but de truf er de matter is dat dis yer ole vimya'd is goophered [...], -cunju'd, bewitch'" (*Conjure Tales* 5). The object which is "conjured" or "goophered" is, in other words, "bewitched." Robert Hemenway defines "conjure" as "the collective term for all of the traditional belief in black culture centering around a votary's confidence in the power of a conjure, root, two-headed or hoodoo doctor to alter which magical powers a situation that seems rationally irremediable" (287). Hemenway's definition is key to the understanding of conjure in this thesis, and provides a basis for an understanding of how conjure can function in metaphorical terms. His definition refers to what is necessary in order for the conjure to work its magic: the target's trust in the goopher's or the conjure practitioner's power. These terms are used in the literary context as the authors' and storytellers' means to communicate their messages. The storytellers and narrators are seen as masters of conjure who construct their narratives in similar ways to the traditional conjure doctors, who mix their potions to create a certain effect. The storytellers, Uncle Remus, Uncle Julius, Chesnutt and Harris seek to affect their listeners or readers, trying to impact their actions and attitudes. The addressees are "under the influence" of a magical agent (Chesnutt, "Superstitions" 371) as targets of the

² A doll is the goopher in Chesnutt's "Mars Jeem's Nightmare."

storytellers' goopher of narration. Conjure is treated both methodically and thematically in relation to both collections.

In order to clarify the textual practices, this thesis draws on theoretical and critical insights from several different traditions. Especially W.E.B. DuBois' and Henry Louis Gates' perspectives regarding "double voicedness" and "double consciousness" are crucial to understand the politics of narrativity. Zora Neale Hurston's insights that are displayed in her critical, theoretical and anthropological work are invaluable in order to explore the collections because of her embeddedness in the African American tradition. Ross Chambers' theories on the power of narration and narrative seduction inspire the view of narration in this study, and Walter J. Ong's view on orality and literacy invites useful understandings of the collections in question. Bertram D. Ashe's and Roman Jakobson's insights are helpful when examining the structure and communication pattern of the two collections.

Chapter One: Political Cookery

‘Don’t push me too close, honey,’ responded the old man; ‘don’t shove me up in no cornder. I don’t want to tell you no stories. Some say dat Brer Rabbit’s ole ‘oman died fum eatin’ some pizen-weed, en dat Brer Rabbit married ole Miss Fox, en some say not. Some tells one tale en some tells nudder; some say dat fum dat time forrer’d de Rabbits en de Foxes make frien’s en stay do; some say dey kep on quollin’. Hit look like it mixt. Let dem tell you w’at knows. Dat w’at I years you gits it straight like I yeard it.’ (“The Sad Fate of Mr. Fox” 155)

Uttered by Joel Chandler Harris’ main character, Uncle Remus, the quote seems to be connected to the stories’ politics of narration which entails a wish to share the tales for the purpose of “preserving ... their original simplicity” (39).³ The stories in the collection have been modified in different ways, yet Harris claims that he is not interested in making up stories, but wants to tell them exactly as they were told to him, including the African American vernacular. Referring to himself as a “cornfield journalist” and not an author, Harris wishes to be regarded a “compiler,” saying that it is the “matter” (the legends) and not the “manner” (the narration and framing) of storytelling that deserves credit (10). Both the matter and manner of telling are crucial for understanding his collection.

Harris’ sentimental plantation reminiscences appeared in a collection of short stories called *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* which was published in 1899. After this he published more stories in the *Uncle Remus*-vein in *Nights with Uncle Remus*. This project discusses the first collection of Uncle Remus tales. This first collection is

³ All page references to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* will appear in parentheses in this chapter.

meant to reach several groups of readers, and Harris tries to make the traditional African American oral tales accessible to white readers through the use of different strategies.

The stories are told by the character Uncle Remus. They are placed in a setting which can be said to romanticize the relationship between the African American Uncle-figure and “Boy,” the white son of Master John, illustrating the the idea of an ex-slave who communicates nothing but pleasant plantation memories. Only two characters are present in the narrative frame, Uncle Remus and Boy. Other characters are mentioned, like Boy’s parents, but they are never active participants in the frame plot. Harris creates an intimate atmosphere around the storytelling situation. In the character of Boy, he creates an inside-the-text listener with whom the reader may position him- or herself. Boy becomes an open signifier, a generalized idea of a white boy who likes to listen to the old man’s stories. The readers’ potential questions might be asked by the inside-the-text listener and answered by the inside-the-text storyteller. This technique allows the reader to relate more to the situation and to feel that a reader representative is present. The storytelling operates on different levels and creates a complex whole. In Harris’ collection the frame narrative represents the white man’s fantasy world, and the inside tale functions as a looking-glass into African American tradition, however altered it may have been.

Bertram D. Ashe’s general theoretical terms will be used in reference to the narrative constructions found in the collection, and need to be defined in brief. The “open frame” introduces the storytelling and creates a setting or a situation in which the story is to be told (Ashe 2). The open frame may contain a description of the setting or of the storyteller, before “zooming in” on the inside tale. The “close frame” concludes the storytelling, and gives room for the adding of comments or reflections by the storyteller or listener after the story has been told (Ashe 2). In the close frame the anonymous narrator

“regains (explicit) control of the narrative” (Ashe 2). The situation is here “zoomed out” from the inside tale to the narrative frame, moving from the inside level to the outside of the tale.

Between the open and the close frame the story is told nearly without interruptions. Boy’s interruptions in Harris’ collection usually signal a transition from the storytelling to the “close frame,” although sometimes, Boy’s comments or setting descriptions cause a disruption in the flow of storytelling between the two frames without automatically moving to the “close frame.” The open and close frames are seen by Hurston as openings for “the third-person omniscient voice, which allow for a maximum of information giving” (qtd. in Gates 185). Sometimes there is no close frame, as in “The End of Mr. Bear,” but there is always an open frame for the storytelling, placing the inside tale in a constructed context. The anonymous narrator tells the overarching story and introduces the frame, in which Uncle Remus is presented as the inside-the-text storyteller. The narrative situation is labeled as an “embedded narrative” by Ashe (2), as the inside tales are embedded in a storytelling situation. While the stories are told in episodes, the frames enveloping the stories form a chronological narrative. The social and communicative space of narration places more weight on the aspects of orality, or oral transmission of stories, which is vital for the African American tradition and folklore.

Texts and Contexts

The collection consists of thirty-six legends. Robert Bone writes that the repertory of the African American Folktale includes

animal fables, trickster tales, ... conjure stories, preacher tales, jokes, proverbs, anecdotes, and plantation lore of every description. Wonder tales, horror stories,

voodoo legends, and what Zora Neale Hurston calls ‘just plain lies’ have passed from mouth to mouth in the black community for ages. (131)

Several of these art forms overlap in Harris’ collection, but all are found in *Uncle Remus*. Animal fables thus also function as trickster tales and preacher tales, for instance, and the conjure tales include tales of animals, tricksters, wonder, horror and hoodoo. The types of stories listed above resist encapsulation into separate folktale groups because of the thematic overlap and flow of meanings, a problem of tale grouping similarly encountered by Vladimir Propp in his study of traditional Russian folk/fairy tales (99), but an attempt at distinction and categorization is made. To illustrate the collection’s variety, this chapter will focus on animal fables, conjure stories, and “tales of how things came to be as they are,”⁴ by examining “The Awful Fate of Mr. Wolf,” “A Plantation Witch” and “Why the Negro Is Black,” which will be considered in relation the tales at large. Investigating the stories’ differences and similarities offer a picture of *Uncle Remus* as a whole.

Harris had different ways of collecting the stories for *Uncle Remus*. Some of the stories he heard in his childhood on the Turner plantation: “Old Harbert and Uncle George Terrell were Joel’s favorite companions, and from a nook in their chimney corners he listened to the legends handed down from their African ancestors, . . . the lore of animals and birds so dear to every plantation negro” (J. Harris, 34). Julia Harris creates a picture of Harris “lurking” in the shadows, overhearing the storytelling, almost stealing pieces of the African American folklore, breaking the African American oral chain of transmission.

Getting hold of the stories was not always easy for Harris considering the history of the

⁴ A related categorization is made in *The Norton Anthology of African American literature* (130-132). The categorization found here influenced this thesis’ grouping of tales. This anthology mentions “animal trickster tales” and “tales of slave tricksters” while this thesis will view tales of this kind as “animal fables.” Trickster characters are found in different types of tales, even in the “conjure tales,” since the “trickster idea” underlies all African American folktales. “Tales of metamorphoses and wonder” will be treated as “conjure tales” in order to draw parallels to Chesnutt’s tales. “Tales explaining how things came to be as they are” will be treated as a separate category.

African American folktales. These tales were traditionally meant to stay within the African American community, especially in the days of the abominable institution. The stories were coded for safety reasons in order to avoid the white ear and included secret, veiled messages. The messages are encoded in the African American vernacular which has, according to Gates, “encoded private yet communal cultural rituals” (xix). The tales stayed within the African American community and were passed on from one generation to the next. Hence, many African Americans found it difficult to break the oral chain of transmission between African Americans and tell their traditional tales to a white man, which meant that Harris had to find clever ways to gather stories.

Sometimes he found ways to “trick” the stories out of the African Americans, by telling a story of his own. His version, for instance, of “The Tar-Baby” story, would urge the African Americans to tell their own version (qtd. in Baer 188). Harris also placed an advertisement in the *Georgia Timber Gazette* encouraging the readers to remember “any of the Negro fables and legends so popular on plantations,” asking for “brief outlines of the main incidents and characters,” claiming that “[t]he purpose is to preserve these myths in permanent form” (Baer 187). The oral tales were then transformed into written tales, and Harris took several liberties in this process.

The tales in the collection are not put together chronologically. The different stories vary in time, and a character who is dead in one story, might reappear in radiant health in the next. An example is found in “How Mr. Rabbit Saved his Meat” where Brer Wolf, already dead in a previous story, suddenly reappears: “‘Why, Uncle Remus!’ the little boy broke in, ‘I thought you said the Rabbit scalded the Wolf to death a long time ago’” (110). Brer Wolf is, in fact, violently murdered seven stories earlier in “The Awful Fate of Mr. Wolf,” yet Uncle Remus ignores the listener by changing the subject. When

Boy becomes confused and sad, Uncle Remus clarifies the apparent inconsistency and explains the insignificance of time and details: “Co’sse, honey, hit mout er bin ole Brer Wolf, er hit mout er bin er n’er Brer Wolf; it mout er bin ‘fo’ he got kotch up wid, er it mout er bin atterwards” (111). The message is more central than the logic or the timeline, even more important than the identity of the character. The characters’ traits are more important for the stories than their individual “identities.”

The stories are relatively short and their episodic patterning signifies a constructed naturalness, similar to that of oral storytelling. Some of the stories are disrupted and split into two to create narrative suspense, representing natural digressions in storytelling. One part is told first, and the rest of the story is told at a later time, maybe even several stories later. “The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story” offers an example of such a distraction when Uncle Remus’ storytelling is disrupted as he hears “Miss Sally callin’” and tells Boy he “better run ‘long” (59). The rest of the story is told several stories later, upon Boy’s request.

Countless stories exist and many varieties of the same story are told. Geography is an important factor in explaining the differences between the folktales. As the slaves were sold and families scattered, the tales were spread with them, leading to regional varieties, which are usual features of the “local color” or “regionalist” genre, which is closely tied to the local histories and customs. The tales sometimes vary due to their different regional origins.

Abasi Kiyimba, a contemporary Ugandan scholar of animal fables and cultural identity claims that

fables that are borrowed from other cultures have to adapt to the rules of the new cultural environment. ... Knowledge of these cultural and anthropological details

helps in the understanding of how the symbolic animal world illuminates human experience. The fables also act as sensors of change, and they simultaneously test the society's receptiveness to new ideas and to differences between persons and groups within that very culture. (208)

Naturally oral tales change over time, and their effect on contemporary readers increases with their cultural relevance. The times and environments change, which means that oral tales, which function as living organisms, change as well. They are organic due to varying geographies or settings, yet differ due to the individual storytellers' adaptations for the differing purposes, as the context may call for different versions of the stories. The context and circumstances take part in forming the story, and the story becomes the result of a collaboration or a negotiation between the storyteller and the listeners. A good storyteller is, according to Ross Chambers, one who has the flexibility to make necessary adjustments as the narrative proceeds (220).

Zora Neale Hurston's and Harris' collections differ on this account. The stories they tell show evidence of different adjustments made by the storyteller and possibly also their differing geographies. Hurston collected stories from her native Eatonville, Florida, and New Orleans in cooperation with Franz Boas and published them in her anthropological work *Mules and Men*, while Harris collected his stories from slaves of the "old Time Middle Georgia," who he claimed to have known well and regarded as masters of the "tale teller's art" (12-13). Harris writes in a note that there are different versions of the story ("The Fate of Mr. Jack Sparrow"), he refers to, for instance, one story he heard in Florida with a different plot, but he "adhered to the middle Georgia version, which is characteristic enough" (109). Some of the stories or story titles are found in both

collections while others are found only in one of them. The stories that are represented in both collections vary in both theme and message, to which the discussion will turn.

