Conjured Memories: Race, Place, and Cultural Memory in the American Conjure Tale, 1877-1905

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Introduction

In 1884, the *Philadelphia Evening Telegram* reported that Democratic presidential candidate Grover Cleveland had been given the left hind foot of a graveyard rabbit as a lucky talisman—a talisman that the article associates with the beliefs and practices of "Southern negroes." In fact, Cleveland's political fortunes were tied to Southern blacks by much more than a lucky rabbit's foot as he narrowly became the first Democrat to win the presidency since the Civil War after sweeping the post-Reconstruction South, where African Americans were increasingly being disfranchised by intimidation tactics and restrictive voting laws. Cleveland's casual appropriation of African American folklore may seem strange to modern readers, but it was symptomatic of a widespread fascination with folklore in general, and with conjure in particular, that arose throughout the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.

In the decades following Reconstruction, a surge of interest in conjure swept America. With the rise of American folklore societies and journals, anthropological projects dedicated to collecting and preserving conjure stories and other folklore flourished, as did representations of conjurers in newspapers, minstrel shows, and popular fiction. One important development of the last decades of the nineteenth century that added to Americans' growing interest in conjuring was the start of a transformation in the field of anthropology. The founding of the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1879 greatly contributed to the field's professionalization. Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania appointed the country's first professors of anthropology in the late 1880s, and the *American Anthropologist* and the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* first appeared in 1888. This increasing professionalization was accompanied by growing debates within the field about some of anthropology's most fundamental premises. Soon after his arrival

in New York in 1887, Franz Boas began to challenge certain anthropological theories and practices—particularly those that assumed a universal narrative of social evolution in which different groups could be arranged hierarchically according to their different levels of progress. Instead, Boas proposed a relativist model of understanding culture, insisting that anthropologists should dismiss the idea of social evolution and study each cultural group on its own terms.

These important changes in the field of anthropology and the popularity of folklore coincided with the ending of Reconstruction and the beginning of Jim Crow segregation and black disfranchisement throughout the South in the 1880s. Southern states, starting with Tennessee in 1881, began passing laws mandating racial segregation on railroads and other forms of public transportation. Attempts to disenfranchise black voters began even earlier than that, with Georgia passing its first poll tax law in 1871. By the 1890s, racial segregation was legally implemented throughout the South and racial violence, lynching, and forced convict labor were at their highest levels in U.S. history. Meanwhile, the Republican party and the majority of Northerners turned their attention to sectional reconciliation, aided by the collective amnesia fostered by the popular literature of plantation romance.

A piece by "A South Carolinian," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1877, vividly captures the nation's collective amnesia about slavery that accompanied the abandonment of Reconstruction:

> The old plantation days are passed away, perhaps forever. My principles now lead me to abhor slavery and rejoice at its abolition. Yet sometimes, in the midst of the heat and toil of the struggle for existence, the thought involuntarily steals over me that we have seen better days. I think of . . . visits to the plantation with its long, broad expanse of waving green, dotted here and there with groups of industrious slaves . . . of the "Christmas gif', Massa," breaking our slumbers on the holiday morn; of the gay devices for fooling the dignified old darkies on the first of April; of the faithful old nurse who brought you through infancy, under whose humble roof you delighted to partake of an occasional meal; of the flattering, foot-scraping, clownish knowing rascal to whom you tossed a

> silver piece when he brought up your boots; of the little darkies who scrambled for the rind after you had eaten your water-melon on the piazza in the afternoon—and . . . I feel the intrusive swelling of a tear of regret. (qtd. in Fishkin "Race" 290)

The South Carolinian's romanticized reverie calls upon the conventional stereotypes of slave life that were becoming more and more common as the yearning for reconciliation between the North and South started to push Reconstruction and rights for African Americans off the nation's political agenda. The author frames the tableau of plantation scenes as a series of fond memories, but the piece is at least as notable for what it forgets as for what it remembers. By depicting slaves as aesthetically pleasing dots on the landscape, minstrel show comedians, selfless and uncomplaining caretakers, and sweetly child-like dependents awaiting the gifts of their benevolent and revered masters, the piece obscures the labor, deprivation, and indignities that provide the subtext for its complacent nostalgia. While the writer complains of the "heat and toil" of postbellum America, the reader can only infer the heat and toil endured by the distant slaves whose primary function, in the eyes of the author, is to decorate the plantation's "expanse of waving green." The hunger and humiliation of the "little darkies" scrambling for watermelon rinds is rendered invisible by the author's preoccupation with the quaintness and the comedy of the scene. As this kind of sentimental literature became more and more prominent in America's literary circles, a closely related but politically distinct type of literature that I am calling the "conjure tale" rose to challenge it.

According to Pierre Nora, a fundamental opposition exists between history, which he describes as "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer," and memory, which he describes as "affective and magical" and "open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting." Sites of memory (*lieux de memoire*) are, according to Nora, sites

"where memory crystallizes" and where "consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn." I believe that written conjure narratives in the last two decades of the nineteenth century often function as sites of memory in the sense that they transform magic ritual and cultural memory into stable textual artifacts, but they often do so in ways that also provide insight into the political interests and psychological processes behind this crystallization.

What is conjure?

Conjure, also known as "hoodoo," is a magical tradition, commonly associated with the American South, which involves the use of spiritual power for purposes such as healing, protection, and self-defense and which resulted from the blending of religious and magical belief systems from multiple African, European, and Native American cultures. No single African tribe or group can claim to be the sole origin of conjure, but slaves from different parts of Africa brought with them many of the religious and cultural practices of their ancestors when they were taken to America through the Middle Passage and came in contact with European and Native American folklore and religions. The term "conjure" encompasses a vast range of regional differences in belief, practice, and even terminology. Conjure is generally regarded as distinct from the African-derived religion of Haitian Voodoo, but, especially in the nineteenth century, the term "Voodoo" was often used loosely either as a synonym for hoodoo or as a term for illicit supernatural harming practices (Chireau 7). Depending on the region where they lived, nineteenth-century conjurers were sometimes known as rootworkers, trick doctors, witch-doctors, double-heads, double-sighters, wangateurs, hoodoo doctors, brujas, high men or women, and goopher doctors (Anderson 27-8; Chireau 20-1). The relationship between Christianity and conjure is complex; some conjurers have understood their magical practices to be fully

compatible with, or even an extension of, their belief in Christianity while others saw conjure and Christianity as conflicting systems of belief.

What is a conjure tale?

I use the term "conjure tale" to refer to a constellation of texts produced in the United States during the post-Reconstruction period that combine representations of supernatural folklore with elements of autobiography, realism, regionalism, and Gothic romance. Most of the texts that I will discuss are largely, if not entirely, fictional, combining the era's anthropological interests in folklore studies with the rise of realism, dialect fiction, and local color writing. Most also contain some autobiographical features, including first-person narration and highly self-reflexive depictions of characters engaging in the art of narration—whether in the form of writing or oral storytelling. From Douglass's serial autobiographies to the fictional autobiography of Huckleberry Finn to the highly autobiographical conjure stories of Mary Alicia Owen, which feature a character who represents a fictionalized version of Owen's childhood, most of the texts include at least one character who represents the writer-as-artist—someone whose skills and struggles as a writer or storyteller stand in for those of the author. While the autobiographical features of the conjure tale highlight the importance of individual memory in creating narratives about the past, the tale's Gothic features highlight the importance of collective memory and cultural inheritance. The Gothic tradition depends on the failure of forgetting, which results in a haunting preoccupation with guilt and loss. I want to historicize that preoccupation for late 19th-century America in order to explore the relationship between the era's fascination with conjure tales and some of its most penetrating national myths.

Structurally, many of the texts that I discuss make use of a frame narrative, which splits the process of interpretation, giving readers two narrative perspectives through which they can

view the events of the story. I argue that partly because of this fragmented narrative perspective, conjure tales provide important insights into the political and psychological forces behind the creation and crystallization of cultural memory during a pivotal period in American history. Conjure is a discourse of power. As such, it provides white and black writers of the post-Reconstruction period with a rich set of metaphors for thinking and writing about the power structures that were working to shape political narratives of the nation's identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally, I suggest that the rise of the conjure tale demands a re-conceptualization of the history and politics of the American Gothic. Rather than being rooted merely in the European Gothic tradition of Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, the American Gothic derives from a transatlantic tradition of African, European, and Native American folklore.

My first chapter begins with an examination of the complex personal and political significance of conjure in nineteenth-century texts that lie at the intersection of African American fiction and autobiography, focusing primarily on the three autobiographies of Frederick Douglass (1845, 1855, and 1881) and on William Wells Brown's *My Southern Home* (1880). The different versions of Frederick Douglass's autobiography offer readers an increasingly ambivalent portrayal of conjure through the figure of Sandy Jenkins, a conjurer who offers Douglass a magical root that he says will protect him from being whipped. I trace the evolution of Sandy in Douglass's narratives as both a father figure and a traitor to Douglass, and I compare him with Brown's more comically minstrel-like but also more politically subversive conjurers. Sandy Jenkins returns in *The Black Cat Club*, a 1902 dialect novel by James Corrothers that combines the influences of Brown and Douglass. Despite their disagreements about the value of conjure itself, all three authors ultimately suggest that the figure of the

conjurer belongs at the center of the African American literary tradition as a symbol of the struggle for self-authorship.

My second chapter explores the anthropological origins of the conjure tale, focusing on an analysis of the politics of nostalgia in nineteenth-century ethnography. As anxieties about industrialization and homogenization gave a sense of urgency to "salvage ethnography" projects, which were designed to preserve, at least on paper, the customs and beliefs of minority cultures that were being destroyed and oppressed by U.S. policies, fiction and anthropology came together to produce frame narratives and folklore collections by white writers such as the Georgia journalist Joel Chandler Harris and the Missouri folklorist Mary Alicia Owen. According to Renato Rosaldo, imperialist nostalgia derives from a psychological conflation of childhood nostalgia with a sense of imagination about cultures that supposedly represent a stable past. However, I argue that Harris's and Owen's conjure tales often challenge such nostalgia by using the unstable and unpredictable powers of the conjurer to reject the comfort of a stable past.

Turning to the role of conjure in American realism, my third chapter analyzes Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to unpack the relationship between conjure and selective memory. As Jonathan Arac has pointed out, today's cultural project of turning *Huckleberry Finn* into an "American classic" depends on widespread misremembering of the book's ending, which transforms the text into an instrument for liberal white America's self-congratulations about racial harmony. By paying careful attention to the interrelated themes of memory and magic ritual, I hope to show what the novel itself can contribute to debates about the selective amnesia it often inspires. Although Twain had no way of knowing exactly how his book would be remembered or misremembered in the years to come, he did have good reason, writing after the abandonment of Reconstruction, to worry about the selective amnesia that

enabled the reconciliation of North and South to proceed at the expense of recently emancipated African Americans. From Jim's fortune-telling hairball to Huck's figurative snake-conjuring prank on Jackson's Island, conjure serves as a metaphor for the novel's preoccupation with the power of selective memory.

My fourth chapter highlights the crucial role of place in the conjure tale by showing how Charles Chesnutt's regional conjure tales construct a Gothic geographical community in and around a fictionalized version of Fayetteville, North Carolina. Robert Hemenway has argued that although the content of Chesnutt's conjure stories is "Gothic in the extreme," the stories themselves are "not a part of the Gothic tradition." I argue that Chesnutt's conjure tales are an important part of the American Gothic tradition and that they seek to conceptualize a Gothic, or "goophered," notion of geography that challenges the regressive racial politics sometimes found in the Gothic tradition. By re-inscribing the identities of former slaves throughout the Fayetteville region, Chesnutt's stories serve as "sites of memory" in opposition to the political and cartographical erasure of black life.

In my conclusion, I examine *Of One Blood*, a 1902-03 novel by the African American Bostonian Pauline Hopkins that not only extends the setting of the conjure tale beyond the bounds of Southern regionalism but also expands it to an explicitly transnational perspective, which implicitly acknowledges the transatlantic roots of conjure itself. Although Hopkins's novel has been characterized by Eric Sundquist as an "escapist fiction meant to flee the brutality and racism of American history," I argue that the novel provides neither its characters nor its readers with an escape from American history. Through her sophisticated engagement with conjure and the conventions of Gothic romance, Hopkins subverts the conventional geographical metaphors of her time and critiques America's political status at the turn of the twentieth century.

Chapter 1

Root Work: Authorship, Betrayal, and the Magic "Roots" of the Conjure Tale

> "Admittedly, the autobiography has limitations as a vehicle of truth. Although so long an accepted technique towards understanding, the self-portrait often tends to be formal and posed, idealized or purposely exaggerated. The author is bound by his organized self. Even if he wishes, he is unable to remember the whole story or to interpret the complete experience."—Rebecca Calmers Barton, *Witnesses for Freedom*

If you imagined the African American literary tradition as an always-growing but old and weather-beaten tree, Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown would be two main branches of the root system that anchors and nourishes the tree, coming together at the precise point where the roots meet the trunk and rise above the surface of the earth. Above them, the trunk forks, twists, and turns, extending into a multitude of limbs and branches that continue to grow and sprout today. One of these forks or branches is something that I will call the conjure tale, connected both to the tradition of slave narratives and black autobiography and to the outpouring of regionalist dialect fiction that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century—all held together by the African American folkloric tradition (and the magic) of conjure.

When black intellectuals in the late nineteenth century wrote about conjure, they tended to regard it as an embarrassing aspect of African American culture—an unfortunate superstition that was a consequence of the denial of access to education that African Americans had endured under the institution of slavery. Burdened by the minstrel stereotypes of the ignorant and superstitious plantation "darkey" and by the evolutionary strain of anthropologist thought, which held that different social groups could be categorized hierarchically, with some being dismissed as "primitive" and others valued for being "advanced," many in the burgeoning class of African

American intellectuals strove to distance themselves as much as possible from the negative connotations of conjure. As one student at the African American Hampton Institute of Virginia wrote, conjure "is an absurd superstitious folly that should speedily be rooted out" (qtd. in Waters 43). Yet even among those who wanted to undermine the belief and practice of conjure, some black intellectuals recognized its importance in African American folklore traditions and sought to preserve the memory of conjure for future generations. For example, in 1893, when a white teacher at the Hampton Institute named Alice Mabel Bacon created a society for the study of folklore and ethnology, whose mission was to "collect and preserve all traditions and customs peculiar to the Negroes," many black teachers, students, and graduates of the Institute joined the society, and they continued to meet regularly and publish articles on topics such as conjure for the next six years (Bacon qtd. in Waters 1).

For Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and James Corrothers, conjure was more than an ornamental token of exoticism and "local color." At its core, conjure was and is a practice and a discourse of power, which made it a perfect metaphor for the complex and shifting power struggles of the postbellum nineteenth century, starting with the struggle for genuine freedom and racial equality during Reconstruction and continuing to the establishment of white supremacist ideology, Jim Crow laws, segregation, and systemic racial violence, which characterized the turn of the twentieth century. Although Douglass, Brown, and Corrothers have differing perspectives on the dangers and possibilities of writing about conjure, for all three of the writers that I discuss in this chapter, conjure serves as a metaphor for the power, the opportunities, and the responsibilities of black authorship.

In the first four sections, I will examine Douglass's evolving representations of a conjurer named Sandy Jenkins and the beliefs that he represents in the serial autobiographies that

Douglass published in his lifetime: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), and the final revised and expanded version of *Life and Times* that was published in December 1892, shortly before Douglass's death. Douglass's interactions with Sandy suggest a variety of ways of thinking about conjure—as genuine magic, as a symbol of his African heritage, as a source of psychological strength and inspiration, as a sinful rejection of Christianity, as an "absurd and ridiculous" superstition, and as a form of betrayal that keeps Douglass from the freedom he desires. Despite the enormous amount of scholarship that has been devoted to Douglass's 1845 slave narrative and the substantial amount that has been written about the other versions of his autobiography, scholars typically pay little attention to Douglass's relationship with Sandy Jenkins, dismissing him as either a sympathetic ally or a traitorous villain. However, such dismissive assessments of Sandy Jenkins and his relationship with Douglass ignore the important changes to Douglass's depiction of the conjurer in his autobiographical revisions as well as the ambivalence and complexity that characterize Douglass's relationship with Sandy Jenkins in each of his autobiographies. The most important changes in the autobiographies' evolving representations of Sandy and conjuring reflect the increasing complexity of Douglass's relationship with Christianity, with his cultural "roots," and with the theme of betrayal. Understanding Douglass's revisions to his portrayal of Sandy will lay the groundwork for understanding the many different interpretations of conjure's significance that coexisted and competed with one another in nineteenth-century America. For Douglass, Sandy represents a powerful father figure, a symbol of Douglass's attraction and repulsion to Christianity, and a metaphor for Douglass's ancestral and cultural "roots," but Sandy's most important resonance for Douglass ultimately lies in his embodiment of the theme of betrayal.

After tracing the evolution of Douglass's relationship with conjure and Sandy Jenkins, I turn in the next section to an examination of the significance of conjure in William Wells Brown's semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical book *My Southern Home; or, The South and Its People,* published in 1880. In this text, unlike his previous publications, Brown clearly recognizes and makes use of conjure's subversive potential, highlighting the links between the conjurer and the traditional trickster figure in African American folklore who uses his wits, deception, and sometimes magic to challenge the authority of those with more traditional forms of physical, social, and economic power. In addition, Brown uses his portrayal of a conjurer named Dinkie to critique the political situation of post-Reconstruction America, to enact a symbolic revenge for the horrors of slavery, and to experiment with the powers and possibilities of black authorship.

Finally, in the last section, I turn to James Corrothers as a representative of the generation of African American writers who succeeded Douglass and Brown at the dawn of the twentieth century. In 1902, Corrothers published *The Black Cat Club: Negro Humor and Folklore,* a dialect novel set in Chicago, which not only names its central character after the conjurer in Douglass's autobiographies but also serves as an attempt to combine and reconcile Douglass's misgivings about conjure with Brown's delight in its playfully subversive potential.

Frederick Douglass and the Magic Root: Christianity, Conjure, and "Spirit"

Many scholars have attempted to use Douglass's autobiographies to understand the author's complex and evolving relationship with Christianity, but his relationship with conjure typically receives little attention. As several scholars have pointed out, Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) has much in common with the genre of spiritual autobiography. In *Long Black Song,* Houston A. Baker argues that in addition

to being a slave narrative in which the "essential goal is physical freedom," Douglass's *Narrative* is also a spiritual autobiography in the tradition of Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, and Henry Adams because it attempts to narrate the realization of the author's "spiritual self" (78).[1] Although critics disagree about whether Douglass's *Narrative* ultimately supports the fundamental precepts of Christianity, most agree that the subsequent autobiographies, starting with *My Bondage*, more directly addresses the author's misgivings about the Christian religion.[2] In the *Narrative*, Douglass sharply condemns the "Christianity of this land" and avoids the prophetic language of earlier abolitionist texts such as David Walker's 1829 *Appeal*, but he also claims to endorse and celebrate "the Christianity of Christ," which he depicts, in the words of Houston Baker, as a practical "pursuit designed to make men better and more dignified while on earth" (Douglass 97, Baker 72). I argue that Douglass's views of Christianity are intimately tied to his portrayal of conjure in all versions of his autobiography, but his attitude toward both conjure and Christianity becomes more negative between 1845 and 1855.

The 1845 *Narrative* offers its readers a largely positive portrayal of the conjurer Sandy Jenkins, who first appears in the text after Douglass has run away from the abusive Mr. Covey. Having just been refused any assistance by "Master Thomas," Douglass is at his lowest point physically, spiritually, and psychologically. He spends most of the day in the woods trying to decide whether "to go home and be whipped to death, or stay in the woods and be starved to

[1] Houston A Baker, Jr. *Long Black Song* (1973); G. Thomas Courser, *American Autobiography: The Prophetic Mode* (1979); Thomas De Pietro, "Vision and Revision in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass."

[2] For examples of scholars who argue that the 1845 *Narrative* is anti-Christian, see Zachary McLeod Hutchins, "Rejecting the Root: The Liberating, Anti-Christ Theology of Douglass's *Narrative"* and Thomas Peyser, "The Attack on Christianity in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave."* Scott C. Williamson, William L. Andrews, and Thomas De Pietro all agree that *My Bondage* is stronger than the *Narrative* in its critique of Christianity. Also, see John Ernest, David W. Blight, and Reginald F. Davis for additional interpretations of Douglass's views on Christianity.

death" (63). Wandering in the woods is a conventional metaphor for being spiritually lost, so by setting this scene in the woods, Douglass conveys not only the literal hardships that he faces but also his status as one who is in need of spiritual guidance. When Sandy appears, he offers Douglass not only a much-needed shelter for the night but also advice and companionship at a time when Douglass is feeling isolated and hopeless. After listening carefully to Douglass's story, Sandy gives the young runaway a root that he says will protect him from being whipped by any white man as long as he carries it on his right side. Though skeptical of its supposed magic, Douglass reluctantly takes the root to "please" Sandy, but when he returns to the farm and is shocked to find Mr. Covey speaking to him kindly, Douglass declares himself "half inclined to think the *root* to be something more than I had at first taken it to be" (63). Douglass does not say that he is completely convinced of the root's magical powers, but he does admit that "this singular conduct of Mr. Covey really made me begin to think that there was something in the *root* which Sandy had given me; had it been any other day than Sunday, I could have attributed the conduct to no other cause than the influence of that root" (63). As Douglass implies with the qualification "had it been any other day than Sunday," the alternative explanation for Covey's strange behavior is his professed Christian piety, which prevents him from beating a slave on the Christian Sabbath.

The alleged magical power of the root is still on Douglass's mind on Monday morning when Mr. Covey attempts to whip Douglass for his disobedience; as Douglass remarks wryly, "[o]n this morning, the virtue of the root was fully tested" (63-4). What follows is Douglass's famous battle with Mr. Covey—the "turning point" in Douglass's "career as a slave" and the dramatic highlight of all three autobiographies. For the first time in his life, the young slave fights back against his oppressors, and his victory not only protects him against further

whippings by Mr. Covey but also revives his thirst for freedom: "It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free" (65). Despite the attention that has been lavished on this scene as a whole, most scholars have either ignored or dismissed the importance of the root or simply assumed that it serves as Douglass's inspiration to fight. For example, Houston Baker says that "Douglass, like thousands of his fellow black men, attributes some power to the root" while Eric Sundquist argues that Douglass's "dismissal of the traitor Sandy's belief in the power of the root is the notorious example" of Douglass positioning himself "outside the circle" of slave folk culture while using it as a "bridge" to his independence (Sundquist, *To Wake* 130). However, the truth is that Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* pointedly leaves the question of the root's influence ambiguous.

After introducing the battle scene by announcing that "the virtue of the root" would be "fully tested," Douglass does not explicitly mention the root at the crucial moment when he makes the decision to fight back, saying simply "at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight" (64). Douglass's refusal to identify the source of his fighting "spirit" highlights the question of inspiration without resolving it. Does Douglass's sudden sense of resolve come entirely from within himself or does his fighting spirit come at least partly from the root, and if the latter, what exactly does that mean? Does the root exude a magical influence that inspires Douglass to respond to Covey's aggression in precisely the way that will best protect him against future whippings, thereby affirming Sandy's belief in its protective powers? Does Douglass's feeling of being "half inclined" to believe in the root's power after Covey's strange conduct on Sunday give the slave a sense of confidence that he previously lacked? Does the root possess other psychological meanings or associations for Douglass that bolster his

courage and resolve, irrespective of Douglass's level of belief or disbelief in the object's magical properties? The *Narrative* deliberately leaves all of these interpretive possibilities open. With this calculated ambiguity, Douglass conveys a certain degree of respect for Sandy and his beliefs, and Douglass's admission that he does not know where his fighting spirit came from adds a mysterious tone to the incident. Whether the root's "virtue" lies in the realm of the supernatural or in the power of suggestion, giving Douglass the courage to confront his oppressor, the 1845 text invites readers to consider the possibility that Sandy's root plays an important role in Douglass's act of defiance. Douglass may not fully share or endorse Sandy's belief in conjure, but by taking conjure seriously (at least on the metaphorical level), he uses the idea of magic to highlight the theme of transformation that he had already established in the foreshadowing of his battle with Covey: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (60). For Douglass, the battle with Covey is not just an act of defiance but also an act of self-transformation. By evoking the magic of conjure, Douglass adds rhetorical force to the idea that he is narrating the moment when a slave transforms himself into a man.