The Survival of the “Wit-Est”

In most instances, the tales appear in the form of animal fables. According to the OED, a fable is among others a “short story devised to convey some useful lesson; *esp.* one in which animals or inanimate things are the speakers or actors; an apologue” (“fable”). M. H. Abrams similarly defines the fable as

a short narrative ... that exemplifies an abstract moral thesis or principle of human behavior; usually, at its conclusion, either the narrator or one of the characters states the moral in the form of an *epigram*. Most common is the beast fable, in which animals talk and act like the human types they represent. (“fable”)

Abrams’ definition focuses more on the expression of the lesson than the OED definition. It focuses more clearly on the traits of the animal characters and the moral, especially in reference to the “beast fable,” which is relatable to tales of trickster figures and animals. The animals replace the humans at the metaphoric level. The animals exhibit human qualities which enable people to identify with them. The story is narrated in this way to produce involvement of the narratee (Chambers 212). The animals are anthropomorphized in the fable. Stock characters are represented by animals that possess similar traits. The entertainment and instruction of the fables are built upon this platform of recognition (Kiyimba 189). The effect of the lesson on Boy or the reader depends on cultural relevance and identification.

Telling fables is closely related to “fabulation.” To “fabulate” is, according to the OED, “to relate as a fable or myth,” to “talk and narrate in fables” or to “invent, concoct,

fabricate” (“fabulate”). The role of the storyteller becomes more evident when considering what is actually done in the process of narrating or presenting the fables. “Fabulation” is synonymous with “fabrication” which is significant for explaining the oral variation of animal fables and the requirements of the storyteller. It is the storyteller’s job to make sure the fable is relevant. If contextually relevant, the political lesson will have a greater impact.

The main character of most of Harris’ animal fables, Brother (“Brer”) Rabbit, is an important symbol of resistance and control for the African American community. He is weaker than his opponents (Brer Fox, Brer Wolf, Brer Bear or Brer Dog) but uses his cleverness in order to avoid difficult situations. He is always able to pull off the unexpected and to turn a rationally hopeless situation to his own advantage. An example of this is found in “How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox” where Brer Rabbit gets stuck to the “tar-baby” and Mr. Fox says “I speck I got you dis time, ... maybe I ain’t but I speck I is” (63). Brer Fox acknowledges Brer Rabbit’s abilities to get away from his grip but assumes to have finally caught the rabbit. The situation seems impossible but Brer Rabbit manages to convince Brer Fox to throw him into the familiar briar patch by applying reversed psychology: “Skin me, ... snatch out my eyeballs, t’ar out my years by de roots, en cut off my legs, ... but do please, Brer Fox, don’t fling me in dat brier-patch” (63). Throwing Brer Rabbit in the briar patch is, then, what Brer Fox does, before Brer Rabbit victoriously exclaims that he was “[b]red en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox – Bred en bawn in a brier-patch!” (64), then skipping away from the danger.

Brer Rabbit is assigned many different functions. Brer Rabbit historically served to communicate hope to African American slaves. The animal fable paradigm is in other words applicable to the slave situation. Penguin’s *Dictionary of Literary Terms and*

Literary Theory's definition of the fable honors Aesop as the first presenter of fables in a collection ("fable"). Aesop himself was, in fact, a slave in Samos in Greece, which means that the fable has always been connected to slavery.

According to the traditional idea of the trickster, trickster characters are assigned specific qualities, as Brer Rabbit exemplifies. The trickster traditionally lives in a world in which "every creature must live by his or her wits or perish, ... in which all is fair in the pursuit of self-preservation" (Owomoyela 476). It is not the fittest who survives in this world, as presented by Charles Darwin's evolutionary studies. In the survival of the one with the most wits (the "wit-est") the trickster character triumphs. The trickster's "dupes" are generally larger and stronger than him, although usually gullible, slow-witted and "vulnerable to the trickster's designs" (Owomoyela 476). Tempting the "dupe" with persimmons from a tree or other foods helps Brer Rabbit exploit several situations, for instance in "Miss Cow Falls a Victim to Mr. Rabbit," where Brer Rabbit causes her to get stuck in the tree, thus enabling him and his family to empty her of milk and fill their stomachs.

The traditional African American trickster figure is compatible with the idea of the fable, together forming the complexity of the *Uncle Remus* animal fables. The trickster "is, by design, a human being in disguise. Whether he acts in conformity with societal mores or in violation of them, he provides the moralizer with material to makes [sic] his case" (Owomoyela 477). Definitions of "trickster" and "fable" focus on veiling the human in a different body of some sorts, illustrating a lesson or moral. Although Brer Rabbit is traditionally connected to the African American culture as a trickster-hero, as the "archetypal hero-trickster character from African American oral literature" (Kulii 46-7), white readers might also learn from his character, as Boy does in Harris' collection. The

trickster figure's function extends *beyond* ethnic and cultural identities, and aims toward universality. The trickster nature appeals to all.

The combination of fable and trickster identity allows for the teaching of a moral, and for the communication of certain politics. The storyteller Uncle Remus' didactic function is evident in his role of an elementary school teacher, or even as a real uncle, who is both inside and outside of the family, yet whose voice is less "preaching" or "threatening" than the parents' but is still respected. At one instance Boy realizes "he had been guilty of a flagrant violation of the family code" (130). It is as if Uncle Remus were part of Boy's family. He takes his role very seriously and is determined to teach Boy a few lessons. An example of Remus' stern devotion to his task is found in "The Fate of Mr. Jack Sparrow" where Boy "could think of nothing he had done calculated to stir Uncle Remus' grief" and Uncle Remus was "looking hard at the little boy" (106-107). Not all of the stories include an explicit didactic point, but in several of the stories, Remus' educational message is evident. Different situations invite different lessons.

Remus does not seem to tell the stories for his own gain except in the case of "Mr. Fox is again Victimized," where he allows Boy to bribe him with teacakes to get the story he wants even though he does not deserve it. Personal gain makes Uncle Remus change his mind: "Seein' um's better'n hearin' tell un um" (71). Storytelling becomes a power game, with the storyteller in control of the situation. Remus is, however, an unselfish character who cares immeasurably about Boy, whose main mission is to teach, amuse and share. Through his storytelling, Uncle Remus seduces his listener, making him interested in what is to come, and making sure Boy returns the next evening for one more story. According to Chambers, all narratives have the power of seduction, and seduction is the

means whereby the narratives maintain their authority to narrate (218), and is what makes Boy return to hear a story, night after night.

The fables appear to innocently encode the message Uncle Remus wants to convey. At night, when Boy seeks out Uncle Remus, a story is always waiting. In some instances, the story seems to be planned and directly linked to a recent happening. In others, the animal fable told relates to other themes. In some stories, the moral is presented in the narrative frame while the story serves as an illustration. The moral is often stated in the open frame or the close frame. Stating the lesson explicitly in the frame makes its message more evident. This strategy is found in “The Awful Fate of Mr. Wolf.” Boy has been handling Uncle Remus’ tools poorly and Remus is disappointed in him. The story Remus is to tell starts with its moral: “Folks w’at’s allers pesterin’ people, en bodderin’ ‘longer dan w’at ain’t dern, don’t never come ter no good eend” (89). Uncle Remus sums up the story’s message when declaring that Brer Wolf was scolded to death by Brer Rabbit “all bekaze he wuz so bizzy wid uder fo’kses doin’s” (92), thus warning Boy what might happen to a person who does not mind his own business. Remus’ staging of the story and the matching of Boy’s wrongdoings with Wolf’s, suggests Boy’s identification with Brer Wolf and an applicability of the story to the present situation. The animal fables are, as exemplified, used as teaching tools. The fables enhance, exemplify and illustrate the point, thus adding clarity to their lesson.

There is an ambiguity within the complex character of Brer Rabbit, and there is a lesson to be learned by the realization of this ambiguity as well. He is both heroic and cruel, but is above all powerful, communicating hope for the apparently weaker figure. He proves that appearances can be deceiving, and displays power through cunning. Brer Rabbit also lies and is flawed. He tricks other characters into misery or displays

inexcusable and egocentric violent actions at others' expense. Owomyela writes of the tricksters that "[a]part from being ungrateful, unreliable, and dishonest cheats, they are also constitutionally averse to any form of physical exertion, instead scheming to gain their livelihood at the expense of others" (476). This is exactly what Brer Rabbit does, for instance when he tricks Miss Cow into a tree so that he can steal her milk to feed himself, his wife and his children. Brer Rabbit's only physical advantage is his speed, but in order to support his family and get out of life-threatening situations, his primary weapon is his wit.

The trickster Brer Rabbit invites a reaction and tests his listeners' ethics. Being *beyond* good and evil, he makes the division between the two qualities blurred. According to Kayode Fanilola the traditional trickster god Eshu⁵ is "the representative of both good and evil; [illustrating the Yoruba people's] belief in, and acknowledgement of, the presence and coexistence of good and evil forces in the world" (478). The trickster is *amoral* rather than immoral, because in his world, he is forced to be mischievous to survive (Fanilola 478). The trickster god that Fanilola and Gates speak of might have been part of the material on which Brer Rabbit was formed, as "the part of the divine that *tests* people" (Fanilola 478, emphasis added). Brer Rabbit plays the same role as Eshu. The narratee is tested in the storytelling situation. The confusion of good and bad is part of the lesson and the listener is expected to decide how to view Brer Rabbit, and when to use Brer Rabbit as a positive or negative exemplum, as a natural step in the maturing process. Boy reacts and questions the mischievous rabbit's doings on several occasions, as in "Mr.

⁵ The trickster God Eshu is also referred to by Henry Louis Gates as "Esu-Elegbara" and "Edju" (among other names) (3) who traditionally served as "a trickster and the messenger of the gods" (xxi). Esu and the Signifying Monkey are presented as two central trickster figures to whom different origins and myths are connected. Their functions are presented as similar, and both figures can be related to the African American tradition.

Rabbit Nibbles Up the Butter,” where Brer Possum not only has to take the blame but dies because of Brer Rabbit’s wrongdoings:

‘But, Uncle Remus, Brother Possum didn’t steal the butter after all,’ said the little boy, who was not at all satisfied with such summary injustice. ‘Dat w’at make I say w’at I duz, honey. In dis worril, lots er fokes is gotter suffer fer udder fokes sins. Look like hit’s might onwrong; but hit’s des dat away. Tribelashun seem like she’s a waitin’ roun’ de cornder fer ter ketch one en all un us, honey’. (102)

Even a story like this one has a lesson to teach. The world is not a fair place in which happy endings can always be expected. Tribulation is waiting for everyone. There is a pessimistic air over this story, an indication that the world and many of the creatures in it are bad and unjust. Not all people can be trusted, which was a common belief among the slaves.

While animal fables are the stories that are most often associated with Harris (Rubin 168), stories containing elements of myth, conjure and mystery have been overlooked by many critics. Wolfe, for instance, notes that “there are twenty-eight victories of the Weak over the Strong” in Harris’ collection, thereby referring to twenty-six tales of Brer Rabbit and two other animal fables including the victory of other “weak” animals (527).⁶ The fact that there are victories of the apparently weaker characters in the other tales as well, for instance in “A Plantation Witch,” is neither counted by Wolfe nor addressed at all. These victories are achieved by other methods and appear in a different setting.

⁶ The other “weak” animals are Brer Bull-Frog in “Mr. Bear Catches Old Mr. Bull-Frog” and Brer Terrapin in “Mr. Terrapin Shows his Strength.” Brer Terrapin is based on the cunning African Tortoise (“Folktales,” *Call and Response* 59).

Conjure Tales

“A Plantation Witch” is the only story in the collection where conjure or conjuring (African American traditional religious rootwork, as defined introductorily) is brought into focus. The gloomy opening foreshadows the nature of the story:

The moon, just as its full, cast long, vague, wavering shadows in front of the cabin. A colony of tree-frogs somewhere in the distance were treating their neighbors to a serenade, but to the little boy it sounded like a chorus of lost and long- forgotten whistlers. The sound was wherever the imagination chose to locate it ... but always dim and always indistinct. Something in Uncle Remus’s tone exactly fitted all these surroundings, and the child nestled closer to the old man. (142-143)

The opening indicates that what is to be told is of a different nature than the preceding stories. The atmosphere creates suspense and an eagerness to know the development. Especially the “long-forgotten whistlers” invite a mystical and retrospective way of thinking.

The story communicates the possibilities made available by the supernatural. There is a way of negating the set power relations through the use of conjure which allows for transformation. Remus explains that the witches “comes en dey conjus fokes” and that they “might come in de ‘pearunce un a cow en all kinder beas’s. I ain’t bin useter no cunjun myse’f, but I bin livin’ long nuff fer ter know w’en you meets up wid a big black cat in de middle er de road, wid yaller eyeballs, dars yo’ witch fresh fum de Ole Boy” (144). A complete transformation of form is, according to Remus, possible.

In the first conjure episode narrated in this story, Remus tells Boy about a haunted graveyard rabbit that Boy’s uncle Jeems could not kill despite a serious effort. The trickster character in this story is, then, also a rabbit, only this time the rabbit is a witch

who “kin drap der body en change inter a cat en a wolf en all kinder creeturs” (144). The rabbit again features as the trickster figure who tricks the apparently more powerful character.

“A Plantation Witch” contains several miniature narratives which makes this story stand out from the rest of stories in Harris’ collection. The suspicious Boy cannot make sense of the story: “‘Papa says there ain’t any witches,’ the little boy interrupted” (144). Remus then explains before telling the next tale. Boy asks a question or makes a remark, and Remus explains, narrating a new episode until again interrupted. Boy becomes the voice that provides “reality checks” and asks for explanations of the improbable. The story’s second episode concerns a man whose brother was a witch. The man tricked the witch and sprinkled him with salt, which hurt him and made him give up “conjun” (145). Surprisingly, the man without the supernatural powers manages to outwit the witch. Similar to the animal fables with Brer Rabbit, the character who seems the least dominant, wins the battle.