Although Douglass's initial skepticism about the root's supposed magical properties challenges a purely supernatural interpretation of the scene, when he wonders "from whence came the spirit" to fight, his choice of the supernaturally-loaded word "spirit" rather than "resolve" or "determination" or "decision" imbues the moment of his inspiration with a sense of something beyond mere human decision-making. Indeed, the word recalls an earlier passage in the *Narrative* in which Douglass repeatedly used the word "spirit" to convey his feeling that being sent to Baltimore is a sign that he is being guarded by a supernatural protective force:

> I may be deemed **superstitious**, and even egotistical, in regarding this event as a special interposition of **divine Providence** in my favor. But I should be false to the earliest

> sentiments of my soul, if I suppressed the opinion. I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and incur my own abhorrence. From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of **faith** and **spirit** of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This **good spirit** was from **God**, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise. (36) [my emphasis]

Like the lead-in to the battle with Mr. Covey, this passage uses the word "spirit" to suggest that Douglass's hope and faith have a source of inspiration that is both mysterious and external to himself. Unlike the battle scene, however, this passage explicitly identifies Douglass's "good spirit" as a gift from God. By echoing this earlier language in the fight scene, Douglass implies that the "spirit" that inspires him to fight Covey also comes from God. Douglass's worry that he "may be deemed superstitious" for regarding his trip to Baltimore as a "special interposition of divine Providence," seems a strange concern for someone writing to an audience largely composed of white Christian abolitionists (36). Such readers would be unlikely to think of Douglass's concept of divine Providence as "superstitious," though they almost certainly would have regarded Sandy's belief in magical roots as a superstition. Perhaps Douglass uses the word "superstitious" to describe his belief in the protection of God because he is thinking of a time when his faith in that protective power was symbolized by a magical root in his right-hand pocket. Douglass says that even "in the darkest hours" of his years in slavery, his "spirit of hope" and faith "remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom." This passage could easily refer to the moment when Douglass is in the woods, both literally and figuratively, feeling lost and bereft of hope in the moments just before his encounter with Sandy Jenkins. Metaphorically, at least, the *Narrative* seems to suggest that Sandy Jenkins is one of God's "ministering angels" sent to cheer Douglass through the gloom of his darkest hours. In that case, Sandy's magic root does possess a certain kind of supernatural and psychological power because

it serves as a reminder and symbol of the power of God, which gives Douglass the confidence and courage to fight back. This link between a conjurer's root and Christianity may seem strange, but as Zachary Hutchins has pointed out, Christ is described as a root in both the Old and New Testaments, and Isaiah even calls Christ "a root out of a dry ground" (Isa. 53:2 qtd. in Hutchins 300).[3] The protective "magic" of Sandy's root represents Douglass's "deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace," which inspires him to break away from the "foul embrace" of Mr. Covey (36).

Although Conjure and Christianity are inextricably linked in the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass is careful not to make the connection between them too explicit—probably because he does not want to offend his white Christian readers, who would regard conjure as a silly superstition at best and a sinful deal with the devil at worst. However, this is not the *Narrative's* only flirtation with blasphemy. As other scholars have pointed out,[4] Douglass's comparison between his victory over Covey and a "glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom" is potentially blasphemous, for Christ's injunction to "turn the other cheek" and suffer passively stands in stark contrast to Douglass's suggestion that divine inspiration has told him to fight (65). To minimize the blasphemy of connecting Sandy's magic root with divine Providence, Douglass downplays Sandy's status as a conjurer. Unlike *My Bondage*, the *Narrative* never calls Sandy a "conjurer" and never refers to Sandy's "belief in a system for which I have no name" or to the "so called magical powers, said to be possessed by African and eastern nations" (280). If Douglass did imagine Sandy (metaphorically, at least) as an emissary

[3] Hutchins makes a compelling case for the connection between Sandy's root and Christianity, but he is mistaken when he says that Douglass rejects the root (and therefore rejects Christianity) in the *Narrative.*

[4] See Thomas Peyser, Zachary McLeod Hutchins, Donald Gibson, and James Wohlpart.

from God, he would have had good reason to fear that his readers would accuse him of being "superstitious" at best and blasphemous at worst for mentioning it directly. Thus, when he narrates his battle with Mr. Covey in his original *Narrative*, Douglass is carefully ambiguous when he refers to the source of his fighting "spirit."

After the enormous success of his 1845 autobiography, Douglass experienced an eventful and productive decade as an abolitionist speaker in Europe, and then as the editor of his own newspaper upon his return to the United States. In 1855, when Douglass published the second version of his autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he not only added material from the past decade of his life as a free man but also made substantial revisions to the earlier portions of the book, including his encounters with Sandy and his battle with Mr. Covey. *My Bondage* is far more detailed than the original *Narrative*, and the details that Douglass adds often emphasize the difference between conjure and Christianity even though they also suggest that both belief systems are linked to one another through the figure of Sandy and the symbol of the root. For example, the 1855 text states that Sandy "was not only a religious man, but he professed to believe in a system for which I have no name," thereby conveying that conjure and Christianity are distinct but not incompatible systems of belief (280). Douglass's initial reluctance to take the root from Sandy becomes more pronounced in *My Bondage*, where he calls Sandy's claims about the root's powers "absurd and ridiculous, if not positively sinful" and worries that Sandy's magic root suggests "dealings with the devil" (281). However, *My Bondage* also calls Sandy a "good Samaritan" who found Douglass "almost providentially," and Douglass even asks himself "how did I know but that the hand of the Lord was in it?" when he decides to accept the root after all (281). Unlike the *Narrative, My Bondage* includes chapter headings, which briefly summarize the major events in each chapter. Chapter XVII, "The Last Flogging," describes Douglass's first

encounter and interactions with Sandy Jenkins as well as his battle with Covey, and it is here, in the chapter headings, that the word "conjurer" first makes an appearance in one of Douglass's autobiographies. By calling Sandy "a Conjurer as well as a Christian," the chapter headings in *My* Bondage emphasize the idea that conjure and Christianity can co-exist.

Ultimately, *My Bondage* suggests that both Christianity and conjure are more harmful than helpful to Douglass's quest for freedom and independence. Douglass's hostility to Christianity is particularly clear during the battle when he admits that he is able to fight Covey only because he has "backslidden" from the "slave's religious creed," cheerfully adding, "my hands were no longer tied by my religion" (282). Douglass broadens the scope of his rejection to conjure as well as Christianity when he reveals that the villainous Covey, like Sandy, is both a pious Christian and someone who was said to have "gone deeper into the black art" than Douglass (282). In all of his autobiographies, Douglass repeatedly compares Covey to a snake, which links Covey to both conjure and Christianity because the snake is both a Christian symbol for the devil (as in the serpent in the garden of Eden) and an animal closely associated with the art of conjuring. However, the primary indication that Douglass rejects both conjure and Christianity in the second version of his autobiography is his choice to revise the *Narrative*'s description of the precise moment when he decides to resist Covey with physical force. In the 1845 text Douglass says "at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight," but in 1855 he changes it to "I now forgot all about my *roots*, and remembered my pledge to *stand up in my own defense*" (64, 283). While the 1845 version leaves the relationship between the root and Douglass's fighting spirit ambiguous, the revised statement indicates that Sandy's magical "roots" must be forgotten because they impede rather than strengthen the author's struggle for freedom (588). Although *My Bondage* still includes the claim

that Douglass does not know where his "daring spirit" came from, he is certain that it did not come from his "roots" (283)

Forgotten Roots: Douglass, Home, and the Importance of "Roots"

I now forgot all about my *roots*, and remembered my pledge to *stand up in my own defense*.

--*My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) [Douglass's emphasis]

When Douglass claims to have forgotten his "roots" in the chapter titled "The Last Flogging," he is, of course, literally referring to the alleged protective power of the root that Sandy had given him. However, Douglass's use of italics to emphasize the word *roots* and his decision to use the plural word "roots" to refer to what he had previously described as a single root, suggest that he intends his readers to be aware that the word has a double meaning. Douglass's "roots" are not only something he carries in his pocket but also the understanding that he has of his own heritage—familial, geographical, and cultural. As he narrates his choice to stand up to Covey and fight in his own defense, Douglass is also choosing to embrace the conventional American rhetoric of individualism and self-reliance over his black cultural heritage, symbolized by Sandy's magical roots. This rhetorical choice offers Douglass many advantages, particularly in its appeal to a set of ideological and literary conventions already familiar to his predominantly white readership, but it also entails certain costs, which, I argue, become more apparent to Douglass as he re-visits and revises his life story in the later versions of his autobiography. Douglass's later autobiographies, starting with *My Bondage,* convey a richer experience of the author's "roots" than the *Narrative* does, but in doing so they also depict those roots as greater obstacles to Douglass's journey toward freedom, literacy, and self-reliance.

For Douglass, Sandy's magical roots represent not only the promise of safety from physical violence but also the sense of belonging and connection to the slave community that have eluded Douglass since his early childhood. For the most part, all of Douglass's autobiographies celebrate the circumstances and characteristics that set him apart from his fellow slaves. However, the later versions of the autobiography also suggest a strong sense of longing for the bonds of family, home, and companionship. A striking example of Douglass's changing attitude toward his familial roots is the difference between his 1845 and 1855 portrayals of his relationship with his mother. In the 1845 *Narrative,* Douglass gives the impression that, as a child, he never formed any strong attachments to the people or places in his environment. Attributing his sense of emotional detachment to the corrupting influences of slavery, he uses formal, matter-of-fact language to convey his disturbing lack of grief at his mother's death:

> She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotion I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger. (16)

Whereas the 1845 *Narrative* emphasizes Douglass's emotional detachment from his mother, the subsequent versions of his autobiography stress the author's sense of longing for his lost familial connections as well as the tenderness of the few memories of his mother that he does possess. For example, *My Bondage* contains a detailed account, not included in the 1845 *Narrative,* of Douglass's last memory of his mother, when she rescues her son from Aunt Katy's attempt to "starve the life" out of him: "That night I learned the fact, that I was not only a child, but *somebody's* child. The 'sweet cake' my mother gave me was in the shape of a heart, with a rich, dark ring glazed around the edge of it. I was victorious, and well off for the moment, prouder, on

my mother's knee, than a king upon his throne" (155). Although Douglass is quick to point out that his moment of victory was short-lived, his decision to include the story (adorned, no less, with the sentimental image of a heart-shaped cookie) represents a striking departure from the emotional tone of his first autobiography. An even more striking revision occurs just two paragraphs later, when Douglass announces that he learned, after her death, that his mother could read. The author uses this information not only to enrich the characterization of his mother but also to express a sense of pride in his mother's African roots, declaring "I am quite willing, and even happy, to attribute any love of letters I possess, and for which I have got—despite of prejudices—only too much credit, *not* to my admitted Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated *mother*" (156). This decision to attribute his literacy to his maternal rather than his paternal heritage suggests that Douglass had acquired a good deal of respect for his African roots.

In the post-1845 versions of his autobiography, Douglass repeatedly uses botanical metaphors to evoke his longing for a sense of home, family, and belonging. For example, in the first chapter of *My Bondage,* Douglass uses the conventional metaphor of the "family tree" to suggest the extent of slavery's disruption to family life: "Genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves. A person of some consequence here in the north, sometimes designated *father*, is literally abolished in slave law and to slave practice" (140). Douglass himself never knew the identity of his white father, but his experience of slavery was also unusual in that, according to Eric Sundquist, "Douglass would have been able to trace his African-American roots on Maryland's eastern shore back five generations, to at least 1701" (Sundquist "Introduction" 5).

Although the *Narrative* says almost nothing about Douglass's African American roots, the later autobiographies devote a great deal of attention to the people and places that were

important to the early years of his childhood. The opening sentence of the 1845 *Narrative* simply declares "I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland" and the text says little else of Douglass's first home. In contrast, the opening paragraphs of Douglass's second and third autobiographies use evocative descriptions of the place of his birth to suggest how slavery prevents slaves' "genealogical trees" from flourishing (140). The "small district" in which he was born is, according to Douglass, remarkable for little other than "the worn-out, sandy, desert-like appearance of its soil" (139). By his botanical metaphor, Douglass suggests that the reason why "genealogical trees" of slave families fail to flourish is not because of any flaw in the families themselves but because of the desolate, corrupted environment in which they are planted. By adding a detailed physical description of the place of his birth, Douglass implies that the institution of slavery metaphorically pollutes the very soil of the South, preventing the growth of family trees.

Later in the first chapter of *My Bondage,* Douglass explicitly calls his readers' attention to his detailed descriptions of place, saying, "[t]he reader will pardon so much about the place of my birth, on the score that it is always a fact of some importance to know where a man is born, if, indeed, it be important to know anything about him" (140). In *Life and Times,* Douglass makes the connection between the land and its inhabitants even more explicit, writing that he was born "among slaves who, in point of ignorance and indolence, were fully in accord with their surroundings" (475). As this last quotation suggests, Douglass, in many ways, has strong negative feelings about his African American roots, but he evidently regards those roots as a crucial aspects of his life story or he would not have put them in his opening paragraphs.

In another chapter of *My Bondage*, Douglass further extends and complicates his botanical metaphor to explain why slaves often have a particularly deep emotional attachment to the places where they are born and raised:

> The people of the North, and free people generally, I think, have less attachment to the places where they are born and brought up than had the slaves. Their freedom to come and go, to be here or there, as they list, prevents any **extravagant attachment to any one particular place**. On the other hand, **the slave was a fixture**; he had no choice, no goal, but was pegged down to one single spot, and must **take root** there or nowhere. The idea of removal elsewhere came generally in the shape of a threat, and in punishment for crime. It was therefore attended with fear and dread. The enthusiasm which animates the bosoms of young freemen, when they contemplate a life in the far West, or in some distant country, where they expect to rise to wealth and distinction, could have no place in the thought of the slave; nor could those from whom they separated know anything of that cheerfulness with which friends and relations yield each other up, when they feel that it is for the good of the departing one that he is removed from his **native place**. Then, too, there is correspondence and the hope of reunion, but with the slaves, all these mitigating circumstances were wanting. (545) [my emphasis]

Ironically, according to Douglass, the institution of slavery, which prevents the flourishing of slaves' "genealogical trees," also increases slaves' emotional tendency to "take root" in the place where they are born. Douglass's analysis in this passage is couched in impersonal language that might seem to suggest that he is free from the slave's usual "extravagant attachment" to "his native place," but *My Bondage*'s richly detailed descriptions of his grandmother's home in Tuckahoe and Colonel Lloyd's plantation suggest otherwise. Indeed, Douglass may feel the need to provide this detailed psychological analysis as an explanation to himself and his readers of feelings of longing and attachment that seem hard to reconcile with his desire for freedom.

In several passages of *My Bondage*, Douglass describes his sense of being forcibly separated from the objects of his affection—both people and places—with language that evokes the image of a plant being torn away by the roots. After his grandmother is forced to disrupt his sense of home and stability by taking him to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, Douglass describes his

struggle to develop a renewed sense of home and belonging in his new surroundings, writing that the "little tendrils of affection, so rudely broken from the darling objects in and around my grandmother's home, gradually began to extend and twine themselves around the new surroundings" (487). When an argument between Thomas and Hugh Auld prompts the teenaged Douglass to be moved from Baltimore to St. Michaels in 1833, he again returns to the same botanical metaphor: "It did seem that every time the young tendrils of my affection became attached they were rudely broken by some unnatural outside power" (552). Both of these passages paint a very different picture of Douglass's emotional life than one finds in the 1845 *Narrative,* which emphasizes Douglass's eagerness to leave the plantation and go to Baltimore, saying that the "ties that ordinarily bind children to their homes were all suspended in my case" (34). Douglass also denies any emotional attachment to Colonel Lloyd's plantation in *My Bondage*, but there he contrasts his eagerness to go to Baltimore with the "severe trial" of being "separated from my home in Tuckahoe" (210). Slavery puts the young Douglass's emotional attachments to people and places at risk constantly and thus makes them dangerously fragile. Ultimately, Douglass's "tendrils" of affection become part of the "bondage" that he must break in order to pursue his dream of freedom.

The 1845 *Narrative* says little about Douglass's grandmother aside from Douglass's criticism of his master for abandoning her and "turning her out to die" in her old age, (48). Yet Douglass's detailed descriptions of his grandmother's strength and skill in *My Bondage* and *Life and Times* not only extend the botanical metaphor of familial "roots" but also provide another link between Douglass's "roots" and the folk magic of Sandy's conjuring. Douglass claims that his grandmother "was held in high esteem, far higher than is the lot of most colored persons in the slave states," partly because of her reputation as a "good nurse," a good fisherwoman, and "a

capital hand" at making fishing nets. Moreover, somewhat like Sandy Jenkins, Douglass's grandmother has a reputation for low-level conjuring—or at least a kind of magical "good luck"—that enhances her crop of sweet potatoes:

> Grandmother was likewise more provident than most of her neighbors in the preservation of seedling sweet potatoes, and it happened to her—as it will happen to any careful and thrifty person residing in an ignorant and improvident community—to enjoy the reputation of having been born to "good luck." Her "good luck" was owing to the exceeding care which she took in preventing the succulent root from getting bruised in the digging, and in placing it beyond the reach of frost, by actually burying it under the hearth of her cabin during the winter months. In the time of planting sweet potatoes, "Grandmother Betty," as she was familiarly called, was sent for in all directions, simply to place the seedling potatoes in the hills; for superstition had it, that if "Grandmamma Betty but touches them at planting, they will be sure to grow and flourish." This high reputation was full of advantage to her, and to the children around her. (*My Bondage* 141)

Douglass is careful to distance himself from the "superstition" of the "ignorant and improvident" Tuckahoe community by providing a non-magical explanation for his grandmother's success at planting sweet potatoes, but he also seems proud of her for using her skill and her neighbors' superstition to provide for her family. The seemingly magical ability of Douglass's grandmother to grow the "succulent root[s]" of seedling sweet potatoes even in the "worn-out, sandy, desert-like" soil of Tuckahoe parallels her ability to grow a relatively healthy family tree even amidst the violence, deprivation, forced separations, and moral corruption of slavery. Like the magical root given to Douglass by Sandy Jenkins, the roots of Grandmother Betty's sweet potatoes are alleged to contain magical properties, but their real power is the metaphorical and emotional power that Douglass imbues them with in his second and third autobiographies, when he turns them into key symbols of his African American "roots."

Although the majority of Douglass's botanical metaphors are absent from the 1845 *Narrative*, there is one important exception in addition to Sandy's root. While the *Narrative* says

very little about the natural features of Douglass's environment, it does contain a description of Colonel Lloyd's "large and finely cultivated garden," which Douglass calls "probably the greatest attraction of the place" but also "not the least source of trouble on the plantation" (25). Its fruit, "from the hardy apple of the north to the delicate orange of the south," tempts the hungry slaves so much that "[s]carcely a day passed, during the summer, but that some slave had to take the lash for stealing fruit. The colonel had to resort to all kinds of strategems to keep his slaves out of the garden (25). Metaphorically, Douglass suggests, Colonel Lloyd's garden is the Garden of Eden and the colonel has assumed the place of an angry God, banishing his slaves from paradise. The forbidden fruit represents not only the food and other physical comforts that are withheld from the slaves but also the knowledge that they are forbidden to access. Just as Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Douglass and his fellow slaves are not allowed to learn to read, which would not only provide them with access to practical information but also enable them to interpret the Bible for themselves and thus to question their masters' representations of the Christian concepts of good and evil.

In *My Bondage* Colonel Lloyd's garden functions as the lush and fertile forbidden alternative to the "worn-out, sandy, desert-like" soil of Tuckahoe, where the "genealogical trees" of slave families are forced to eke out their meager existence. However, in *Life and Times*, when Douglass returns to Colonel Lloyd's plantation after the Civil War, the garden reappears as a metaphor for all of the knowledge, resources, and opportunities that had been forbidden to slaves but were now, at least in Douglass's eyes, accessible to all American citizens, black and white. As Douglass describes his leisurely tour of the garden, he suggests that in spite of his miserable childhood, a return home is also a return to Eden.

As he expands and refines the botanical metaphors in each of his autobiographies, Douglass is also clarifying what it means for him to forget his "roots" and remember his pledge to stand and defend himself against Mr. Covey. In the *Narrative* Douglass does not need to forget his roots in order to defend himself. In 1845, the literal roots that he receives from Sandy are a possible source of inspiration for his fighting "spirit," mainly because of their association with Christianity. In any case, Douglass's weak familial and cultural "roots" give him little reason in the *Narrative* to refrain from risking everything in a fight. By 1855, however, Douglass acknowledges both a stronger attachment to his roots and a greater need to rise above them in order to achieve his goals of freedom and self-reliance.

Patterns of Betrayal: Douglass vs. Sandy Jenkins

The changes that Douglass makes to his autobiography between 1845 and 1855 convey his shifting perspective on conjure and Christianity as well as the growing complexity of his attitude toward his cultural and familial roots, but Douglass's most striking revision to his portrayal of Sandy Jenkins appears after the battle with Covey, when Douglass describes how his plans to escape from slavery are disrupted by a secret informant. The 1845 *Narrative* refuses to name the culprit even though Douglass says that he and his fellow plotters "came to a unanimous decision among ourselves as to who their informant was," but the later autobiographies, starting with *My Bondage*, explicitly identify Sandy as the suspected "betrayer" who thwarts the planned escape (78). Why does Douglass decide not to identify Sandy as a traitor in his 1845 autobiography but to call attention to Sandy's betrayal in all subsequent versions of the text? Since it is highly unlikely that Douglass learned any new information or had any further encounters with Sandy or the other slaves involved in the plot, the most likely explanation for

Douglass's revision lies in the author's changing perspective on conjure itself and his evolving interpretation of the role of betrayal in his life story.

Douglass's second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), is much more than an updated version of the original 1845 *Narrative*. The *Narrative* concludes with Douglass's discovery of his gifts as an abolitionist orator and with the start of his new career in William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society, but the eventful decade following the publication of the *Narrative* prompted Douglass to reexamine key aspects of his life story. The welcome and the attention that he received during his speaking tour in Great Britain broadened his perspective and boosted his confidence, but it also heightened his sense of outrage over the racist treatment he had endured in the North after his escape from slavery. After his return to the United States in 1847, Douglass defied Garrison by launching his own abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star,* to compete with Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator*. By 1851, Douglass had further antagonized Garrison and his followers by publicly contradicting Garrison's claim that abolitionists should renounce the U.S. Constitution because it was a fundamentally tainted, pro-slavery document (Andrews "My Bondage").

According to William L. Andrews, the rift between Douglass and Garrison not only influenced the chapters that Douglass wrote about his life as a freeman but also prompted Douglass to reinterpret "the dynamics of love, authority, and power in almost all of the major relationships in his life, particularly those involving father figures" ("My Bondage" 139). Andrews identifies several key betrayals in Douglass's life, including the betrayal of Douglass's white biological father, who fails to acknowledge any relationship with his son, the betrayal of "Father Lawson," whose passive interpretation of Christian virtue gives Douglass hope but also

inhibits the growth of his self-reliance, and the traumatic betrayal that Douglass's grandmother commits when she takes her young grandson to the plantation and abandons him. Oddly, although Andrews compellingly supports his argument with several examples of paternal and maternal betrayals in Douglass's life, he fails to include Sandy Jenkins among those examples even though Sandy's suspected betrayal of Douglass's escape attempt is surely the most dramatic example of betrayal in the text. Perhaps Andrews fails to mention Sandy's betrayal because he believes that Sandy's relationship with Douglass is not sufficiently paternal to qualify for the pattern that he is trying to establish. If so, I think Andrews is making an important oversight. Sandy's strong identification with the extended botanical metaphor for Douglass's cultural and familial "roots" suggests that Douglass does indeed view Sandy as a paternal figure whose connection to Africa and to conjure are important components of Douglass's African American heritage.

The revisions that Douglass made between 1845 and 1855 reflect the author's growing longing for a sense of connection with his roots as well as a growing conviction that such a connection is impossible for him to achieve without sacrificing his status as a leader and example for the African American community to follow. Douglass has mixed feelings about his role as a leader. As Andrews puts it, in *My Bondage* Douglass "had come to recognize and admit that he had often been a seeker of authority, even 'something of a hero worshiper, by nature,' to use the autobiographer's own phrase, who had been all too ready to attach himself to paternal figures whom he identified unconsciously with all that home signified" (140). For this reason, Douglass strengthens his portrayal of Sandy as a "good-hearted" and sympathetic "old adviser" during their first encounter in the woods, when Douglass has not yet fully attained the confidence and manhood that he gains from his battle with Covey (279, 280). However, Douglass and the

conjurer cannot remain allies because they are ultimately rivals for authority in the African American community, both of them "famous among the slaves of the neighborhood"—Douglass for his ability to read and Sandy for his "good sense" and "good nature," his alleged "magical powers" and his "insight into human nature" (279-81). When Douglass initially rejects Sandy's magic root because he considers it "beneath one of my intelligence to countenance such dealings with the devil," Sandy insists "with flashing eyes" that Douglass has nothing to lose by trying the root since his "book learning" has, so far, failed to protect him (281). Sandy's flashing eyes and disdain for Douglass's "book learning" are among the first indications in *My Bondage* of the analogy and rivalry between Douglass's power and Sandy's, but they are not the last. When Douglass begins his "public speaking" career by convincing several of his fellow slaves to join his escape plot, he compares his power with words to Patrick Henry's "magic eloquence," and when he prepares his followers for their escape, he provides them with written "protections" to put in their pockets instead of magical roots (306, 312, 318). The final escalation of this personified rivalry between the power of conjure and the power of writing occurs when Sandy betrays Douglass by revealing his escape plot to the white authorities and Douglass responds (in writing) by exposing Sandy's betrayal to his readers.