Boy is scared by Remus’ conjure stories. After the two episodes have been narrated, Remus has to walk Boy home and sing him to sleep with a “lusty tune,” although the lyrics of the song do not seem to be joyful and contain an intricate pattern:

Hit’s eighteen hunder’d, fortyen-eight,
 Christ done made dat crooked way straight—
 En I don’t wanter stay here no longer;
 Hit’s eighteen hunder’d forty-en-nine,
 Christ done turn dat water inter wine—
 En I don’t wanter stay here no longer. (146)

The lyrics appear ambiguous in the sense that they convey both hope and hopelessness, expressing a belief in the possibility of miracles while expressing a desperate wish to escape. This might be one of the songs that were heard on the plantations. Christ's power is portrayed as limited. Christ may have made life easier for the slaves, according to common belief, but they were not set free. As powerful as Christ was regarded by many, as a symbol of hope and the possibilities for miracles, he could turn water into wine, but he could not remove them from the abominable institution.

The song as illustrated in this chapter is an excerpt from the song which is found at the end of Harris' collection, "A Plantation Chant." In a note to the song Harris declares that "[i]f these are adaptations from songs the negroes have caught from the whites, their origin is very remote. I have transcribed them literally, and I regard them as in the highest degree characteristic" (170). The song seems to be of different origins. Christ's making the crooked way straight is a direct Bible reference (Matthew 3.3). This instance is the only one in the collection where Uncle Remus directly refers to Christianity. There is a reference to the Bible, however, in "The Story of the Deluge and how it came about," where Boy brings up the reference to Noah's ark which Uncle Remus dismisses: "'W'ich ark's dat?' asked the old man, in a tone of well-feigned curiosity" (66). Uncle Remus does not seem to see the relevance of Noah's ark and questions the truthfulness of Boy's reference, pretending not to understand. In the song religion is an obvious theme, but there is also a pessimistic attitude toward the supremacy of God because God was not powerful enough to help the slaves.

The song provides a challenge by offering historical, biblical and personal elements in its pattern, combining the past and present through references to specific years of history, references to biblical history and the expression of a wish for the present. It

may be that Uncle Remus wants to leave the boy and go home, but because he feels bad for the boy, he has to stay to comfort him. It is, however, likely that the song is influenced by two different sources: The “Counting Spiritual” (which appeared in several song books in the 1860s) and “Danville’s Chariot” (first recorded and printed in 1874) (Mudcat.org). Pieces from both songs are traced in Harris’ song, where “Danville’s Chariot” includes several lines saying “I don’t want to stay here no longer” and “The Counting Spiritual” includes the same pattern for the presentation of the years as well as a repeated theme:

Eighteen hundred and forty-eight,

Christ done made that crooked way straight,

Eighteen hundred and forty-nine,

Christ done turned dat water to wine. (White 104)

Why this song is sung at this instance and why the sad song is referred to as “lusty,” is uncertain. Harris may portray Uncle Remus’ singing in a merry way to underscore the romantic plantation myth. The song does not seem to be linked to the two episodes in “A Plantation Witch.” Maybe Boy’s uneasiness or anxiety reminded the ex-slave of the misery connected to slavery and his past, and the song he sings to Boy has functioned as a comfort to Remus previously.

The Voice of Reason

The stories explaining “why some things are the way they are” provide a different sense of comfort. This comfort is rooted in the understanding and explaining of different phenomena. “Why the Negro is Black” is a tale in line with this kind of African American folktale tradition which in Hurston’s words, is the result of a “shaping and rationalizing [of] the natural laws” the African Americans found around them (qtd. in Ogunleye 436).

Both Hurston's *Mules and Men* and Harris' collection include a story of the same name, but their plots are different. This proves that there are many different versions of folktales, and that the storyteller's poetic license grants the freedom to tell the story the way he or she chooses. The story seems to be modified in a manner suited to the the specific agenda or purpose. Harris himself speaks of the different versions of the same stories in a note to "The Fate of Mr. Jack Sparrow": "It may be well to state that there are different versions of all the stories – the shrewd narrators of the mythology of the old plantation adapting themselves with ready tact to the years, tastes, and expectations of their juvenile audiences" (109). Boy's query of why the palms of Uncle Remus' hands are as white as his own initiates the telling of a story which explains both why the African American's skin is black as well as why his palms are white. Hurston's version, however, only explains how the skin happened to "git black" by accident, by God's command (*Mules and Men* 34), yet no explanation is provided for why the palms of the hands are white. An African American child who realizes his or her skin is of a different color than the whites, probably often wondered why it was so, why someone is black while others are white, as illustrated by Hurston in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." Both Harris' and Hurston's explanations supply answers to questions of this kind.

There are stories in the collection that explain why something is the way it is that are rendered in the form of animal fables. An example of such a story is "Why Mr. Possum Loves Peace" in which Brer Possum plays dead in face of danger in the shape of Mr. Dog. When accused of being a coward, Brer Possum claims that he was only laughing so hard because he could not "stan' ticklin'" (62). Even today, Uncle Remus explains, Brer Possum surrenders when touched in the short ribs because he laughs too hard. The known fact that possums play dead when threatened is given another explanation in this

story. This explanation is more favorable and gives more credit to the courage of possums. Again, the least dominant creature finds a way to survive, or a defense mechanism, in the cruel world.

“Why Mr. Possum has no Hair on his Tail” is a similar story, told upon Boy’s request: “[Y]ou know you promised to-day to tell me why the Possum has no hair on his tail” (131). Uncle Remus tells the story: Brer Possum was stealing persimmons from Brer Bear. Brer Bear finds Brer Possum, shakes him down from the tree and chases him. Brer Bear catches Brer Possum by the tail and pulls all of his hairs out of his tail while Possum manages to slip away. Uncle Remus concludes the story by saying, in the close frame: “Fum dat day ter dis, ... Brer Possum ain’t had no ha’r on his tail, en needer do his chilluns” (132). The story is logically connected to real facts, and provides a fun explanation for why something is the way it is. Dropping the hair on the tail becomes Brer Possum’s defense mechanism, and what saved him from a possible death by the hands of Brer Bear.

Communicating Hope

The three types of stories seem different at first glance in style, plot and theme. It is safe to claim, however, that Harris’ collection includes different types of folktales which have historically served a similar purpose for the African American community. According to Harris, the collection was not simply intended as entertainment; “its intention is perfectly serious” (qtd. in Flusche, “The Folklore” 354). The stories are enjoyable, and were meant to be placed in the “entertainment”-section in the libraries, but there is a serious undertone in the tales related to their serving a means of survival. The stories of “how things came to be as they are” helped explain the condition of the slaves. The animal fables represented a

fictional universe in which Brer Rabbit operate as the powerful and heroic, although ambivalent trickster figure with whom the slaves could identify, featuring as an “underdog” who manages to use his wits to get on top of the seemingly impossible situations.

Hope seems to be the keyword that connects the stories. The supernatural element inspires imagination and optimism, presenting a world parallel to the one introduced in the Bible, where miracles do happen. The tales provide a fantasy world in which transformations and escapes from unpleasant situations are possible. The stories in Harris’ collection “got a hidden meanin’, jus’ like de Bible” (Hurstun, qtd. in Gates 206).

What’s Cookin’

The politics of narration is rooted in Harris’ role in the collection, and what he claims he does is analyzed as opposed to what the text shows evidence of. Harris claims that “none of [the stories] are cooked” and that “not one not any part of one is an invention of mine” (qtd. in Flusche, “The Folklore” 354). He also declares that the legends have been given “without embellishment and without exaggeration” (39). The truth, however, is another.

Labeling Harris a mere reteller would be incorrect if one considers his actual part in the finished product. A mere retelling of the stories would mean that the stories would be told in the same medium, in the identical manner. In Harris’ case the stories have been converted from one medium to another, as in their transformation from oral to written. A black on white presentation of oral tales can never present a complete recreation of the original. Harris’ thus becomes a “teller” rather than a “re-teller,” because the prefix “re” signals a repetition of something, and what the collection signifies is a manipulation and a creation of something. Several critics, for instance Alan Dundes, speak of Harris as the

one who “re-told” the stories while at the same time speaking of the obvious misrepresentation of the tradition (524). He does not see the contradiction in his claims. The stories were not retold, they were told in a new manner.

Harris created the narrative frame, including the atmosphere and setting, which are features of his authorial signature and imagination. The narrative frame is formed by the characters Harris produced, who speak the dialect that Harris created, claiming to provide factual transcriptions. The plots of some of the stories show evidence of alterations as well. The stories are, in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, “cooked,” compared to the “raw” stories Harris collected (1). The chef Harris “cooked” the stories into a more suitable format for the white readership.

The discussion of authenticity often arises when speaking of Harris’ folktales, especially when considering their relation to other collections of folktales, like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*. What does it mean to be authentic? How can one tell if the legend is authentic, and how can one measure authenticity? Is a story authentic because it includes elements of or follows the traditional version of a story? Or, is it only the story which includes the original ideas and expresses no divergence from the original tale that can be considered authentic? Can a story told by African Americans and modified by a white American author still be considered authentic? A comprehensive discussion of authenticity is beyond the scope of this thesis, but the theme needs to be addressed briefly. The OED defines the word “authentic” as “[r]eally proceeding from its reputed source or author; of undisputed origin, genuine” (“authentic”). This definition relies on the origin of the stories and the source of the author, which implies that Harris’ collection is less authentic than Charles W. Chesnut’s or Hurston’s, for example, because Harris, unlike

Chesnutt and Hurston, is not African American, and is not as closely culturally tied to her tradition.

Harris' modifications of the original legends reduce his role as a genuine spokesperson for African American tradition. His modifications remove the legends from their original African American cultural setting to a setting where a white author is the manipulator. Claiming to stick to the tradition yet modifying it reduces the level of authenticity in Harris' work. Folklorists, nevertheless, often acknowledge Harris' collection with regard to authenticity. Baer writes that "more than two-thirds of the total canon of Uncle Remus tales have close analogues in African traditional oral literature" (192).

Hurston's anthropological work *Mules and Men* is, on the other hand, usually regarded a quintessentially authentic collection of African American folktales. Some critics, however, question her authenticity, because the tales included in *Mules and Men* allegedly collected on an anthropological expedition in 1927, had been published at earlier dates. For instance, the story of "How Brer Dog Lost His Beautiful Voice" appeared in the "Eatonville Anthology" (1926). Still, the above definition of "authentic," which focuses on the roots and the historical connection of the author to her material, grants Hurston the label of authenticity. Hurston allows one to go directly to the folk source without relying on the literary reworkings of folktales (Dundes 524), because she presents the stories as they were told, without the need to place them in a deliberate context, frame or setting. The stories therefore do not show evidence of appropriation for certain audience or implied audience, and seem to be written down as they were told.

Harris' collection represents the contrast between black and white, thus between the oral and the written. Writing has historically been a culturally privileged and exclusive

mode of expression. The black culture relied on oral transmissions of the stories to keep them alive. The whites, on the other hand, who accessed and mastered literacy, had the opportunity to record their history in writing. Hence, written history has been considered superior to oral history because of the apparent permanence of the written sources, which is believed to be the only true key to knowledge.

In Walter Benjamin's terms, the power struggle between the different discourses can be referred to as the struggle between "historicism" and "historical materialism" (I). According to Benjamin, one finds, on one hand, the "master" discourse of history, or the so-called historicism, offered by the dominant classes, providing dictates of how to read history. On the other hand, history written from the bottom-up offers lived records of history as basis for historical knowledge. Benjamin here speaks of a similar historical split as Ashraf Rushdy ("Master Texts" 4). There is a tension between the two understandings of history which the black and white readings of history can demonstrate. In "History Is Your Own Heartbeat," Rushdy exemplifies the difference between the two: He mentions Paul Murray who was happy to see the oral stories that were heard at home "confirmed by documents" (17). Writing down the stories made them appear true, to Murray, although significant problems arise from the transposition from the oral to the written medium.

The written medium allows Harris to construct an African American image. According to Rushdy, race is what black people have, whereas white people have, or claim to have, the power to impose blackness and whiteness on someone, and to place black or white labels ("Master Texts" 21). The construction of African American identity or character as presented by Harris is stereotypical and false. The translation from oral to written granted Harris power to create a picture of African Americans at the same time as

it made Harris susceptible to critique for the way in which the oral tradition was “carried on.”