The increased rivalry between Douglass and Sandy in *My Bondage* and *Life and Times* reflects Douglass's growing concern that conjure and superstition pose a threat to the freedom and dignity of African Americans. The Douglass of the 1845 *Narrative* was reluctant to identify his old friend as a traitor because he interpreted Sandy's magic root as a source of inspiration and courage within the oppression of slavery and therefore felt no need to condemn the power of conjure. However, by the time he wrote his subsequent autobiographies, Douglass had attained sufficient distance from his life in slavery to see that slavery was not an isolated evil but a part of

the broader problem of American racism, which he encountered frequently in his travels through the North and in the theories of polygenesis and scientific racism espoused by books such as *Types of Mankind,* a collection of writings from the American School of ethnography that Douglass denounced in a speech in 1854 (Brawley 103-4). Because these theories, which sought to "brand the negro with natural inferiority" depended in part on negative stereotypes about African Americans' allegedly "primitive" folklore and superstitions, Douglass came to regard the conjuring beliefs of Sandy Jenkins as a threat to the dignity and intellectual accomplishments of himself and his race (Douglass qtd. in Brawley 104). Just as Douglass's quarrel with Garrison shaped his perception of the patterns of betrayal in his life, his growing concern about the negative effects of racial stereotypes shaped his perception of and attitude toward the conjurer and his beliefs. Douglass and Sandy must be rivals and enemies instead of allies because Douglass ultimately locates the primary source of his own power not in his African "roots" but in his ability to conjure the "magic" of the written word.

"What conjuration and what mighty magic": Douglass and Conjure After Reconstruction

> And therefore little shall I grace my cause
> In speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious patience,
> I will a round unvarnished tale deliver
> Of my whole course of love, what drugs, what charms,
> What conjuration and what mighty magic—
> For such proceeding I am charged withal—
> I won his daughter. –*Othello,* (I.iii.89-95)

By the time Douglass published his third autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,* in 1881, the Civil War had put an end to slavery and, in doing so, created an identity crisis for the famous abolitionist. The abolition of slavery, which Douglass describes as "the great labor of my life," produces "a strange and, perhaps, perverse feeling" in Douglass: his

"exceeding joy" at witnessing the end of slavery is "slightly tinged with a feeling of sadness," he says, because he feels that he has "reached the end of the noblest and best part of my life" (811). Under these new circumstances, Douglass finds himself in need of a new meaning and purpose to structure the ongoing story of his life. Both the 1845 *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) had been, first and foremost, anti-slavery texts; by telling his life story, Douglass was seeking to inform readers about the horrors of slavery, convince them of its injustice, and persuade them to support its abolition. Therefore, although Douglass's journey into literacy and his increasing confidence as a writer and political leader are important themes in all three of his autobiographies, they are especially important to *Life and Times,* which lacks the clear political purpose of the 1845 and 1855 texts.

In *Life and Times,* Douglass focuses primarily on extending his self-narrative rather than re-writing it, adding twelve lengthy chapters about his life after 1855 while making only relatively minor revisions to the earlier chapters, which are more or less copied from *My Bondage*. No longer shaped exclusively by the tension between bondage and freedom, Douglass's feelings about his "roots" and his anxieties about betrayal take on new meaning in the postbellum version of his life story. Although the descriptions of Douglass's encounters with Sandy Jenkins in *Life and Times* are nearly identical to the descriptions he provides in *My Bondage,* the conjurer's significance to the author's autobiography becomes more complex as Douglass faces new threats to his political goals and sense of identity. Some things, however, remain unchanged. In the conclusion to the 1881 version of *Life and Times,* Douglass writes, "In my communication with the colored people I have endeavored to deliver them from the power of superstition, bigotry, and priest-craft" (913).

Douglass spends much of his third autobiography defending himself against accusations

that had been leveled against him by various critics during the years since the Civil War. The worst of these accusations concerns Douglass's involvement with the Freedman's Savings Bank, which went bankrupt in 1874, just months after Douglass was named as its president. The bankruptcy was a disaster for African Americans, many of whom lost their savings as well as their faith in financial institutions such as banks. Responding to his critics, Douglass defends himself by insisting that he had no knowledge of the bank's insolvency when he became its president and that all of the ruinous financial decisions were made before he became involved:

> The fact is, and all investigation shows it, that I was married to a corpse. The fine building with its marble counters and black walnut finishings, was there, as were the affable and agile clerks and the discreet and colored cashier: but the LIFE, which was the money, was gone, and I found that I had been placed there with the hope that by 'some drugs, some charms, some conjuration, or some mighty magic,' I would bring it back. (842)

Douglass's quotation in this passage comes from the first act of *Othello,* when Brabantio accuses Othello of using magic to seduce his daughter and Othello promises the Senators a "round unvarnish'd tale" of his courtship, including an explanation of "what drugs, what charms, / What conjuration, and what mighty magic" he used to woo Desdemona (1.3. 90-2). Douglass clearly envisions himself as Othello, defending himself against accusations of corruption with what he calls "a fair and unvarnished narration of my connection with the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company" (841). However, the significance of the passage does not end there. To understand the full meaning of Douglass's paraphrase of *Othello,* we must read it not only in the context of Shakespeare's play but also in the context of Douglass's evolving attitude toward conjure.

Trying to make sense of Douglass's strange mixture of metaphors and literary allusions,

John Ernest[5] writes:

> What makes Douglass's application of *Othello* here particularly strange is that he is defending himself against charges that his service was the death of the Freedmen's Bank, that he in fact failed to relume the light. Shakespeare's tragic story of one who has been deceived to the point of killing his own wife seems a strange explanatory framework for Douglass's own tale of discovering that upon accepting the presidency of the bank, he 'was married to a corpse'(Introduction xxxix).

This interpretation of the passage makes sense up to a point. Douglass is claiming that he did not kill the Freedman's Bank (his metaphorical wife) by comparing himself to a character who famously did kill his wife. However, Ernest only interprets Douglass's allusion in terms of its applicability to the play's overall plot, not in terms of Douglass's relation to the specific scene in which the lines appear. The charge against Othello is based on Brabantio's racial prejudice—the assumption that his daughter could not possibly fall in love with a Moor unless she had been "corrupted / By spells and medicines" because "For nature so preposterously to err / Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense, / Sans witchcraft could not" (I.iii. 61-5).However, as Othello explains, he is not a literal conjurer or magician; his "conjuration" of Desdemona took the form of telling her exciting and moving stories of the events in his life. In other words, Othello, like Douglass, derives his power from his facility with language and his skill at telling a compelling narrative. Both men face racist assumptions about their abilities and limitations and both use their storytelling skills to elicit emotions of pity and admiration from their audience.

In fact, the "charm" that Othello uses to seduce Desdemona is a story with striking similarities to the one that Douglass tells in his own autobiographies:

> Her father loved me, oft invited me,
> Still questioned me the story of my life

[5] Ernest, John. "Introduction." *My Southern Home: The South and its People.* University of North Carolina Press,

> From year to year—the battles, sieges, fortunes
> That I have passed.
> I ran it through, even from my boyish days
> To the very moment that he bade me tell it;
> Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,
> Of moving accidents by flood and field
> Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach,
> Of being taken by the insolent foe
> And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
> And portance in my travailous history (I.iii.133-40)

Douglass's autobiographies also begin with his "boyish days" and describe his "fortunes" and his "battles," including the life-altering battle with Covey, which occurs after his first encounter with Sandy Jenkins. Both Douglass and Othello experience slavery and redemptions, and among the many "disastrous chances," "moving accidents," and "hair-breadth scapes" in Douglass's life, the most dangerous may be his hair-breadth escape from being sold to slave traders after his betrayal by the conjurer. Although neither Douglass nor Othello is a literal conjurer, they both have similar experiences and a similar ability to use their life stories to enact a kind of figurative "conjuration."

Fundamentally, *Othello* is a tragedy about betrayal. Likewise, *My Bondage and My Freedom,* the second version of Douglass's autobiography, is a story of betrayal that illustrates why Douglass associates betrayal with conjuring and why he sees the repetition of trust and betrayal as the traumatic pattern of his life story. Even those who criticized Douglass for his affiliation with the Freedman's Bank did so because they saw it as a betrayal of his fellow emancipated slaves. In the 1881 text of *Life and Times* when Douglass denies the accusation that he could have saved the bank through "some drugs, some charms, some conjuration, or some mighty magic," he is incorporating the recurring theme of betrayal into the second chapter of his life story, but he is also adding a new layer of complexity to the patterns that he established in

My Bondage. The final version of *Life and Times*, which Douglass revised and updated again in 1892 at the age of seventy-five, acknowledges the final betrayal of Douglass's life story—the nation's betrayal not only of Douglass but of all African Americans. The 1881 version of *Life and Times* is suffused with optimism about the future of race relations in America. However, Douglass's optimism had faded by 1892 and was replaced by a conviction that although his "emancipated brothers and sisters" were no longer slaves, they remained oppressed and "in as much need of an advocate as before they were set free" (939). Acknowledging the nation's betrayal of the promises of Reconstruction, Douglass laments that the "imperfections of memory, the multitudinous throngs of events, the fading effects of time upon the national mind, and the growing affection of the loyal nation for the late rebels, will, on the page of our national history, obscure the negro's part, though they can never blot it out entirely, nor can it be entirely forgotten" (946).

The "Place" of William Wells Brown: Conjure and Minstrelsy in *My Southern Home*

"Who is that nigger?" inquired Cook.
"That is Dinkie," replied Dr. Gaines.
"What is his place?" continued the overseer.
"Oh, Dinkie is a gentleman at large!" was the response.
—Brown, *My Southern Home* (59)

"What is his place?" The overseer's question about Dinkie—a peculiar black character in *My Southern Home,* a semi-fictional 1880 memoir by William Wells Brown—seems simple and straightforward enough. Like most white Americans in the antebellum nineteenth century, the overseer assumes that every African American occupies a clearly-defined "place" in the rigid social and economic hierarchies of the South, and he assumes that Dinkie's place is fixed and limited by the word "nigger," which simultaneously serves as a marker of Dinkie's racial identity and as a sign of the systematic dehumanization that makes slavery possible by transforming

people into property. However, both the overseer and the reader of Brown's postbellum memoir will soon learn that Dinkie is an exception to this rule. Dinkie is a conjurer, which means that although he lives among the slaves on the plantation, his nominal "master," Dr. Gaines, can neither sell him nor force him to work because of the fear and respect that Dinkie's knowledge of conjuring commands among both whites and blacks. Dinkie's "place" as a "gentleman at large" puts him in a peculiar position somewhere between freedom and slavery, between power and powerlessness. As its full title suggests, *My Southern Home; or, The South and Its People* is a book about place, but the place that most concerns Brown is neither the "home" of his youth nor the South as a region. *My Southern Home* is, at its core, is about the undefined, liminal "place" of the conjurer—the truest home of William Wells Brown.

Like Dinkie, the genre-bending text of *My Southern Home* resists easy classification. At first glance, the text seems to be very similar to *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), a revised autobiography starting with scenes from Brown's life as a slave and ending with his return to the South after the Civil War. Like Douglass, Brown was born into slavery but escaped to the North, where he first achieved prominence as an abolitionist speaker and then entered the literary arena in the 1840s as the author of his own slave narrative. Also like Douglass, Brown recycles much of his earlier writing in his postbellum memoir while also adding new material, including his thoughts on the social and political difficulties of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction America. However, *My Southern Home* is much more than a revised and expanded version of Brown's 1847 slave narrative. As Brown's biographer William Farrison notes, *My Southern Home* borrows "a considerable amount, often verbatim," from Brown's fiction and from his 1858 play *The Escape* as well as material from the "several editions of his *Narrative"* and from the earlier *Memoir of William Wells Brown* (447).

According to John Ernest, Brown's habit of borrowing freely from his own publications and from "various newspapers, pamphlets, and books" has led some readers to criticize *My Southern Home* as "a problematic pastiche of a narrative, with shifting genres and perspectives, and sometimes shifty opinions and commentary" ("Introduction" xiv). Ernest himself regards this pastiche quality as one of the book's strengths, calling *My Southern Home* an account of Brown's "intellectual as well as physical" journey and "a mixed-genre text, including elements of autobiography, travel narrative, history, political science, sociology, and drama" (xlii-xliii). While Ernest carefully traces the sources of Brown's text and examines the author's revisions and re-contextualizations of recycled material, he pays little attention to the parts of *My Southern Home* that are entirely new, written especially for Brown's final published book. Several of the most striking episodes that Brown wrote specifically for *My Southern Home* are depictions of conjure and what the author calls the "superstitions" of the South. Although the conjurer bears some resemblance to the other trickster figures in Brown's oeuvre, he is also unique in his affiliation with magic and in his extraordinary success at manipulating and defying the dominant power structures. In order to make sense of the "problematic pastiche" and the "shifting genres and perspectives" of *My Southern Home,* we need to examine how Brown understands the power of conjure and why he introduces the conjurer as a new kind of trickster figure in the final literary work of his career. *My Southern Home* establishes Brown as one of the founding fathers of the conjure tale by illustrating the importance of conjure to Brown's humor, to his peculiar narrative technique, and to his political critique of postbellum America as the country began its transition away from the goals and promises of Reconstruction.