Harris used different strategies to narrow the gap between the oral and the written media. Thematically linked episodes are split into separate storytelling situations or chapters. Similarly, in an oral storytelling situation, there is no guarantee that the story will be finished and distractions are likely to appear and cause the teller to discontinue his telling and to continue when urged to do so at a later point of time. According to Walter J. Ong, starting “in ‘the middle of things’ is not a consciously contrived ploy but the original, natural, inevitable way to proceed for an oral poet approaching a lengthy narrative” (*Orality* 144). Keeping this oral storytelling trait intact, the transition from the oral to the written mode is less dramatic. Ong provides the connection between the oral narration and memory as a reason for why the storyline is not linear in oral storytelling (*Orality* 147). Memory is not necessarily chronological and the oral narration is, therefore, not chronological either. The narrator “in an oral culture . . . normally and naturally operated in episodic patterning” (Ong, *Orality* 148). This oral narrative phenomenon appears in Harris’ collection: The continuation of “The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story” is delayed and told at a later point of time. The two episodes, the creation of the tar-baby leading to the catching of Brer Rabbit, and Brer Rabbit’s turning the situation around, are split into two structurally separate but thematically linked stories. “Why Mr. Possum Loves Peace” separates part one from part two, and the end of the story is told in “How Mr. Rabbit was too Sharp for Mr. Fox,” three pages later, when Boy asks to hear the end of the story. Remus replies “I ‘clar ter grashus I ought er tole you dat, but ole man Nod wuz ridin’ on my eyeleds ‘twel a leetle mo’n I’d a dis’member’d my own name, en den on to dat here come yo’ mammy hollerin’ atter you” before telling part two of the story (62).

The distraction, sleepiness and fading memories which are features of oral storytelling caused the story to be split in two separate parts. The effect of this split is the creation of suspense and anticipation. Eager to hear the end of the story, the reader and listener keep on reading or listening, because of Uncle Remus' narrative tactics.

Uncle Remus as a character is temperamental, judging, humorous, loving and moral, and tells stories to Boy to teach him a lesson or to entertain him. Uncle Remus becomes Harris' mouthpiece or channel for storytelling. For Bernard Wolfe, Uncle Remus is "the ventriloquist's dummy on Harris' knee" (527), the communicator of the material Harris wanted to share. He is presented as a stereotypical African American, whose idiosyncratic traits correspond with the traits of "the race of which Uncle Remus is a type" (46), which is a clearly racist statement.

While Harris expresses a wish to distance himself from Harriet Beecher Stowe who, he claims, "painted the portrait of the Southern slave-owner and defended him" (40), his Uncle Remus is not very different from the traditional "Uncle Tom"-character, who was portrayed as a naïve, faithful, gullible, obedient and kind slave who did everything he was told to do by his master. Louis Rubin supports this claim by showing the similarities in the descriptions of Uncle Remus and Uncle Tom. Both uncles are "happy darkies" (Rubin 159) or "grinner-givers" (Wolfe 527). Harris himself stated that he wanted Uncle Remus to express "nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery" (47). Boy saw the nights with Uncle Remus "as entertaining as those Arabian ones of blessed memory" (66), in which the "blessed memory" represents the beliefs incorporated in the plantation myth. Uncle Remus also plays a more threatening role than Uncle Tom, a role

in which he “was compelled to assume a threatening attitude” (89). The two uncles both speak a constructed African American vernacular.⁷

The diverse presentations of the dialects help separate the two frame characters from each other. The dialects increase the gap between the “white” narrative frame and the “black” content, and make the contrast between the two more striking. The collection is hence double-voiced, a dynamics which Gates in reference to Hurston calls “Hurston’s theory of Signifyin(g)” or “the Speakerly Text” (xxv).⁸ Boy’s Standard English is contrasted by Uncle Remus’ vernacular. Dialect presentation or transcription is an important part of storytelling and might preserve some of the oral features or imprints that would be lost if one were to represent the stories in Standard English. The translation from oral to written medium becomes less marked, because some of the oral elements are kept. A transcription of the dialect can bring the work to life and seems to provide the text with authenticity. Harris writes that he wanted to wed the stories to “the quaint dialect – if indeed, it can be called a dialect – through the medium of which they have become a part of the domestic history of every Southern family” (39). The wish to recreate the original dialect is common in local color or regionalist literature, and an attempt at dialect representation is found in works by regionalist writers such as Mark Twain, Charles W. Chesnutt and Joel Chandler Harris.

The oral aspect seems to be of great importance to Harris who ponders the fascinating sound of one of Uncle Remus’ words:

’I-doom-er-ker-kum-mer-ker!’ No explanation could convey an adequate idea of how the intonation and pronunciation which Uncle Remus brought to bear upon

⁷ African American Vernacular English which refers to what Henry Louis Gates and William Labov call “Black English Vernacular,” (Gates xix), is the most recent and most widely accepted linguistic term for the dialect (Crystal 179).

⁸ The phenomenon is similar to that which is called “skaz” by the Russian Formalists (for instance Vladimir Propp), and refers to a text that “seems to be aspiring to the status of oral narration” (Gates xxvi).

this wonderful word. Those who can recall to mind the peculiar gurgling, jerking, liquid sound made by pouring water from a large jar, or the sound produced by throwing several stones in a rapid succession into a pond of deep water, may be able to form a very faint idea of the sound, but it cannot be reproduced in print.

(92)

The music of the word is very important to Harris, and he therefore strives to recreate the sound.

In some ways the dialect rendition is also problematic and not necessarily representative of the original dialect. A white man's attempt to recreate a dialect which is not natural to him is not necessarily accurate. Harris' version of the African American Vernacular reflects stereotypical ideas of the African American voice. Exaggerating the dialect made Uncle Remus' "peculiarities" stand out more for the white reader. The dialect was, in other words, made excessive "as a literary device to emphasize the quaintness of regional characters" (Baer 185). The dialect rendition does, in addition, seem to be influenced by applied grammatical rules, simplifying the dialect in a way, making it less organic or oral, including no "ehm"-s, "Ah"-s or natural grammatical incongruities, focusing on making the dialect readable and more understandable for the white reader.⁹

For Harris, "a volume written entirely in dialect must have its solemn, not to say melancholy, features" (39). What he means here is unclear since Harris does not seem to want Uncle Remus to signal memories of misery. Uncle Remus is meant to portray the memories from his slavery days in a nostalgic manner. He explains in his introduction that there is "pathos" in the fact that a group of people feel that they can recognize pieces of

⁹ According to Hurston, "Ah" would be the natural transcription of the African American use of the personal pronoun "I" ("Characteristics" 1052). Examples of the correct use of "Ah" instead of "I" are found in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: "Ah kin signify all Ah please, ... so long as Ah know what Ah'm talkin' about" (qtd. in Gates, 197).

themselves within the “weakest” of all animals, communicating that “it is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness” (44). He feels sorry for the people who identify with the rabbit. At the same time, the melancholy can be rooted in the memory of the white man, who misses the time of slavery, in which the white men were better off. Harris does write, though, about the melancholy features of a volume written *entirely* in a dialect. Harris’ volume, that includes both African American dialect and Standard English, might succeed in reducing the level of melancholy in Harris’ view, compared to a volume written only in African American Vernacular English, if one interprets his claim in this manner.

Unwillingly, and based on another interpretation, Harris is right in claiming that his dialect rendering is melancholic. Harris’ creation of Uncle Remus as a character and speaker of the vernacular presents African American stereotypes. The unveiled attitudes found in the presentation are, in fact, melancholy. The African American Vernacular variety Harris presents is racist and incorrect. Gates presents a similar view when he writes that Uncle Remus is “more related to a racist textual tradition that stemmed from minstrelsy, the plantation novel, and vaudeville than to representations of spoken language” (176). The dialect is far from correct, according to Gates.

In addition to the setting, characters and dialect, Harris also creates new plots, based on inspiration from his different sources. Harris’ daughter-in-law Julia Collier Harris illustrates his appropriations of the original stories in *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris*. Here one finds references to the format in which many legends reached Harris, as for example, the story about “Bro Bare” and “Bro Rabbit”: While Brer Rabbit is in Miss Meadows’ house, Brer Bear eats up his children, burns down his house and makes the scene look as if the children set the house on fire and perished in it. Brer Rabbit does not fall for Bear’s setup, sees Brer Bear’s tracks and wants to get back at Bear. He then

tricks Bear to put his head in a hole in a tree, in which Brer Bear gets stuck and probably suffocates to death. The storyteller who sent the tale to Harris concludes his story by saying “Mr. Harris you have the tale now give it wit I never had room to give you all you can finish it” (J. Harris 197).

Harris changes and finishes the story as “The End of Mr. Bear.” This story is significantly different from the one that was sent to him. Harris’ story omits several incidents from the original oral tale, preserving only the scene of the Bear’s demise. The parts including the eating of Brer Rabbit’s children and the burning of his house are excluded. The noticeable degree of alteration makes one realize how significant the difference is between the suggested outline and the finished product, and how considerable Harris’ role has been in the creation of the published stories.

Accommodating the Reader

The main reason for the alterations was probably making the material suit the target audience. Harris’ book had different groups of readers. The collection seems to be meant to reach both the black and the white readership as well as children and adults, but to different degrees and for different reasons. Harris himself speaks of his varied readership in his introduction to the collection:

I trust I have been successful in presenting what must be, *at least to a large portion of American readers*, a new and by no means unattractive phase of negro character – a phase which may be considered a *curiously sympathetic* supplement to Mrs. Stowe’s *wonderful defense of slavery* as it existed in the South. (40, emphasis added)

Harris' statement seems to express a belief that his collection might not be as favorably regarded by all readers. Harris seems to be content with creating an acceptable and compassionate image of the African American which is not unpleasant. This quote, however, reveals the attitude of the time, including its underlying racism. Rubin claims that "his audience surely did not read the stories as subversive" (171), which this thesis contests, arguing that even in Harris' time the reading of the stories must have depended on the readership, to which the discussion will turn. His primary audience, the whites, did probably not necessarily find the stories subversive, which makes Rubin partly correct.

The collection seems to be primarily meant for whites who are comfortable with imagining the, to the observant reader, oxymoronic image of "the venerable old darkey" (90), or a happy black man who has nothing bad to say about his slavery days. The "white" plantation myth-frame was needed to communicate, to contextualize the tales. Especially violent or controversial elements from the "raw" folktales were removed in order to avoid offending the white reading public, Southerners in particular. Harris' collection consists of the tales he found "most characteristic" (39), and suitable for white readers; they were chosen to create an image of the African American character and culture that suited his audience. The whites were generally fond of Harris' representation of Uncle Remus (Hemenway, Introduction 10).

A changing of the original tale to suit the white readers is illustrated in the example of "The End of Mr. Bear," as shown earlier in this chapter, in which the most disturbing violence in the original tale is omitted in Harris' version. The white readers are meant to enjoy the fantasy of a sympathetic relationship between the black and white in the days of slavery without being distracted by dramatic violence, at the same time as they are to learn about the "peculiar" African American folktale tradition. Flusche writes that Harris

“heightened the appearance of cordiality among the animals and softened their hostility ... [muting] the real meaning of the stories” (“Underlying Despair” 177-178), downplaying the communication of the possibility for resistance in the core tales.

Not all critics seem to be aware of Harris’ modification of the stories. Rubin writes that “[i]n telling about the animals, Harris did not have to shape the morality and motivations of his characters in accordance with what the ideality of his time and place decreed ought to be; he could view their actions and responses in terms of what truly *was*” (167). Rubin is correct in claiming that Harris was able to disguise some of the subversive messages through the use of the animal fable, “writing of Negro life in the guise of the animals [to be able to] tell what he knew” (Rubin 167), but he also changed the fables to make them more reader friendly, as illustrated.

The image of a white narrator might have made the collection more likeable to the white reader. In this collection the overarching frame narrator is anonymous and omniscient, but some truths about the narrator do, nonetheless, surface. The unnamed narrator is white, speaks Standard English which offers a large contrast to Uncle Remus’ speech. The external third-person narrator is “invisible.” The author himself intrudes and adds notes to the stories when he expects his white readers to be confused, for instance when he explains the meaning and the origin of the word “skedaddle” in “Mr. Rabbit Finds his Match at Last”: “It may be interesting to note here that in all probability the word ‘skedaddle,’ about which there was some controversy during the war, came from the Virginia negro’s use of ‘skaddle,’ which is a corruption of ‘scatter.’ The matter, however, is hardly worth referring to” (105). Explaining the meaning of the word, Harris explains how the African Americans of Virginia tainted the Standard English infinitive to “scatter.” Viewing language variations as corruptions, Harris’ discriminating disposition is again

displayed. Linguistically, “skedaddle” is an oral transformation of the original word, representing the logic of a sound transmission.

The fact that the stories are narrated in African American vernacular and that Harris went through much trouble to keep the tradition of storytelling intact, makes it evident that the collection was meant to reach African Americans as well. He seems to try to avoid offending African Americans in his work, yet to what degree he succeeds in this undertaking is less certain. His work is meant to profit the African Americans and their tradition by preserving the orature in writing. Harris is almost speaking in tongues in the language less familiar to his white readership, which is meant to cause both confusion and fascination in the white reader, and to some degree, familiarity in the African American reader. Harris wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Folk-Lore Journal* in London that

[i]t is a misfortune, perhaps, from an English point of view, that the stories in that volume are rendered in the American negro dialect, but it was my desire to preserve the stories as far as I might be able, in the form in which I heard them ...
(qtd. in J. Harris, 157)

Harris shows a keen interest in African American tradition and expresses a wish to continue with it in his own writing.

Whether Harris was successful in reaching all readerships, however, is a different story. As he expected, his work was too transparent to convince the black readership, who disliked his misrepresentations and stereotypical character creations, and perhaps parts of the white readership, as well. Africans and African Americans are and were often skeptical of Harris’ interpretation of their traditional tales. Ogunleye writes that “myths must be dispelled and we must begin to discriminate between the folklore that is truly reflective of the African worldview and that which has been falsified or is indicative of the

dislocated African persona” (454). The acceptance of Harris’ work becomes more problematic with time because of a heightened awareness of racial undertones. According to Leonard Diepeveen, Harris had a “shaky reputation with all Harlem Renaissance artists and intellectuals. The typical discussion tempered slight praise with strong reservations” (70). Diepeveen’s description of the typical reception is similar to the light in which Harris is viewed by this thesis, and the light in which most critics view him today. Harris’ work reveals an attitude that is objectionable, especially to those familiar with the African and African American tradition.

Tainted Love

Harris wrote in his copybook: “Which is most respectable, poor folks or niggers?” (qtd. in Flusche, “Underlying Despair” 175). The private African American heritage was used and widely distributed for Harris’ purpose: “To preserve the stories dear to Southern children” (J. Harris 156). In other words, Harris marketed a “reunion” (Rubin 158), a reunion for white children or adults with pleasant plantation memories. Harris’ narrative politics made it possible to publish his collection and make money. Hurston argues that “language is like money” and that its development is similar to and dependent on the financial marketplace (qtd. in Gates, 197). The success of a work relies on two factors in particular: Firstly it relies on publishing, which was, in Harris’ and Chesnut’s time, controlled by the Northern whites, and secondly it relies on the work’s reception. The subject matter and narrative strategies depend on the needs of the targeted reading public, which Harris adjusted in order to please it.

A question that needs to be asked is why Harris did not admit his modifications of the folktales. Why keep them a secret? Why claim the tales were unaltered, when they

obviously are modified in several ways? The answer may lie in Harris' wish to preserve the precious stories for later generations, to make sure they live on, to keep on bringing joy to people's lives. He did not want the credit for having anything to do with the content of the folktales; he wanted the African American culture to be credited for the creativity, imagination and form of the folktales, which is why he claimed to have nothing to do with the plot or the presentation. He wanted to reduce his own voice to keep the focus on the African American folktales. The problem then becomes how to separate Harris from the African American tradition. The two have proved to be intertwined, thus hard to distinguish, which reduces the level of authenticity drastically, at the same time as it prevents Harris from fulfilling his goal which is to share the stories to as many as possible. The collection is not used in some schools because of what some perceive as offensive content (Dundes 524). A tainted recording of a tradition is worth less than an authentic one, and because of the ban of Harris' work in some schools, many black children are kept from learning about the special rabbit trickster figure (Dundes 524).¹⁰ Harris did, in other words, stand in his own way.

The tales are instructive, motivating and entertaining in more than one sense. They educate the reader how to act, as well as they teach him or her about the attitude prevalent at the time. What initially started as African American tradition has been wrapped in white supremacy and rewritten with some elements left and others lost in the process of conversion. This makes Harris' collection complex and dynamic, and gives the reader insight into the attitudes of the time. Ong claims that "moving into the exciting world of literacy means leaving behind much that is exciting and deeply loved in the earlier oral world. We have to die to continue living" (*Orality* 15). This thesis forms an objection to

¹⁰ What Dundes does not take into account are the other Brer Rabbit oral tales, for instance Hurston's, which are more widely accepted. The tales may still be read in these schools, for instance, while Harris' are not.

Ong's claim as well as a support. Harris wanted to record and carry on the African American oral heritage, but he writes from the outside of the tradition, which is why he cannot be regarded a true spokesperson. The presentation of the African American tradition is racist and incorrect. The oral tradition has thrived for ages, and parts of it are omitted or modified if the manner of the carrying on of the tradition is changed. Moreover, recording the oral material in writing is a sort of a perversion of the tradition.

Harris' collection can be seen as a move toward acceptance of African Americans in a prejudiced society and as a wish to record and carry on the African American tradition in writing. Despite its good intentions, there is a challenge because of its false representation of African Americans and African American tradition, and because of the author's historicist approach to historical materialism. Not only are its elements lost in translation, the collection, unfortunately, displays ignorance, stereotypification, and political incorrectness.

Chapter Two: Narrative Conjunction

Before Chesnutt's original publication of *The Conjure Woman*, the author published several of his stories in the *Atlantic Monthly*. According to the "one-drop rule" and Chesnutt's own opinion of himself, he was African American, but could pass for white. His narrative constructions allow his tales to pass as readings for white readers. Chesnutt was the first African American writer of fiction to enlist the white-controlled publishing industry in the service of his social message (Andrews, Introduction vii). The readers of *The Conjure Woman* were primarily white, middle-class readers. The journals and publishing houses were established in the North, and Chesnutt wrote with the economy of the North in mind. To the Northerners who Chesnutt was forced to attract to get published, the black folk tradition was a curiosity which made the local color conjure-stories a popular read (Brodhead, Introduction 4-5). He is known for basing his political agenda in folklore in an attempt to bring something African American into American literature.

The Chesnutt-collection discussed in this thesis counts eighteen tales. The order of the tales roughly represents the order in which they were written. The first seven tales were published as *The Conjure Woman*, which will be the focus of this thesis. *The Conjure Woman* includes seven tales from the days of slavery. The purpose of these tales is to contest the idea of the pleasant plantation myth. The poor conditions of the abominable institution are illustrated and exemplified. Chesnutt's descriptions of slavery life seem to be meant to affect the readers, revealing the destructive and dehumanizing force of slavery (Eckard 82).

The stories in the collection include enslaved characters, masters and performers of conjure. Often, the slave seeks the conjurer's help in order to resolve a problem or improve his or her condition. The two stories that this thesis will focus on are "Mars Jeem's Nightmare" and "Hot-Foot Hannibal." These particular stories have been chosen because the role of the storytellers as conjurers or trickster figures is explicit. There is a complex relationship between author, narrator, storyteller, audience and reader. These two stories were written over a period of six weeks in the vernacular dialect style with the conjure theme, according to the publisher Houghton Mifflin's requirements (Brodhead, Introduction 16-17). The fact that these stories were based on the specific requirements makes it extra relevant to assess Chesnutt's careful politics of narration to study how he works with and against the demands of the publishers. References to other stories in *The Conjure Woman* will also appear when relevant.

Texts and Contexts

Chesnutt uses his authorial imagination vividly to create original tales. "The Goophered Grapevine" is an exception because it is a tale which he was told at a young age and published before *The Conjure Woman*. Also this story shows evidence of creative authorial input, since Chesnutt's version differs from similar "Goophered Grapevine"-stories that were told earlier (Hemenway, "The Functions" 286-287). There are familiar elements of traditional folklore that can be traced in the other stories as well. The doll with red pepper feet in "Hot-Foot Hannibal," for instance, resembles a doll mentioned in traditional tales, and Chesnutt explains that this repetition of earlier elements occurred instinctively, and that he was taken by surprise when he heard talk of a similar doll on a trip to North Carolina ("Superstitions" 372).

The narrative communicative pattern is the same for all seven tales, featuring the ex-slave storyteller Uncle Julius, and his listeners: John, Annie, and sometimes Mabel. Yet, in the narrative frame enveloping the said narrative scenario, John, the white plantation owner, serves as the narrator, while Uncle Julius tells the stories. Julius' tales are embraced in John's story, and the individual tale functions, in Ross Chamber's words, as a "narrative act within a narrative act" (77). The author stages the tellers' positions and is "invisible," as he does not intrude in the storytelling explicitly.¹¹ The frame story is told according to a linear chronology, while the inside tales are told seemingly independently without any obvious connection to an overarching timeline. The function of the stories' frames and the teller-tale-receiver-reader paradigm will be discussed at length in this chapter.

Chesnutt's carefully structured narrative layering suggests the layering of an onion. Several critics, like Ashe, choose to view the collection strictly in this manner. According to this interpretation, it consists of three "layers": The outside layer comprises Chesnutt's narrative *The Conjure Woman* with Chesnutt as the writer and storyteller. The next layer exists inside Chesnutt's narration: It is the voice of the narrator, John, who tells the reader of his surroundings and experiences. On the third level lie the tales as narrated by Uncle Julius. There are, in other words, three narrators and storytellers, with Chesnutt serving as the storyteller of the "outside tale," with John serving as the storyteller of the "middle tale" and with Uncle Julius serving as the storyteller of the "inside tale."

Approaching the narrative construction as a layered onion can give an idea of how the narrative is constructed, but it may also represent a simplification of the narrative situation. Especially when considering the receivers, the audience or readers, the

¹¹ He never intrudes directly in the text like Harris does. Harris includes notes when he expects his readers to be confused, as illustrated in "Political Cookery."

addressees and their roles are blurred. The addressees can be seen as both the audience inside the story (John, Annie and Mabel) as well as the reader of the story. Several narrative frames merge and cannot be fully separated as distinct “layers.” John is both a narrator and a listener, which complicates his role in the narrative construction. Chesnutt as the constructor supersedes the whole narrative situation at all times. The situation therefore does not form separate “boxes” or “layers” as such.

The narrative frame and the inside tale are separated by the vernacular. The narrator uses Standard English while Julius speaks the African American vernacular. The telling of the tale contrasts the inside tale to the narrator and listeners. The collection presents double-voicedness in Henry Louis Gates’ sense, representing the speaking African American voice in writing (xxv). The contrast between Uncle Julius and the narrator is similar to what Gates observes in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “The direct discourse of the novel’s black speech community and the initial standard English of the narrator come together to form a third term, a truly double-voiced narrative mode” (xxvi). One may see *The Conjure Woman* as heteroglossic, in Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s terms, signaling different languages and discourses connected to the characters’ differing contexts and backgrounds (302), indicating the distance between the two cultures and between the two stock characters. Dialect is in this way used to signal both distance and closeness, depending on the reader or narratee.

The contrast between the narrative frame and the inside tale implies doubleness, a doubleness which is related to the conjurer roles of Chesnutt and Uncle Julius, to which the discussion will turn. Another name for the “conjurer” or Conjure Doctor is “two-head,” which reflects a belief that conjure doctors possess two souls (Anderson, *Conjure*

xii). Thus the reference to the “conjurer” as a “two-head” is similar to the DuBoisian idea of “double consciousness”:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (896)

DuBois refers to the two souls of the black folk, and their peculiar psychology of citizenship (Gates 207). This notion resembles the idea of the conjure doctor who possesses two souls. Chesnutt demands of his reader to think of the double indications. Uncle Julius is both African and American when in the eyes of John: He looks at himself through the eyes of others and speaks of himself and other African Americans as a white man would speak of him, in the “white” terminology.

Chesnutt’s message is coded in the African American vernacular, but whether his ideas reach the receiver depends on the addressee’s understanding, and on the addressee’s interest and willingness to comprehend. The coding of the narrative relies on folk wisdom and double-codedness, signifying, or speaking in tongues to camouflage the utterance. Thus, the vernacular is both a code and a “goopher,” or a means of conjuration. Language works as a bridge and a barrier at the same time, as much as it gives Chesnutt the power to transform and conjure the stories’ receiver (Jakobson 1147). The vernacular, which demands further investigation, fascinates and challenges the readers. Julius and John are, similar to the frame narrative and core tale, separated by the vernacular element.

The Power of the Powerless

John and Annie move from the North to a vineyard in the South due to Annie's health problems. Uncle Julius McAdoo works for John as a coachman and offers advice since he knows the area and customs which he explains to the newcomers. He offers advice when the couple considers buying the vineyard in "The Goophered Grapevine," and guesses the price of a piece of land that would enlarge their property in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt." Julius becomes an important and helpful figure in their lives, although John and Annie are "tricked" into benefitting him as well. Uncle Julius is described as a "venerable-looking colored man," "not entirely black" (4).¹² John observes "a shrewdness in his eyes ... which [was] not altogether African, and which, as we afterwards learned from experience, was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character" (4). Julius' shrewdness indicates a clever trickster mind. As illustrated, most of the initial descriptions of Julius as a character concern his color and complexion. The text suggests that it is surprising that the ex-slave is of mixed background, and although this side of Julius is highlighted in the text, it is not mentioned again.

Chesnutt writes that all of his writings, with the exception of *The Conjure Woman*, deal with the problems of people with "mixed blood" ("Post-Bellum" 910). Chesnutt's claim may appear strange, judging by the focus on Julius' mixed complexion in the first pages of his collection, which makes it evident that mixed background is a theme in this collection as well. This, however, is not a theme that is easily addressed at Chesnutt's time. During the time of slavery it was illegal for whites to sexually engage with African Americans, which means that Julius' complexion raises questions about his background which evidences sexual transgression. His color is important to his identity to the narrator,

¹² All page references to *The Conjure Woman* from *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line* will appear in parentheses in this chapter.

it seems, and it is therefore important to comment on his color when describing him as a person, while allowing Chesnutt to make implicit, political comments.