Although Brown's depictions of conjuring are unique to *My Southern Home,* they could be seen as part of a questionable pattern within Brown's writing: a tendency to exploit negative

racial stereotypes in order to appease and appeal to racist white readers. With his comical depictions of "superstitious" African American characters, Brown can easily be accused of endorsing and profiting from minstrel stereotypes, and thus engaging in a form of betrayal figuratively similar to that committed by Sandy Jenkins against Douglass. However, while Brown is perfectly willing to use folk beliefs to get a laugh, he is also careful to depict "superstition" as a regional rather than racial characteristic. For example, in the opening paragraph of Chapter VII, Brown's narratorial persona adopts the attitude of a detached observer describing a peculiar feature of the antebellum South: "Forty years ago, in the Southern States, superstition held an exalted place with all classes, but more especially with the blacks and uneducated, or poor, whites. This was shown more clearly in their belief in witchcraft in general, and the devil in particular" (165). Brown's narrator distances himself from the "superstition" of his fellow Southerners by adopting a condescending tone, but he is also careful to characterize such beliefs as widespread features of Southern culture rather than markers of any particular race or class. In fact, the text repeatedly insists that belief in conjure is common among plantation owners and other members of the Southern aristocracy. Even Dr. Gaines, a character who regards his slaves' "superstition" as an innate racial characteristic, concedes that his peers are not immune to such beliefs, saying "the African is preeminently a religious being . . . They have a permanent belief in good and bad luck, ghosts, fortune-telling, and the like; but we whites are not entirely free from such notions" (158). Even white characters who regard themselves as pious Christians believe in conjure. The text notes that Mr. Pinchen, a Christian minister "was possessed with a large share of the superstition that prevails throughout the South, not only with the ignorant negro, who brought it with him from his native land, but also by a great number of well educated and influential whites" (133). Brown's use of the phrase "ignorant negro" in this

passage might seem disparaging, but the context suggests that readers should interpret the phrase ironically because African Americans are no more "ignorant" than the region's well-educated white population.

White Southerners' superstitious beliefs are, according to Brown's narrator, "the result of their close connection with the blacks; for the servants told the most foolish stories to the children in the nurseries, and they learned more, as they grew older, from the slaves in the quarters, or out on the premises" (159). The scene that Brown describes—of white children being entertained by black storytellers with "foolish" tales of ghosts and conjurers—would soon become ingrained in America's cultural imagination thanks to the enormous popularity of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories, the first collection of which appeared in 1880, the same year that Brown's *My Southern Home* was published. However, the storytelling scene holds a vastly different significance for Brown than it does for Harris. Although Brown again seems to align himself with the sophisticated skepticism of his white Northern readers by using the pejorative word "foolish" to describe the slaves' stories, the text ultimately suggests that both conjure and black storytelling are worthy of respect rather than condescension by showing how they provide African Americans with a way of achieving influence, power, money, and even vengeance within the confines of an oppressive culture.

The most memorable illustration of the power of conjure in *My Southern Home* is Dinkie, a "very ugly" one-eyed "full-blooded African" who acts as the local "oracle" and "conjurer" of Dr. Gaines's plantation (166). Dinkie, who wears a snake skin around his neck and carries a petrified frog in one pocket and a dried lizard in the other, is, according to Brown, more "deeply immersed in voudooism, goopherism, and fortune-telling" than anyone else in the area (166-7). Despite his ridiculous name and grotesque physical appearance, Dinkie is treated with respect by

everyone in the neighborhood, including the whites, who "tipped their hats" to him, and the patrollers, who "permitted him to pass without a challenge" (166). Although Dinkie is nominally a slave, he comes and goes as he pleases and, according to Brown's narrator, "no one could remember the time when Dinkie was called upon to perform manual labor" (166). As one of his fellow slaves explains, "Dinkie's got de power, ser; he knows things seen and unseen, an' dat's what makes him his own massa" (167). Dinkie's knowledge of "things seen and unseen" not only makes him his own master but also gives him power over others, such as the overseer who mysteriously changes his mind about whipping Dinkie and the white woman who allows Dinkie to spit in her hand when he tells her fortune.

Dinkie and the Burial Plot: Conjuring the Stench of Slavery

> His remedy was to dig a pit in the ground large enough to hold the man, put him in it, and cover him over with fresh earth; consequently, Mr. Sarpee was, after removing his entire clothing, buried, all except his head, while his clothing was served in the same manner. A servant held an umbrella over the unhappy man, and fanned him during the eight hours that he was there. –William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home*

Dinkie's most outrageous and most significant demonstration of the freedom and power that his conjuring abilities give him occurs at the end of the very first chapter when he is called in to help a "city gentleman" named Mr. Sarpee, who is visiting Mr. Gaines and has been sprayed by a skunk during a "coon hunt" (124-5). Dinkie's remedy not only earns him a Mexican silver dollar as payment but also gives him an opportunity to wreak a hilarious revenge on the cocky white man. The remedy, Dinkie says, is to dig a pit in the ground, put him in it, and bury him up to his neck in dirt (125). After eight hours, the man is removed from the pit and inspected by Dinkie, who declares that although he "smelt sweeter" than when he was buried, he must return to the pit once again the following day to eliminate the smell completely. Never allowing a trace of the scene's humor to enter his tone, Brown's narrator dryly describes every detail of

Dinkie's "remedy": "Five hours longer in the pit, the following day, with a rub down by Dinkie, with his 'Goopher,' fitted the young man for a return home to the city" (125). Although Dinkie gives no sign that he is enjoying this ritual of humiliation, the narrator describes how the rest of the slaves openly display their appreciation of the spectacle: "No description of mine, however, can give anything like a correct idea of the merriment of the entire slave population on 'Poplar Farm,' caused by the 'coon hunt.' Even Uncle Ned, the old superannuated slave, who seldom went beyond the confines of his cabin, hobbled out, on this occasion to take a look at 'de gentleman fum de city,' while buried in the pit" (125-6). At least on this occasion, Dinkie's powers as a conjurer not only empower him but also provide a symbolic victory for the entire slave community. Even Dante could not invent a more appropriate punishment for the sins of slavery than the "remedy" that Dinkie conjures up. Stripped of his clothes, his dignity, and his freedom of movement, the white gentleman must submit to a state of total powerlessness. Meanwhile, Dinkie assumes the power to command, inspect, and punish his victim, all under the guise of benevolence. Like Dr. Gaines, who claims to be a benevolent master because he teaches his slaves to be Christians, Dinkie can use his superior knowledge of conjure to claim that everything he is doing is for the white gentleman's own good while simultaneously profiting from the transaction.

The chapter immediately following the "coon hunt" incident offers a striking parallel to Dinkie's ingenious revenge, this time using the language and imagery of Christianity instead of conjure. The chapter begins with Dr. Gaines explaining his conviction that slavery is a benevolent institution, saying "I regard our negroes as given to us by an All Wise Providence, for their especial benefit, and we should impart to them Christian civilization" (127). However, when Dr. Gaines orders one of his slaves to be whipped merely for obeying an order given by his

mistress, the doctor feels guilty and permits the slave, named Jim, to lead the other slaves in prayer as compensation for the undeserved punishment. Jim sheds "grateful tears" over his master's apology and compensation, but when he begins his prayer, Jim's underlying anger becomes evident: "Now, Lord, I would specially ax you to try to save marster. You knows dat marster says he's gwine to heaven; but Lord, I have my doubts; an yet I want marster saved" (128). To save Dr. Gaines's soul, Jim asks God to "take him, Dear Lord, by de nap of de neck, and shake him over hell and show him his condition" (128). Since the Christian Hell is typically represented as a dark pit from which there is no escape, Dinkie's "remedy" of burying the doctor's friend in a custom-made pit is a physical representation of the spiritual warning that Jim envisions when he asks God to show Dr. Gaines "his condition." However, while Dinkie emerges completely unscathed and even enriched by his escapade, Jim inspires his master's indignation with his prayer and barely escapes being whipped for it. The juxtaposition of these two scenes suggests that both conjure and Christianity offer slaves a language and iconography for envisioning retribution against their oppressors, but conjure is the safer alternative because whites are willing to concede African Americans' superior expertise in the realm of conjuring, but they assert their own authority on the doctrines of Christianity.

Dinkie's skunk remedy serves not only as a symbolic retribution for the sins of slavery but also as a metaphor for white Americans' growing attitude toward slavery and its legacies during the period when Brown was writing *My Southern Home*. As Reconstruction ended in 1877 and federal troops left the South, a spirit of reconciliation increasingly characterized relations between whites from the North and the South. As David Blight has argued, this spirit of sectional reconciliation depended largely on widespread cultural amnesia about both the horrors of slavery and slavery's role in the Civil War. Metaphorically, white Northerners and

Southerners tried to mask the lingering stench of slavery by burying it and forgetting any debts or obligations owed to the newly-freed slaves and their descendants. Dinkie's method of conjuring away the white man's moral stench is not only a masterful revenge fantasy but also a satire of the cultural amnesia that Brown critiques explicitly in the later chapters of the book. Elevated by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the legal status of American citizens, African Americans had made considerable social and economic progress during Reconstruction. However, by the time Brown wrote *My Southern Home* in 1880, Reconstruction had ended and African Americans found themselves "subjected to a reign of terror," nominally free but practically enslaved to the economic and political power of Southern Democrats (123). Brown passionately insists that "the restoring of the rebels to power and the surrendering the colored people to them, after using the latter in the war, and at the ballot box . . . is the most bare-faced ingratitude that history gives any account of" (135). Later in his book, Brown insists "it was the duty of the nation, having once clothed the colored man with the rights of citizenship and promised him in the Constitution full protection for those rights, to keep this promise most sacredly" (123). Dinkie's skunk remedy functions not only as a revenge fantasy but also as a symbolic critique of the post-Reconstruction condition of African Americans who were stripped of the (figurative) clothes of citizenship and then buried beneath white America's public discourse of reconciliation.

Although Dinkie is the most memorable conjurer in Brown's text, he is not the only one. A conversation between Dr. Gaines and his slave-owning friend Colonel Lemmy reveals that the superstition of the local white population is strong enough to provide economic support for at least two black fortune-tellers in addition to Dinkie. These fortune-tellers,"old Frank" and "old Betty," make a living advising their white customers on matters such as legal disputes and horse

race gambling (158-9). However, the only conjurer who truly rivals Dinkie in power and sophistication is Brown himself, who uses the conjurer as a model for his own role as an African American author trying to make a place for himself in the American literary marketplace. As John Ernest has pointed out, "it is sometimes difficult to locate Brown" in his memoir because the author's narrative persona seems radically unstable, undergoing several transformations over the course of the narrative (xiii). How does Brown manage to disappear from his own memoir? It must be magic.

In the early chapters, Brown's narrator maintains an ambiguous racial status by becoming almost totally invisible to the reader. Because the narrator hardly ever participates in the events that he describes, his position in Dr. Gaines's household remains unclear: is he a slave, a member of the family, or a guest? The narrator's racial, political, and idealogical perspective shifts from chapter to chapter and paragraph to paragraph. In some passages, the narrator openly identifies himself as an African American, supporting equality for "our people" and condemning racist laws that create "a system of peonage" in the South (177, 161). Yet in other passages, he clearly identifies with his white readers, denying that the liberation of the slaves has "made it incumbent upon *us* to take *these people* into *our* houses, and give them seats in *our* social circle" [my emphasis] and claiming to "easily see the cause of the great antipathy of the white man to the black" (122, 135). All of this has prompted John Ernest to pose the question "Where in the world is William Wells Brown?" Ernest's response is to interpret the ambiguity of Brown's narrator as a sign that *My Southern Home* is "less memoir than sociology," (xxvi). However, I propose that Brown sees his text's narrator not as a sociologist but as a conjurer who can transform himself at will and challenge even the immutability of race itself. In the end, Brown and Dinkie occupy the same "place"; as Dr. Gaines would say, they are both "gentlemen at large."