Uncle Julius serves as a trope for narration. He is a narrative prop that allows the stories to be told. While the stories are conditioned by his existence, his existence is at the same time conditioned by his storytelling. The stories seem very important to him, and he is important to the stories' existence. He would be less advantaged if he did not tell stories, as the stories are his weapon to affect his circumstances. The stories that Julius tells seem to be told for a specific purpose. Uncle Julius thus becomes a "conjurer," a character who performs trickery or "goopher" by storytelling. To him, storytelling is an investment that presumes a personal or communal profit although the story's pragmatic purpose appears to conceal it. Chesnutt himself addressed Julius' agency in an essay when he said:

In every instance Julius had an axe to grind, for himself or his church, or some member of his family, or a white friend. The introductions to the stories, which were written in the best English I could command, developed the characters of Julius's employers and his own, and the wind-up of each story reveals the old man's ulterior purpose, which, as a general thing, is accomplished. (qtd. in Ashe 18)

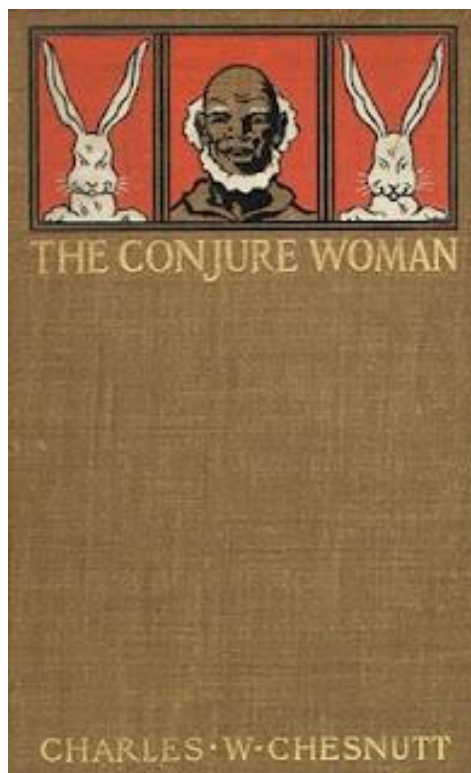
By telling his story, he ends up with a gain of some sort. His plan almost always works. The exception to the success of his pragmatic agenda can be found in "The Goophered Grapevine" in which Julius warns the couple not to buy the vineyard because it is bewitched (5). Julius is in disposition of a cabin on the property, which he wants to keep to himself to sell neglected grapevines. The couple decides to buy the vineyard nevertheless, and his plan fails. He does, however, end up with a profit, because John pays

him well for his services as “coach-man” and he is better off in the end than he was in the beginning (13). Yet his plans most often work. He tricks his audience, John, Annie and Mabel into letting him have his way, and negates the set power relations, rewarding himself with prizes that his powerful employer did not plan for him.

John and Julius illustrate the power struggle between the plantation owner and the African American ex-slave. It is important to realize that Chesnutt is the one who is always in control. He commands the whole narrative and decides how to divide the rest of the power between his respective characters, granting them varying amounts of space, staging the characters’ positions within the narrative act. “Authorship” is cognate with “authority,” and to tell a story is to exercise power (Chambers 50). Chesnutt is the authority who oversees and controls his characters. Between the narrator John and Uncle Julius the power is relational, based on the individual’s discourse and their taking of turns (Chambers 50). Thus, in the narrator-narratee relationship, a benefit replaces a loss, when the narratee offers attention in exchange for information while the narrator sacrifices the information for attention (Chambers 51). In the case of *The Conjure Woman*, the situation is more complex. When it is Uncle Julius’ “turn,” he sacrifices information for attention, but this attention leads to a personal gain, which makes his offer less significant when compared to the achievement. The offer (the story) is specifically designed to bring profit to the teller, as an art of seduction performed to conjure the listener or reader.

Julius has several reasons for telling his stories. He may have short-term practical goals that he wishes to reach, but he also wants to share his tradition the Northerners by narrating stories from the past, offering an alternative to the white narrative tradition, or to the plantation myth. He wishes to portray the abominable institution and its consequences. Richard H. Brodhead, on the other hand, sees that Julius exploits his environment for

“limited practical gains instead of infinite, abstract returns” (Introduction 8). He wants to illustrate truths and politics different from those communicated by the plantation myth. Brodhead does not see the full picture or the full story, and focuses merely on Julius’ practical benefits, like the listener and narrator John. The abstract, long-term message is less explicit than Remus’ moral which is often overtly expressed. Chesnutt and Julius work together, it seems, to reach the long-term objective, which is served more by a thematic undertone than by a direct articulation of the lesson. If the plantation myth was markedly discouraged, publishing in the white world would be a problem, which meant that Chesnutt had to find ways of communicating his political message and still getting published. Julius’ trickster character and the “white” framing function as narrative devices that allowed for Chesnutt’s political ideas to be communicated.



Uncle Julius is set to play the role of an African American “trickster” figure. He is presented between two Brer Rabbit-figures on the front cover of the collection’s first edition, on the same horizontal axis or on the same level as the rabbits (Chesnutt, “Post-Bellum” 906). Compared to Brer Rabbit,¹³ the presentation of Uncle Julius signals similar qualities: He displays power through cunning, and although he is seen as weaker in some respects than the other characters, he manages to trick his way to advantages. Uncle-

characters in African American fiction or fiction containing African Americans have been

¹³ The comparative account made here is based on the description of Brer Rabbit in the previous chapter, “Political Cookery.”

assigned different roles. The role of the most famous one, Uncle Tom, was addressed in the previous chapter. Uncle Julius, on the other hand, is more mischievous and cunning, and similar to Zora Neale Hurston's mysterious and powerful "Uncle Monday" (*Folklore*), who is portrayed as a mysterious and authoritative figure. While Uncle Tom and Uncle Remus make the best of their situations, Uncle Julius does what he can to alter it. In this way, Uncle Julius gains more power, and the storyteller plays around the white rulebook: He negotiates what Brodhead refers to as the "Old-Uncle Formula" (Introduction 13), contrasted to Harris' Uncle Remus, who can be said to adhere to the Old-Uncle convention. As the "Old-Uncle Formula" is nearly synonymous with the plantation myth, Uncle Tom and Remus can be said to support it, while Julius opposes it, telling disturbing stories of the slave past to affect his listeners.

Also recently written African American literature explores the role of the "Uncle"-character. The "Uncle" continues to exist as an experimental model in literature, enabling the author to comment on earlier portrayals of African American "Uncles," challenging earlier conventions. Ishmael Reed's Uncle Robin seems docile, obedient and ignorant, at first, before it turns out that he has conjured and tricked most of the other characters, his master included. The other characters speak of his "childish race" (Reed 37) and refer to him as a "simple creature" (Reed 34). One of the other characters calls him "impoverished" and comments that it is "[n]o wonder they call you an Uncle Tom" (Reed 41). His Uncle Tom-acting is evident in significant parts of the book before the tables turn toward the end, and the trickster nature in Robin is revealed. The role Uncle Julius plays is more similar to that of Robin than to those of Tom or Remus because Julius and Robin are portrayed as sharp-witted players. The difference between Uncle Robin and Julius, however, is that Robin does not tell the story, like Julius does: He urges Quickskill to

write it. Storytelling is not his means of conjure, as in Julius' case, as he tricks the other characters by other means, and by pretending to play one role before exposing the other. Still, both characters are characters that negate the assumed power relations, who challenge the African American Uncle-conventions.

Yet, According to Ashe, some critics suggest that "Hot-Foot Hannibal" is "an example of the way Chesnutt ultimately portrays Julius as a safe old Uncle, dangerously close to an Uncle Tom" (18). The story he tells benefits the two young white lovers in the narrative who get reunited due to the storytelling. Although Julius does not acquire a material return after telling his story, he still changes the current situation. He hopes to get hired by the couple after helping them back together, and as expected, he gets an "opportunity to enter their service" (89). He is still a cunning and unpredictable Uncle and far from the "safe, old Uncle."

The story is what allows the storyteller Uncle Julius to make changes or to conjure. The story becomes the "goopher," that which makes the conjuration possible. The term "goopher" is used, in this case, both as a concrete object and as an abstract term, assigning the stories with powers of conjuration. John realizes how Julius' weapon works and admits that Julius' story, "Mars Jeem's Nightmare," is "powerful goopher" (38), which has already worked its magic. John appears powerless against the goopher and does not realize what Julius is doing before it is too late. Brodhead writes that "Julius defends himself against John's superior power – the surplus capital that lets him buy the new McAdoo plantation – with the weapon he has in endless supply: The countless stories he knows about the land that John knows as property" (Introduction 8). The stories serve as Julius' tool for conjure, or his "goopher."

Storytelling as conjure impacts even the most difficult situations. As mentioned in the introduction, Robert Hemenway's definition of "conjure" centers around the "votary's confidence" ("The Functions" 287), the "votary" being the addressee whose trust in the storyteller is a key factor. The storyteller betrays the listeners' confidence, in a way, because the confidence is used for the storyteller's benefit. In "Mars Jeem's Nightmare," John decides not to hire Julius' grandson Tom because he does not work hard enough. But, after Uncle Julius tells his story to John and his wife, Annie rehires Tom. Annie has more confidence in Uncle Julius and might even be seen as naïve, underestimating the power of storytelling, and underestimating Julius' agenda. Uncle Julius' story is influential enough to alter Tom's situation, which rationally seems irremediable.

Another example of the impact of storytelling may be found in "Hot Foot Hannibal," where Julius' story affects Annie's sister, Mabel. Mabel has a fight with her boyfriend Malcolm due to her jealousy, and both of them including John and Annie see the situation as hopeless. Annie expresses that she does "not see how it can ever be settled" (77). After hearing Julius' heartbreaking love story, Mabel feels bad and saves her relationship with Malcolm. Here, the confidence in the storyteller is not fully "betrayed" by Uncle Julius, because the story is told to benefit the two lovers as well, the story is told for their sake, to save their relationship, although he is hoping to profit from their reunion at a later point.

Julius' wording is what impacts the situation and what makes a change possible, seducing and influencing the narratees with his stories. Julius stages his narrative in a way which gives opportunities for identification, drawing unfavorable parallels which make the listeners want to dissociate themselves from the character to whom they are compared, as the Master Jeems' example will illustrate. Julius' words make the listeners consider and

doubt their ethics. The story impacts the narratees and makes them view themselves in a different light. In “Mars Jeem’s Nightmare,” Julius states that

Dis yer tale goes ter show ... dat w’ite folks w’at is so ha’d en stric’, en doan make no ‘lowance fer po’ ign’ant niggers w’at ain’ had no chanst ter l’am, is li’ble ter hab bad dreams, ter say the leas’, en dat dem w’at is kin’ en good ter po’ people is sho’ ter prosper en git ‘long in de worl.’ (38)

Julius here sums up his instructional message, which John and Annie are supposed to understand as the moral of the tale. The observant reader should realize that Julius is not only talking about the “noo nigger” but is also referring to his grandson, Tom. He wants John and Annie to reconsider their decision and let Tom stay, referring to Tom as “poor and ignorant nigger” with a tone of irony, when speaking of the slave in the way whites would refer to him, hoping his listeners might be able to relate to the stereotypical language and characterization, that mirror the language of a white man, reflecting the double consciousness.

Julius draws a parallel between John and Master Jeems whose biggest concern is to maximize their profit.¹⁴ John lets Tom go because he is lazy. Julius tells the story about Master Jeems who “said he wuz n’ raisin’ niggers, but wuz raisin’ cotton,” who “did n’ make no ‘lowance for nachul bawn laz’ness, ner sickness, ... ner nuffin; he wuz des gwine ter git so much work outer eve’y han’, er know de reason w’y” (28). When Julius signals that John knows the reason why, he seems to directly compare Master Jeems’ heartless work ethics with John’s. Master Jeems is not a person Annie would like her husband to be

¹⁴ Master Jeems is also the name of the plantation owner who is outwitted by a rabbit in Harris’ “A Plantation Witch” (144), which is treated in “Political Cookery.” Master Jeems is outwitted in Chesnut’s tale as well, and Chesnut’s use of the name might shed light on the influence that Harris has exercised on his writing.

compared to. Annie is emotionally affected by Julius' story and rehires Tom to give him a second chance.

A similar unfavorable invitation for identification is found in "Hot-Foot Hannibal" where Mabel identifies with the character Chloe who ruined a good relationship due to her unreasonable jealousy. Chloe's eventual misfortune and death inspire Mabel to make up with her boyfriend Malcolm, and Julius' detour that avoids Chloe's haunt. Julius first tells his story in a detailed, emotional manner so that Mabel can identify with Chloe, and then inspires her to fix her relationship. The story which allows Mabel to identify with Chloe and her sad fate encourages her to make a change in her own life, a change which affects not only the two lovers but also may involve the future employment of the apparently innocent storyteller. As Julius explains in "Hot Foot Hannibal," "It's all in de tale" (79), the magic and the power is located in "de tale." The details of the narration of the tale allow for a change in the circumstances. The details allow for identification and inspire transformation or change. Uncle Julius' influence and didactic function is allowed through his storytelling, and through his politics of narration.

The force of the "goopher" of storytelling however, has its limits. Julius manages to make certain changes to the current situation but is not able to change it radically. It is in the employers' power to give him or withhold his benefits (Brodhead, Introduction 11). He even depends on John's permission to be able to tell his story in the first place. The power struggle between John and Julius is recognizable in the structuring of the narrative. In the frame leading to Julius' storytelling, or the open frame, John is in control, and decides whether storytelling is appropriate, or the time is right, and whether he is "willing to humor the old man's fancy" (79). In the process of telling Julius is in control, and is able to tell his story without being interrupted. After the story has been told, in the close

frame, John regains the control, presents his conclusions and opinions, at the same time allowing Annie and/or Mabel to express their thoughts (Ashe 2).

In the embedded tale, the power of conjure is also limited. In none of the tales are the slaves freed by means of conjuring, but their daily lives might change for the better. Thus, in “Mars Jeem’s Nightmare,” for example, the master starts to treat his slaves better after been turned into a slave himself, even though none of his slaves are freed. The slaves are given the ability to take part in activities that make their days more bearable, but they are not relieved from their duties.

At the thematic level, the conjure doctors of the inside tales introduce the concepts of “goophers” and “conjuring.” One example is the Conjure Doctor Aunt Peggy, “de free-nigger conjuh ‘oman down by de Wim’l’ton Road” (29). She plays a significant role in the the stories and helps the characters in different ways. Goophers or other Hoodoo elements open up for an interpretation which awards the storytellers with similar powers as those of the conjure doctors. One can also find references to other kinds of “goophers”: In “Mars Jeem’s Nightmare,” Aunt Peggy prepares a “goopher mixtry” that causes Master Jeem’s nightmare; in “Hot Foot Hannibal,” Jeff places a “goopher” (a doll which resembles Hannibal with red pepper feet) under the Master’s house. Jeff’s and the conjure woman’s experiment affects Hannibal who is challenging his relationship to his master and to Chloe. The “goopher” causes burning feet and Hannibal loses Chloe’s and the Master’s trust. When Uncle Julius “goophers” his audience, he takes on the role of the Conjure Doctor or the Conjure Man.

Julius’ role as a conjurer depends on his ability to prove his embeddedness in traditional African religious practices of the conjure doctor and the roles that were

assigned to the practitioner of conjure. Brodhead is of a similar understanding of Julius' role in the collection:

Like the conjure woman working her roots, ... Julius's storytelling creates a zone of reality under his imaginative control. ... Casting his own kind of spell, the persuasion of his telling relocates his hearers' imaginations within this mind-managed world, where he can subject them to the counterforce of his different understanding. (Introduction 10)

The persuasion of telling, or the seducing storytelling, allows for a change in the listeners and readers, inspiring the listeners to direct their thinking in a certain way. Subjecting the narratees to another insight is done through irony, for example, as mentioned earlier, in relation to the stereotypical language used. The addressee might see the irony in what is said, or he or she may not. Whether the point is brought home depends on the narratee's understanding. The phenomenon in which fiction becomes a form of "goopher" or conjuring is at heart of Marjorie Pryse's work in which she treats Alice Walker who "associates authorship with magic" (1). In Pryse's view, Walker and Zora Neale Hurston regard fiction a kind of conjuring (2). The storyteller is the character who makes the transformations happen and who triggers a change, thus becoming the Conjure Doctor.

The storyteller shares many of the qualities with which the traditional conjure doctors were imbued. Traditionally, the figure of Conjure Doctor in African American folklore or Hoodoo had three roles: to conjure or "trick" a person, to cure persons who had already been conjured, and to help in love affairs (Anderson, *Hoodoo* 65). Uncle Julius assumes all three roles in *The Conjure Woman*. He tricks his employers for an economical gain of some sort, as, for instance, by telling the story of "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" to scare people away from the forest in order to keep the place of his source of honey hidden.

Moreover, he seems to cure Annie of her illness and sadness and to bring her good fortune with his “rabbit’s foot” in “Sis Becky’s Pickaninny.” John observes the change in Annie after Julius’ visit: “My wife’s condition took a turn for the better from this very day, and she was soon on the way to ultimate recovery” (61). Julius also helps Mabel in settling her quarrel with Malcolm by telling his story, as mentioned earlier.

Julius plays with his set role in relation to John and Annie and increases his own agency, accomplishing economical, practical as well as long-term gains by telling his stories. Jeffrey Anderson focuses on these kinds of returns when he defines a “conjurer” as “a professional magic practitioner who typically receives payment in return for his or her goods and services” (*Conjure* x). His conjuring capabilities allow him to do so. Conjure is “a recourse, a form of power available to the powerless in mortally intolerable situations” (Brodhead, Introduction 9). Zora Neale Hurston’s description of Uncle Monday in her article of the same name makes the connection between storyteller and conjure doctor or conjurer more apparent. Hurston describes Uncle Monday as “old, firm and strong” (*Folklore* 862) and as “sought when life becomes too powerful for the powerless” (*Folklore* 865). These descriptions fit Uncle Julius. He is “a tall man, and, though slightly bowed by the weight of his years, apparently quite vigorous” (4). Julius also has a function in John, Annie, Mabel and Malcolm’s lives. He is sought when John and Annie need advice, to cheer Annie up when she is feeling depressed, or when they are waiting for something and want a story to fill up their time.

Hurston writes that “[y]ou don’t have to explain things to Uncle Monday: Just go there, and you will find that he is ready for you when you arrive” (*Folklore* 866). This fact is also often the case with regard to Uncle Julius. The story has often been prepared beforehand for a certain reason, and Julius is more than ready to tell it. Before telling the

story about “Mars Jeem’s Nightmare,” for instance, Julius, John and Annie observe a man who is beating his horse, which Annie finds terrible: “I think there is no worse sin and no more disgraceful thing than cruelty” and that he “ought to be [ashamed of himself]” (27). Julius initiates the storytelling: “Ef young Mistah McLean doan min’, he’ll hab a bad dream one er dese days, des lack ‘is granddaddy had way back yander, long yeahs befo’ the wah” (27). As Julius expects, John inquires Julius about Mr. McLean’s dream. He wants Julius to tell them a story to keep them occupied while waiting to fill up their jugs, and Julius, of course, complies, because he has a story prepared.

Another example of Julius’ readiness for storytelling, displaying the same narrative tactic is in “Hot-Foot Hannibal.” The mare leading the carriage suddenly stops and ceases to move further, and Julius blames it on Chloe’s ghost, which makes Mabel ask “Who was Chloe?” and John decides that this is a good time for storytelling: “Tell us the tale. Perhaps, by the time you get through, the haunt will go away and the mare will cross” (79). Julius tells his story, and the mare “was never known to balk again” (79), which makes one think that Julius’ role in the mare’s recoil was more significant than Annie and Mabel expected, as he deliberately stopped the horse in order to tell the story and conjure his listeners.

Accommodating the Reader

‘That is a very ingenious fairy-tale, Julius,’ I said. ... ‘Why, John!’ said my wife severely, ‘the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did.’ ‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘especially the humming-bird episode, and the mocking-bird digression, to say nothing of the doings of the hornet and the sparrow.’ ‘Oh well, I don’t care,’ she rejoined, with delightful animation; ‘those are mere ornamental details and not at all essential. The story is true to nature, and might have happened half a hundred

times, and no doubt did happen, in those horrid days before the war.’ (“Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny” 61)

The quote entails dissimilar kinds of understanding and reactions to storytelling, as exemplified by the characters John and Annie. The two listeners signify different lines of thinking. Uncle Julius negotiates between different traditions or groups of readers to get his political message across, which is comparable to what the author of the collection does.

Chesnutt’s message is, as previously pointed out, coded in the vernacular and framed in a deliberate manner in order to reach a wide audience. Like Julius, he conjures his readers, entertaining them, challenging their views and enlightening them, inviting internal transformations in the narratees. Chesnutt is a careful innovator who lures his way into the narratees’ conscience without being explicit in his mission. As the Conjure Doctor Aunt Peggy admits, “I has ter be kinder keerful ‘bout conj’in w’ite folks” (30). Chesnutt’s power is limited, like Julius’ is. Chesnutt has to limit his political message in order to be published, but manages to get published, and is given the opportunity to affect readers. His narrative frame as well as his use of African American folk traditions allows him to comment on the racial realities. His approach inspires black American writers and instructs white American readers (Andrews, Introduction xvii). He plays with the roles of storytellers, audience and addressees, codes his message in the vernacular and conjures his audience.

The author’s message is similar to Julius’ message: He wants to enlighten the readers and narrate culture and traditions from the slavery days, to “overturn white racist attitudes with his fictions” (Ashe 26). By presenting scenarios that illustrate individual fates in the inside tales, he hopes to reach his audience emotionally. Even though there are

supernatural and unlikely elements in his tales, the challenges and misery that lead the characters to seek the Conjure Doctors inform the readers of the abominable conditions in which the slaves were forced to live. There is a truth in the unbelievable, and a reality at the heart of the unreal. Chesnutt himself works as a Conjure Doctor since he has the power to transform the attitudes of his audiences. Hemenway claims that "[t]he inside conjure story is parallel to the frame story" ("The Functions" 296). Uncle Julius serves as the conjurer in the frame narrative, while Chesnutt functions as the collection's chief conjurer. The lines between the different "frames" or levels of storytelling are blurred. The author supersedes the narrative at all levels.

In a comparable manner, Brodhead draws a parallel between Julius and Chesnutt, not seeing Chesnutt as a mere victim of the restrictions of the time he lived in, but as a conjurer, "casting a literary spell of his own" (Introduction 12). His framing of the narratives and use of conjure is what transforms and affects the reader, which is a technique similar to the one Julius employs. Both have the ability to make limited changes to the current situation, and whether the readers are affected by the storytelling relies on several factors: the readers' understanding of the vernacular, the readers' understanding of conjure, the readers' relationship to the storyteller, and the possibility for the readers' identification with the presented situation. The power of the narrative depends on the willingness and the ability of its readership to be impacted or conjured (Chambers 14), which makes it relevant to examine the possible readings of the stories.

In order to reach the Northern reading public, Chesnutt had to create the frame with the John-character as the teller of the stories. As an African American writer, Chesnutt addressed his writing to an Annie/John readership in order to get published, maneuvering through the conditions that worked against him because of his background.

If the African American author did not allow the white narrator to tell African American stories, *The Conjure Woman* would probably have had fewer white, middle-class readers, and not have been published at all. Chesnutt wanted to inspire and affect the attitudes of his listeners but could not be too explicit in this operation if he wanted to succeed as a writer or to get his work published. Consequently, John's views and reasoning correspond with the supposed opinions and beliefs of the white middle class *John*. Especially John is seen as the "Everyman," or the "John Doe," who is easily relatable by the Northern whites. John, Annie or Mabel function as the readers' inside-the-text representatives. They help to contextualize the tale, while providing models for white readers. As Walter J. Ong puts it, through the framed scenario the author fictionalizes his audience (*Interfaces* 61). Ashe writes that "African American writers periodically use a narrative frame as a medium for negotiation with their readership; the inside-the-text listeners . . . mirror their anticipated readers" (1). John and Annie become implied readers, or possible projections of the readers (Ong, *Interfaces* 61). The implied readers stage identification on a deeper level. In Stanley Fish's terms, the presented characters represent the different interpretive communities (9).

The creation of the "white" frame became Chesnutt's vehicle for social mobility. He shifted from one culture to another and directed his writing to a specific audience, not basing his narrative choices on direct feedback from a listener, but instead hypothesizing the audience's reaction (Chambers 220). John and Annie's move from one place to another is similar to what Chesnutt had to do in order to reach a wide audience, but their moves are reversed. While Chesnutt primarily looks to the white readers of the North, Annie and John move to the South. Brodhead writes that "the composition of *The Conjure Woman* . . . gives an extraordinarily vivid picture of the conditions that enabled and

restricted African American literary aspiration in the late nineteenth-century America – the conditions that Chesnutt worked in, through and against” (Introduction 2). Studying the way in which *The Conjure Woman* is coded and put together creates an image of the attitudes of Chesnutt’s time, his mission, and how he managed to fulfill his mission.

Chesnutt’s stories tend to focus on “‘a tragic incident’ but ‘not on slavery exactly’, instead ‘showing the fruits of slavery’” (Andrews, Introduction x), carefully conjuring the audience.

The conjurer’s message can be understood on different levels, and this thesis proposes the most likely readings of the stories and those readings that are suggested. Chesnutt seems to suggest at least two possible readings of the stories. As Chambers states, the point of literary narratives is “to admit (and invite) a range of interpretations, that is, to display the possibility of having, as individual narratives, any numbers of points” (19). The various readers view the narrative differently. This thesis holds the claim that there are no determinate meanings and that the text is unstable, similar to Stanley Fish’s belief (312). Although the possible readings may be many, particularly two readings are presented as examples of reader-models. Chesnutt seems to leave it to the reader who to identify with, whereby he or she becomes the *John* or the *Annie/Mabel*.¹⁵ In this way the two characters represent different trends or patterns of identification, and Chesnutt’s conjure depends on the readers’ identification.

If the reader identifies with John, Chesnutt’s and Julius’ stories function as a source for entertainment, as well as trickster tales in which the practical and economical goals of the storyteller are evident. Julius’ pragmatic returns would be this type of reader’s main interest. John comments on his skepticism after listening to “Hot-Foot Hannibal”: “I

¹⁵ Annie and Mabel are seen as one pattern of reader identification due to the similarity of their responses to the narration and to the seeming gendering of the readership.

was old enough, and knew Julius well enough, to be skeptical of his motives” (88). After listening to “The Conjuror’s Revenge” he also admits to taking “his advice only in small doses and with great discrimination” (50). The function of Uncle Julius is declared in the opening of “Mars Jeem’s Nightmare”: “We found him useful in many ways and entertaining in others, and my wife and I took quite a fancy to him” (25). These are sensible qualities that *John* treasures, probably because *John* is a pragmatist himself, filling his time pragmatically, with stories bringing purpose to situations in which he is not occupied, or needs a story for other reasons, as advice, or to cheer up his wife. *John* would read these stories to be amused and to uncover underlying, practical aspects of the addresser. *John* scorns the element of conjure because he is portrayed as too rational to consider it as truthful. Frowning upon the supernatural elements of conjure, *John* seems to miss the moral dimension of the tales, because he seems to be oriented toward the practical.