Comparing Brown's use of humor and minstrel stereotypes to the "tragicomedy" of Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales, Glenda R. Carpio dismisses Brown's engagement with folklore, saying "[m]uch more so than Brown, Chesnutt made intricate use of African American folklore, in particular of conjure" (48). Although she claims that Brown "rarely invoked conjure explicitly," Carpio uses conjure as a metaphor in her own analysis of Brown's humor, saying that Brown, like Chesnutt, is "a conjurer in his own right" because of his ability to bring "to life racial stereotypes through mimicry and hyperbole, strategies that were more obvious and more potent in his dramatic readings (since these relied on his acting) than in his written work" (48). Yet because her analysis focuses almost exclusively on Brown's 1858 play *The Escape,* Carpio ignores Brown's most extensive, humorous, and sophisticated uses of conjure, which appear in *My Southern Home*. Through the figure of Dinkie, Brown's bizarre postbellum memoir not only demonstrates the author's willingness to invoke conjure explicitly but also challenges Carpio's claim that Brown lacked Chesnutt's ability to make "intricate use of African American folklore" (48). Carpio explains that conjure "operates in Chesnutt's tales as a mode of narration in which to tell a tale is to cast a spell, a spell that has the capacity to 'dissolve and rearrange the reader's historical sensibilities and racial assumptions'" (Carpio 48). [6] I argue that conjure also operates as a mode of narration in *My Southern Home* and that Brown, like Chesnutt, uses the power of his narrative technique to "cast a spell" over his readers in order to "dissolve and rearrange" their "historical sensibilities and racial assumptions." My analysis of *My Southern Home* suggests that Brown was an important precursor to Chesnutt not only, as Carpio argues, because of his use of humor and racial stereotypes to critique American racism but also because of his treatment of conjure as a rich and complex source of metaphors and narrative techniques.

[6] Carpio is quoting Jeff Rovin's analysis of the comedy of Richard Pryor.

Sandy Jenkins in Chicago: Portrait of the Artist as a Conjurer

Dah de wand'rin' night winds stray,
Dah de groanin' branches sway,
Ghosts an' witches lose dey way—
'Way in de woods, an' nobody dah.

--James D. Corrothers, "'Way in de Woods an' Nobody Dah," *The Black Cat Club*

As the parallel careers of Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown came to an end in the late nineteenth century, a new generation of African American writers arose to take their place. This generation, which includes such writers as Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and W. E. B. Du Bois had grown up in an America without slavery and therefore had a very different perspective and set of concerns than the previous generation, which had focused primarily on slave narratives and abolitionist literature. One member of this new generation who typically receives far less attention than he deserves is James D. Corrothers, a Chicago journalist who wrote short stories, sketches, and poetry in both dialect and standard English, publishing in mainstream magazines as well as independent black publications. His first book, published in 1902, was *The Black Cat Club: Negro Humor and Folklore*, a dialect novel set in turn-of-the-century Chicago. Derived from a series of newspaper sketches that Corrothers began writing in 1896, the episodic novel follows the activities and antics of a "literary society" called the Black Cat Club, which consists of eight disreputable black men and their leader, who is both a conjurer and a poet. The club is not especially "literary" in a traditional sense, having banned college graduates and those "too familiar with the classics" from membership, but its members do meet regularly to socialize, tell stories, read poetry, and "learn all they can concerning cats, witches, ghosts, quaint Negro sayings and plantation stories and melodies" (17).

Although Corrothers claims in his preface that the book is "intended as a series of

character studies of Negro life as it may be observed in the great cities of the North," he portrays his characters with such broad strokes of racial caricature that the novel has received little attention from scholars and, according to Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., "has been very hard to fit into most historical paradigms for African-American writing, particularly those emphasizing, rightly, issues of protest and liberation" (Bruce 3). Even Corrothers himself denounced the novel in his 1916 autobiography, *In Spite of the Handicap*, saying "I have grown to consider the book a very poor one and regret exceedingly that it was published" (Corrothers qtd in Gaines 341). Richard Yarborogh apparently agrees with Corrothers's assessment, writing that *The Black Cat Club* "vacillates between broad, cartoonish farce and belated attempts at psychological realism," includes a "totally improbable" love story, and portrays its main characters as "bickering, superstitious, boisterous black buffoons" (Yarborough 5). Despite such harsh criticism, *The Black Cat Club* deserves scholarly attention not only because of its ability to yield insight into the literary trends, frustrations, and preoccupations of turn-of-the-century black writers but also because of its unusually complex engagement with the traditions of African American literature and folklore.

The overall tone of Corrothers's book owes much to William Wells Brown's brand of bawdy comedy, featuring characters who lie, swindle, boast, and perform in ways that simultaneously evoke and challenge racial stereotypes. However, Corrothers's most interesting and explicit literary debt is to the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass, which supply the name of the *The Black Cat Club*'s protagonist: Sandy Jenkins. Corrothers's Sandy Jenkins, the founder and president of the Black Cat Club, is both a conjurer and a popular and prolific dialect poet living in Chicago. Instead of a magic root, Corrothers's Sandy carries a rabbit's foot in his pocket for protection and he has a black cat named Mesmerizer, which he uses to "hoodoo" and

intimidate his "literary rivals" and the club's detractors. Corrothers's decision to name his novel's main character after the conjurer from Douglass's autobiographies is almost certainly no coincidence. As Dickson Bruce, Jr., has noted, naming has traditionally been seen as a matter of "great importance" in African American literature and Corrothers was a "great admirer of Douglass" who not only met and spoke to Douglass as a young journalist but also supported him during a brief controversy related to the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1893 (Bruce "Lives" 668). Moreover, Sandy is the only member of the Black Cat Club who retains his real name throughout the novel instead of adopting a stereotypical pseudonym (18).

The only scholar who has offered an explanation for Corrothers's borrowing from Douglass is Dickson Bruce, Jr., who argues that the theme of betrayal is the key to understanding Corrothers's decision to name his character "Sandy Jenkins." Because the original Sandy Jenkins betrayed Douglass by exposing Douglass's plan to escape from slavery, the name, Bruce says, is a symbol of betrayal and a sign that Corrothers intended his novel to be read as a satire of black leaders and writers who betrayed the African American community by capitulating to degrading racial stereotypes and tolerating segregation and discrimination. Specifically, Bruce argues that Corrothers is trying to challenge black authors who write in dialect such as Paul Laurence Dunbar (and Corrothers himself) as well as critique Booker T. Washington, a black leader who gained fame and support from many blacks and whites for his 1895 Atlanta Compromise, which advised African Americans to accept segregation and stressed accommodation, self-help, and industrial education as strategies for dealing with systemic racism. Thus, according to Bruce, Corrothers's character Sandy is a traitor to his race partly because he writes humorous dialect poetry that reinforces racial stereotypes and partly because he explicitly endorses Booker T. Washington in a speech to on "de eddicated cullud man," and implicitly allies himself with

Washington by showing contempt for black college "graddiates" and by gaining the approval of racist whites during the club's "Great Debate" (59). According to Bruce, "Just as Douglass's Sandy Jenkins was, ultimately, the ideal slave . . . so is Corrothers's Sandy the kind of leader whose role is defined according to the terms set by whites in a racist society" (Bruce "Lives" 670).

Although Bruce's interpretation does explain part of the significance of Sandy's name, it also oversimplifies Corrothers's portrayal of his novel's main character and fails to account for some of the *The Black Cat Club*'s most important aesthetic and political strengths. Corrothers's depiction of Sandy and his fellow club members is certainly not entirely positive, but neither is it as wholly negative as Bruce's interpretation seems to suggest. Even if Corrothers regretted writing the book by 1916, the complexities of *The Black Cat Club* suggest that in 1902 the author felt respect, and even admiration, for some aspects of his Sandy Jenkins character. As I argued earlier in this chapter, Douglass portrays the original Sandy Jenkins not only as a figure of betrayal but also as a father figure who becomes an embodied representative of the "roots" of African American folklore and conjure. *The Black Cat Club* conveys both of these sides of the original Sandy Jenkins, illustrating both the attraction and the repulsion that black intellectuals such as Corrothers felt toward African American folk culture.

At first glance, Sandy and the other members of his boisterous club certainly seem to embody many of the negative characteristics that have been stereotypically associated with African Americans. Given the title of the book, perhaps the most obvious of these stereotypes is superstition. But while it is true that club's members frequently tell stories and write poems about "ghosts witches and hoodoos" and the magical powers of black cats, their relationship with conjure and other supernatural folklore is more complex than it appears on the surface (78).

While some episodes do seem to suggest that the club members' fear of conjure is ridiculous and disempowering, the novel as a whole depicts conjure primarily as a tool that African Americans can use to help them survive in an oppressive and racist country. The first chapter begins with Sandy reading a newspaper article that says "Sandy's friend have taken up the spirit of the fun" by joining the Black Cat Club, which is "founded on a pretended belief in the old Negro superstition that black cats are the children of his Satanic majesty" (16). The word "pretended" and the phrase "spirit of the fun" suggests that the apparent superstitions of Sandy and his friends may be feigned (or at least exaggerated) for the sake of camaraderie and the celebration of African American folklore. As a conjurer, Sandy gains social status for himself and his club by using his black cat, Mesmerizer, to intimidate his critics and rivals. Moreover, by declaring that the black cat is "a pow'ful an' 'spectable genamun" and a "mahvel ob de nations" who "hab allus bin somebody," Sandy uses the legend of the club's mascot to instill a sense of pride and black heritage in people who may not have any experience with being treated as "somebody"—much less as powerful and respectable gentlemen—in their daily lives (32-5).

While the vast majority of *The Black Cat Club* focuses on interactions within the African American community, when white characters do appear in the text, Corrothers often makes a point of challenging and ridiculing their supposed racial superiority. One of the club's members tells a story of how he "wo'ked a cullud shahpah." After being approached by a black con man who mistakes him for a "greeny," the character decides to play along and "hab some fun" by conning the con man. Most of the humor of the episode comes from watching the two black con artists try to outwit one another, but some of the humor also comes at the expense of white people. The club's storyteller describes the scene as the con artist, pretending to be a millionaire, takes his intended victim to the Chicago Board of Trade: "Coon tuck me ovah to de Bo'd o'

Trade, whah white folks wuz a-howlin', lak cannibals in de wiles o' Affirky!" (119). Calling the would-be swindler a "coon" seems to invite the reader to use racial stereotypes to ridicule the transparent trickery of the unsuccessful charlatan, but then the storyteller undermines the supposed racial basis of the stereotypes by comparing the white folks in the Board of Trade to "cannibals" in the wilds of Africa. When the storyteller asks what is wrong with them, the swindler says, "Dem men's worryin' ovah gw-e-a-t social problems! Dem men's studyin' foh yo' good when you's asleep. An' evah time dey tu'ns a thought ovah, hit's wo'f a million dollahs mo'" (119). By putting these words in the mouth of a character who has already shown himself to be a shameless liar and manipulator, Corrothers underscores their irony, implying that the white men hide behind a pretence of solving social problems and acting for the greater good of society while really engaging in economic exploitation—a form of figurative cannibalism.

One reason why *The Black Cat Club* offends some readers is that it seems at times to be so concerned with making its readers laugh that it fails to treat its serious political and cultural themes with the seriousness that they deserve. However, a more careful analysis reveals that Corrothers uses his characters' dialect, idioms, and expressions in subtle ways to suggest that there is something deadly serious and significant just below the surface of the novel's humor. In fact, several times the novel refers (consciously or unconsciously) to a phrase that, according to Glenda Carpio, characterizes the complex humor of both Charles Chesnutt and William Wells Brown. Taking the title of her book, *Laughing Fit to Kill,* from a phrase that Chesnutt uses repeatedly in his conjure stories, Carpio argues that the phrase is important because it evokes the fundamental connection between laughter and violence in any text or performance that attempts to use humor to critique slavery or racial oppression. This same phrase also occurs repeatedly in Corrothers's novel, which often describes both white and black characters as "laughin fit to kill"

in situations where humor is linked to violence, racism, or betrayal. For example, one of the club's members tells a story about a black con artist who begins "laughin' fit to kill his se'f" when he discovers that the black victim he intends to fleece has a large wad of money (117). Given Corrothers's concern with the theme of betrayal—particularly the betrayal of black people by other black people—the storyteller's figure of speech suggests that intra-racial crime, including the black con man's intended theft, is a form of social suicide.

In a later chapter, Corrothers uses black dialect and the expression "laughing fit to kill" to shed light on an inter-racial encounter. One member of the Black Cat Club tells a story about time when he was working on a steamboat and saw the "Pictured Rocks." He describes the scene in vivid detail, saying that the rock formations look like pictures of God's thoughts, including representations of flowers, cities, mountains, railroads, and "thaings whut de white folks ain't *discovered* yit" (164). One day, he overhears a "young white lady" talking to her lover about the rocks and quoting a passage of Whittier's poetry to describe them, which Corrothers reproduces for his readers in the storyteller's dialect: "Alof' on sky an' mountain wall, / Is God's great pictahs hung" (165). The black storyteller then recounts how he responded to the white woman's recitation by saying "Lady, you jes' took dem wo'ds outen ma mouf!" (165). When the white lady and her lover heard his comment, he says, "huh an' huh fellah laughed fit to kill 'emse'ves, an' flung me a quahtah" (165). In the eyes of the white tourists, the joke in this scene is on the black storyteller because they consider it impossible that a black man could even understand Whittier's poetry, much less have thoughts of his own that could equal Whittier's in eloquence or sophistication. For the readers of Corrothers's novel, however, the joke is on the white tourists because the storyteller's earlier description of the rocks as pictures of God's thoughts exactly mirrors the sentiment of Whittier's poem. Moreover, it is the white lady, not the black man, who

is taking the words out of someone else's mouth; by quoting Whittier to describe the rocks instead of expressing her thoughts in her own words, the lady unwittingly shows that the black storyteller surpasses her in both creativity and eloquence. Although the storyteller in Corrothers's book does not give any direct or explicit indication of being angry or humiliated by the white couple's laughter, his statement that the couple "laughed fit to kill" themselves suggests that his anger is merely sublimated and he is taking pleasure in the thought of the white couple literally being killed by (or for) their cruel, racist laughter (165). The character ends his story with a recollection of how he and "us boys" used to earn money by singing "plantation songs" to the white steamboat passengers, suggesting that the white couple's racism and their humiliation of the black worker was a routine occurance (165).