John displays a different dimension of himself when he describes Julius’ storytelling in the open frame leading to the telling of “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt”:

Of tales of the old slavery days he seemed indeed to possess an exhaustless store, - some weirdly grotesque, some broadly humorous; some bearing the stamp of truth, faint, perhaps, but still discernible; others palpable inventions, whether his own or not we never knew, though his fancy doubtless embellished them. But even the wildest was not without an element of pathos, - the tragedy, it might be, of the story itself; the shadow, never absent, of slavery and of ignorance; the sadness, always, of life as seen by the fading light of an old man’s memory. (65)

This ability in John has been overlooked in much of the earlier critical reading of the John-character, referring to John as a flat, one-dimensional character, for instance in

Brodhead's reading of his character ("Why Could Not" 197-198, 203-205).¹⁶ This quote reveals John's ability to see other aspects of Julius' storytelling. John still chooses to dismiss this trait in Julius when referring to his practical profit instead, and by mocking Mabel and Annie's emotional responses. At the same time, because this utterance is so unlike anything John's character would have said, the quote seems to come directly from the implied author. Chesnutt is possibly intruding here, and presenting his view of Uncle Julius, camouflaging his view in the figure of John. Chesnutt's view has in this case impacted one aspect of John's character. The supernatural details and the lack of truthfulness seem to be what shifts John's focus from the emotional aspect to the economical aspect of Julius, as the realistic side of him prevails.

The ideas of the *Annies* and *Mabels*, however, will most likely look at the moral, aesthetic and ethical dimensions of Chesnutt's stories. They will reach the "desired state of feeling" that Chesnutt wants his readers to do (qtd. in Gates 116). Like the character Annie, they question the truthfulness of the stories but see beyond the supernatural elements of conjure and allow the stories to appeal to their emotions. They allow conjure to work its magic on them because they trust the storyteller. John sees this after Julius is done telling them the story of "Hot-Foot Hannibal": "There was silence when the old man had finished, and I am sure I saw a tear in my wife's eye, and more than one in Mabel's" (87). When *Annie* reads "Hot-Foot Hannibal" and "Mars Jeem's Nightmare" she does not focus on the pragmatics and the economics of the storytellers. She is emotionally affected by what lies underneath the improbable tales, thereby allowing herself to be influenced by Chesnutt's stories. The ethics and aesthetics of the stories are important. The romantic

¹⁶ Brodhead's reading surprisingly also refers to Annie as "Anne" throughout this essay, yet he refers to her as "Annie" in his Introduction, published one year earlier than "Why Could Not a Colored Man." It is probable that the earliest editions of some of the stories published in *The Conjure Woman* use "Anne" as the name for John's wife.

aesthetics of “the package” in which they are enveloped is attractive and exciting, relieving her from her boredom. Uncle Julius impresses and fascinates her, while the memories the ex-slave narrates touch her heart. John’s understanding of the stories as presented in the close frame does not necessarily influence her because she chooses to read more into the stories than merely the economic aspect. She “can look through the fantastic elements of Julius’s tale to discover the tragic reality they highlight” (Andrews, Introduction xii), and makes up a mind of her own.

The *Annie* and *John* reading dichotomies also represent stereotypical gender-conditioned readings. There seems to be a stereotypification of the narrative situation. The female interest in ethics, emotions and aesthetics is portrayed as opposed to the male focus on practical interest and reason. Chesnutt reaches both groups and affects them differently. His political comments seem to affect the female group more than the male group due to their different interests in his storytelling. The female group is also more naïve and unsuspecting, which makes it an easier target for conjuration.

The addressee’s relationship to the past, to the supernatural and his or her connection to the storyteller are key elements in allowing the story to function as conjure. This connection is found between Annie and Mabel and the storyteller Uncle Julius. If the listener or reader disconnects himself or herself from the storyteller and his themes, like John does, conjure will not have any effect, either as long term imprints, or as short term goals.

Annie and Mabel’s approach to African American folk magic differs greatly from John’s approach. Their different relations to the supernatural are illustrated in “Po Sandy.” Annie exclaims after listening to the story: “What a system it was ... under which such things were possible!” (23). John then asks, in amazement, “Are you seriously considering

the possibility of a man's being turned into a tree?" focusing on the supernatural elements of the tale (23). Annie responds, "[o]h no, ... not that; ... Poor Tenie!" (23). As Annie is horrified by the abominable institution, John questions the truthfulness of the story. For Annie, the "truthful" or "true" is viewed differently. She knows that there is a truth in the descriptions of the characters in that the scenarios narrated can be rooted in the realities the slaves faced, even though the effects of conjure as narrated are hard to believe, placing her focus on a different aspect of the stories. She feels sorry for the character Tenie, who personifies an unfortunate girl who lived in the days of slavery. The idea of the miserable "Tenie" is what Annie focuses on, illustrating aspects of the painful African American past.

A similar contrast between the John and Annie/Mabel reading dichotomy is found in "Hot-Foot Hannibal." Again, the elements of folk magic separate the two receivers. John focuses on Chloe's haunt which he sees as an unbelievable aspect of the tale and asks jocularly: "You are not afraid of Chloe's haunt, are you?" to which "the mood was not responded to, and neither of the ladies smiled" until Annie responds "Oh no, ... but I prefer the other route" (87). Annie and Mabel are emotionally affected by the tale and wish to leave the road that they are on, where the haunt supposedly lives, distancing themselves from John's approach.

In addition to reaching white Northern readers and publishers through the Annie/John reader-model dichotomy, Chesnutt also reaches the African Americans. Before publishing the collection, Chesnutt announced that the African American is "to prepare himself for recognition and equality" and that literature would "open the way for him to get it" (qtd. in Gates 116). To the African American readers of *The Conjure Woman* the world presented offers a sort of healing power and a link to their past,

communicating hope in hopeless situations, which is what the core tales in Harris' collection also convey. The stories embody the African American wish to change the world and communicate a belief in the possibilities in those who are oppressed and subjugated. The stories in this way serve to inspire the African American readers, comforting these readers while reminding the readers of the types of stories that were told on the plantations, and the folk religion and superstition that were present. The healing power that is addressed here links up with the healing power of the conjure doctor, the effect that the "Rabbit's Foot" had that led to an improvement of Annie's health in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny." The stories become Chesnutt's prescription to treat and heal his African American readers. Ashe also addresses Chesnutt's covert attempt to speak to "the black readership" (11). These readers are not reached through the frame, as implied listeners or readers, but by way of "a little personal attention" (Ashe 11). They are contacted through the content of the stories, serving more as an implied frame than as implied readers within the frame narrative (Ashe 13). Being able to talk about, illustrate and play with the tradition that is also associated with painful memories, may bring reconciliation to the African American readers, to whom the vernacular becomes more of a "bridge" to their own tradition than a "barrier."

Determining the Mission's Success

Brodhead argues that "by mastering the literary conventions in which a distant culture images Southern racial life, a black author can make himself a personal success, while also helping a society prejudiced against people like him to change its mind" ("Why Could Not" 195). The *Johns* and *Annies* represent the society which Chesnutt wanted to impact in the same way that Uncle Julius wanted to shape the mind-sets of John and

Annie. The effectiveness of Chesnutt's conjure is determined by the readers' understanding while Julius' conjure is limited by the listeners' conceptions. Whether Chesnutt was successful in changing their minds and whether their prejudice or discrimination toward black Southerners changed depends on their understanding of the stories.

The readings differ in regard to the individual's approaches to the addresser, the supernatural and the vernacular. These elements control the function and the effect of Julius' and Chesnutt's conjure. The storytellers' minuteness of telling the story, their choice of words, the framing and patterns of identification stage transformation in their addressees. In this way, the magic is located in "de tale." It is these inventive details which separate the groups of readers from each other and thus determine the power of storytelling and its limits. The addressees are free to interpret the stories and their elements according to their own preferences, and take part in determining the stories' seductive and conjuring power.

If Chesnutt's plan was to change the whites' attitudes, to cultivate the audience, he succeeded only in part. What he did succeed in was to be published and to become a successful author who reaches a wide audience, who fascinates his readers. Fascination and seduction seem to function as the platform which unites the different groups of readers and connects them to the African American tradition. In Chamber's terms, literary seduction is a form of reader recruitment (217). Chesnutt's use of imagination and folk tale tradition, deliberate framing and coding in stories like "Mars Jeems' Nightmare" and "Hot-Foot Hannibal" allowed him to make it as an African American writer in the white Houghton Mifflin world of publishing, while his careful narration permits him to

successfully convey the African American tradition and his political message to the interested audience.

Conclusion: Rootwork

Both Harris and Chesnutt serve the function of “conjure doctors,” or “root doctors,” performing “rootwork.” Important parts of the African American roots, oral storytelling, including African American traditional elements, are allowed dissemination through different structural and narrative-political means. The oral tradition is carried on in two different ways and formats, through the literary tools in Harris’ and Chesnutt’s hands, allowing for different readerships.

The two authors’ politics are different, and link to their cultural belongings. The Southern journalist Harris, who is white, wishes to idealize the Southern plantation myth while sharing the tales he heard, however modified, while the African American Chesnutt, on the other hand, who is from the North and looks white, represents a more objective view on slavery as it existed in the South and challenges the plantation myth, using his African American roots to communicate with his readers. Harris “cooks” the African American roots into a dish which presents stereotypic images, as if idealizing the plantation tradition, and displaying an evident lack of political correctness in his presentations. Chesnutt uses conjure both thematically and methodologically to illustrate the realities of slavery. To Harris, the art of conjure seems to be more of a peculiarity or a curiosity than to Chesnutt, who treats the folk religion more respectfully.

The stories are both enigmatic and entertaining. The reader is challenged and has to solve the riddle of the tale and ponder the politics of narration. Roman Jakobson’s communication model can assist in explaining the narrative function, and in illustrating the difference between the two authors (35). The authors are situated in the same context,

post Civil War North America, which still shows evidence of racial prejudice and the leading white ideology. They direct their differing political messages to the same groups of addressees. The message reaches the addressee through their storytelling which is coded in the African American vernacular and brings in traditional African American folk elements. The authors' means and aims are different, but their material and tools come from the African American toolbox of tradition. The African American roots are used differently to guide the authors on their different routes to acceptance and publication.

The assessment of the two collections' authenticity is, as illustrated, linked to the two authors' actions and their relations to the folk material, or to the roots. Since Chesnut has a closer cultural link to the African American tradition than Harris, his role as a spokesperson for the tradition is not questioned as much as Harris'. Chesnut shapes his collection with the African American tradition in mind and explores the oral tradition. They both illustrate the African American ex-slave who is referred to as "Uncle," presenting their versions of the local custom and dialect, and their success in the rendering of the African American tradition is of different degrees.

Harris serves as a useful inspiration for Chesnut, and his literary contribution must not be underestimated. Especially his narrative structure and framing must have influenced Chesnut's narrative constructions. The setting, character constructions and themes are elevated when Chesnut is allowed to command the narrative. He lifts the folk tradition from the romantic Plantation Tradition into a historically realistic setting, playing with stereotypes to recruit readers and to satirize, while displaying accurate images of the African American history meant to teach the readers. Chesnut writes in "Superstitions and Folklore of the South" that too little attention has been paid to Harris' stories which deal with "so-called conjuration" (371), while mentioning that Harris has, through literary

discrimination, put stories into “pleasing and enduring form” for the readers (371). Chesnutt realized the unrealized potential of Harris’ approach, and uses Harris’ thematically neglected theme of conjure as the ingredient which takes his narrative further. Chesnutt thereby moves the text from Harris’ and Stowe’s log cabin to “the Big House of Western literature” (Gates 117), opening the doors for African American folk tradition.

The two collections are double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are white novels and African American oral traditions (Gates xxiii). African American folk stories and traditional elements are presented in a reader-friendly white frame format, that mixes the two traditions. This thesis argues that both collections employ “white” masking to express the potential for resistance present in the folk tradition, although Craig Werner only credits Chesnutt for the achievement (467). Through his trickster nature, Brer Rabbit and the other animal figures in Harris’ collection serve the same purpose, although the potential for resistance is downplayed in Harris’ versions of the folktales. The frame and the animal fable soften the rigidity of the core tale, and the core tale in itself is modified. The notion of hope for the hopeless, however, still remains. Both authors draw on folk traditions of masking to assert subversive ideas for black audiences (Werner 467), which appeal to several groups of readers.

Through their different approaches to the folk material, the two authors manage to conjure their way into the the readers’ hearts and bookshelves, although some will choose to dismiss Harris’ work because of its underlying racism. Poetic license allows both writers to work magic with the African American tradition that they explore, as they affect their listeners through the shaping of their narratives. Both collections serve as fascinating windows into the world in which the authors lived and to the African American tradition.

The folk elements found in both collections prove that African American folktales are still vibrant and that the stories “still live,” revealing the enchanting creativity that continues to be a trademark of African American culture and literature (“Folktales” *Call and Response* 59). The potential of the African American folk tradition is explored in contemporary twentieth century literature, like Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Patricia Eakins’ *The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste* (1999). Reed is African American and Eakins is white, showing that writers of different cultural backgrounds still engage with the African American tradition of conjure and folk material in newer literature. Notions of conjure and “Uncle”-figures live on as tropes, and especially the trope of conjuration challenges the limits of the possible in literature, of which the inventive and playful complexities of *Pierre Baptiste* and *Flight to Canada* show evidence. Hurston highlights that “[n]egro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: Nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use” (“Characteristics” 1045). African American tradition still inspires writers, storytellers, audience and readers, proving that the African American legacy is still with us.

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