"De Eddicated Cullud Man": Corrothers, Douglass, Sandy, and Dialect

> I think I was the most conceited negro that ever lived. Why, I was a great race man, always talking about the abuse my people received and thinking that anything that referred to them was a slur. I would have no more written verse in negro dialect than fly. I thought it would demean me. (1899)—James D. Corrothers (qtd. in Yarborough 4)

Born in 1869, Corrothers grew up in a predominantly white town in Michigan, where, after the death of his mother in childbirth, he was raised by his paternal grandfather, a pious man of Cherokee, Scotch, and Irish descent (Yarborough 2). Because of his unusual background, Corrothers held a complex and ambivalent attitude toward dialect writing. As Richard Yarborough writes, "On the one hand, he felt that being raised in 'an atmosphere of pure speech' prevented him from picking up black dialect or stereotypically black behavior patterns. On the other, he argues in his autobiography that this lack of extensive early contact with Afro-Americans handicapped him in his dealings with what he termed 'the unschooled Negro'" (Yarborough 2). As a young journalist in Chicago, Corrothers was fired from his job at the

Tribune after angrily confronting his boss about an article of his that had been re-written by a white reporter as a comic dialect piece according to the conventions of minstrel show humor. At the same time, two of Corrothers's favorite white writers were the Scottish dialect poet Robert Burns and the "Hoosier" poet James Whitcomb Riley (Yarborough 2).

This brings us back to the second part of Dickson D. Bruce's argument—that, in addition to satirizing accommodationist black leaders such as Booker T. Washington, Corrothers also chose the name "Sandy Jenkins" for his protagonist because he felt guilty about writing his novel in the humorous dialect style that was popular and marketable to white readers at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Bruce, Corrothers viewed his novel as a betrayal of Douglass, of his own ideals, and of his fellow African Americans—a capitulation to the racist tastes and expectations of white readers—and he names the character Sandy Jenkins in order to express his guilt.

Once again, Bruce's interpretation is only partly right because it over-states one side of Corrothers's ambivalence. Although Corrothers may indeed have felt both some guilt and resentment about the success of his dialect writing and its possible contribution to racial stereotypes, his truly masterful and creative use of dialect in *The Black Cat Club* is the work of someone with genuine respect for the form. Corrothers assures his readers in his preface to the novel that "many quaint negro expressions, droll sayings, and peculiar bywords, used by Negroes universally, have, to the best of my ability been set down at just such times and places as a Negro would naturally make use of them" (8). As the author suggests in his 1899 self-accusation of having been "the most conceited negro who ever lived," Corrothers changed his attitude about "negro dialect" at the end of the nineteenth century and ceased to feel "demean[ed]" by it (qtd. in Yarborough 4). Corrothers's decision to transplant African American folklore, conjure, and

dialect from the rural South to the city of Chicago was an innovation on the conventions of black dialect writing at the time that illustrated the complexity, durability, and flexibility of African American culture at a time when many dialect writers insisted that their work was important precisely because such cultures were on the verge of extinction. Moreover, Corrothers's use of dialect goes well beyond mere misspellings to include African American idioms and figures of speech that enable both the author and his characters to conceal multiple layers of meaning within seemingly simple dialogue.

Instead of being a marker of stupidity or ignorance, the characters' dialect is often used to emphasize their cleverness with word-play. For example, when a character named Bad Bob Sampson tells a story about his encounter with the biggest black cat in "de Newnited States," he creates a clever portmanteau that conveys the important information that his story is set at a time when the re-unification of the United States was still a new and the terms of that re-unification were not yet fully clear. Another example is the Black Cat Club's rule about honorary members, which are neither called "honorary members" nor choose them on the basis of their "brilliancy" or honor (19). As a bartender reads in a newspaper article about the club, "[t]hey will be denominated 'onry members,' and will be chosen because they are considered too 'onry' to belong to the club" (19). Seemingly like the typical malapropisms of the typical "Zip Coon" minstrel stereotype, this passage uses the similar sounds of the words "honorary" and "ornery" (especially in the characters' dialect) to make a joke, but this joke is different because it seems to be deliberate, not only for the author but also for the novel's dialect-speaking characters. A minstrel show version of this joke using a typical malapropism might start when one character calls someone an "onry" (meaning honorary) member of the club and then the second character, unfamiliar with the word "honorary" or its definition, assumes that he is being called "ornery"

and takes offense. In this case, the joke is on the second character because he does not know what the word "honorary" means. In Corrothers's novel, however, the members of the club seem to be deliberately combining the definitions of "honorary" and "ornery" to make a joke that illustrates their cleverness rather than their ignorance.

Although the poet, Sandy, speaks in a heavy black dialect, Corrothers undermines racial stereotypes by exposing Sandy's self-awareness through the performative flexibility of his speech patterns. When the Black Cat Club is invited to hold one of its meetings in a saloon full of rowdy Dutch and German immigrants, Sandy entertains the crowd by reading two of his dialect poems. The first poem is in the African American dialect that appears throughout the book in the speech of the Black Cat Club's members, but the second one is a Dutch dialect poem that Sandy says he wrote "'specially foh dis occasion" when the club planned to hold its next meeting in the saloon of a "jovial German" (74, 65). This chapter, which derives its humor from the chaotic confusion of ethnic stereotypes, suggests that Sandy's use of dialect in his poetry is an artistic choice.

When Douglass declared in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that he had to forget about his "roots" in order to stand up for himself against Covey, he articulated a problem that many African Americans, including Corrothers, faced in the late nineteenth century: How can one challenge racial stereotypes without also forgetting about the cultural "roots" that many white Americans took to be the basis of those stereotypes? David Blight has argued persuasively that in the decades following Reconstruction, white Americans used selective forgetting of slavery and the Civil War to justify a national narrative that facilitated sectional reconciliation at the expense of African American citizenship. However, Blight is wrong when he says that only white Americans engaged in such selective forgetting. As Chesnutt suggests in his color line story,

"The Wife of His Youth," the forgetting of slavery was not exclusively the province of whites in the post-Reconstruction period; some economically and socially elite African Americans also tried to ignore or forget about the horrors and the shame of slavery in order to pursue individual or collective "advancement." This is precisely what the protagonist of Chesnutt's story does when he considers casting off the formerly-enslaved wife of his youth for a free-born and light-skinned woman who occupies a higher position in African American society. Like Chesnutt, Corrothers subtly challenges Douglass's decision to disparage his "roots" in conjure and African American folk culture by giving a voice to the positive side of Sandy Jenkins that Douglass felt the need to reject in his autobiographies. Although the tone is sentimental, Sandy has a point when he says he is not ashamed that his mother was a slave and proclaims "de high-tone' dahkies dat hab forgot dey mothers, an' is tryin' to prove dey ain't got no slave blood in 'em, is all a sick'nin mess o' fools!" (124). By embracing black folklore, conjure, and the other "roots" of slave culture, Corrothers's Sandy Jenkins suggests that, for African Americans in the generations following the end of slavery, looking to the future need not be entirely incompatible with remembering the past.

Chapter 2

Conjuring Nostalgia: Framing Memory, Childhood, and Folklore Studies in the Conjure Tale

The surge of interest in conjure at the end of the nineteenth century coincided with a period of tremendous growth in the social sciences as anthropology and folklore studies became recognized and institutionalized academic disciplines in both America and Europe. Edward B. Tylor, the first anthropologist and folklorist in Britain to hold a university faculty position, published *Primitive Cultures* in 1871, in which he argued that all societies began in a primitive state of savagery and then evolved toward civilization. Tylor claimed that studying "survivals" such as myths, riddles, and games would help nineteenth-century social scientists to understand the primitive past that he believed all modern societies had in common (Olson 73). In his 1877 book *Ancient Society*, the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan expanded upon Tyler's ideas of social evolution, writing that "all the facts of human knowledge and experience tend to show that the human race, as a whole, has steadily progressed from a lower to a higher condition" (Morgan qtd. in Olson 73). Morgan's book identified three main stages of social evolution: savagery, barbarianism, and civilization. Drawing on the Darwinian idea of "survival of the fittest," many anthropologists, particularly in America, believed that certain "primitive" societies, such as the tribes of American Indians, were destined to vanish because they could not keep up with the rapid changes of the modern world (Olson 74-5). This belief in the inevitable disappearance of supposedly "primitive" societies contributed to the sense of urgency that many anthropologists felt about studying and preserving certain kinds of folklore before it vanished.

In 1878, the English Folklore Society was formed, and American scholars followed suit ten years later by establishing the American Folklore Society. Early members of the American

Folklore Society included Joel Chandler Harris, Mark Twain, and a young German anthropologist named Franz Boas, who would later revolutionize the field of anthropology with his egalitarian understanding of cultural difference. Neither Twain nor Harris was a trained anthropologist, but both writers greatly contributed to the popularization of African American folklore among ordinary white American readers. When Harris began publishing his Uncle Remus stories in the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1879 even John Wesley Powell, the head of Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology and "arguably the most institutionally significant" American anthropologist of his day, knew very little about African American folklore, but by the end of the nineteenth century, both conjure stories and African American trickster tales were well-known and widely read throughout the United States (Evans 53).

Harris's decision to contain the subversive energy of the folktales that he collected within a frame narrative that reassured his readers about the contentment and selfless devotion of the "good Negro" contributed greatly to the popularity of the stories among nostalgic white Southerners while reassuring Northern whites that the South could be trusted to look out for the welfare of its emancipated black population. The success of Harris's Uncle Remus stories spawned many imitations, including an 1893 book of conjure tales collected by the Missouri folklorist Mary Alicia Owen. By comparing Harris's typical animal trickster stories with Owen's conjure tales and with the relatively scarce conjure tales that Harris includes in a few of his Uncle Remus stories, I will show how conjure challenges and disrupts the sense of containment and nostalgia created by the stories' frame narratives.

Witchcraft and Double Consciousness: Harris, Du Bois, and the "Other Fellow"

> I never have anything but the vaguest ideas of what I am going to write; but when I take my pen in my hand, the rust clears away and the "other fellow" takes charge.—Joel Chandler Harris

In 1963, at the end of a long life, W. E. B. Du Bois told a reporter a story about a time when he was living in Atlanta in the 1890s and set out to meet Joel Chandler Harris. As he was walking to Harris's office at the *Atlanta Constitution*, he "passed by a grocery store that had on display out front the drying fingers of a recently lynched Negro" (Du Bois qtd. in Mixon "Irrelevance" 457). The gruesome sight of those drying fingers made Du Bois reconsider his visit and he turned back, never meeting the famous Uncle Remus author. Explaining his decision, Du Bois said, "it was no use. He . . . had no question in [his mind] about the status of the Negro as a separated, lesser citizen. He unhesitatingly lived up to a paternalistic role, a sort of *noblesse oblige*. But that was all" (qtd. in Mixon "Irrelevance" 457). When Wayne Mixon tells this anecdote about Du Bois's ill-fated visit in his essay on Harris, he does so in order to lament what he regards as the widespread misperception of Harris as a paternalistic white Southern racist—a perception which Du Bois shared with a wide range of more recent Harris detractors, including the writer Alice Walker and the vast majority of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s—so much so that one scholar declared in 1975 that Harris was "in bad odor among the younger generation of literary men" (Bone 130). Mixon argues that Harris's bad reputation is unfair because Harris "at his best" was unusually sympathetic to the plight of African Americans and because "a major part of his purpose as a writer was to undermine racism" ("Irrelevance" 461, 480).

Like Mixon, I regret that the meeting between Harris and Du Bois never took place, but I disagree with Mixon about what the two writers had in common. Harris's views on race were complicated, and he certainly did not share the vitriolic hatred and exaggerated fears of many of his white Southern contemporaries, but if we look at Harris's career as a whole instead of merely looking merely at what he did and said when he was "at his best," we can see that Du Bois had

good reasons to accuse Harris of romaticizing slavery and of possessing "a sort of *noblesse oblige"* attitude toward African Americans (457). Writing about his memories of the antebellum South, Harris admitted that "the possibilities of slavery" were "shocking to the imagination," but he also insisted that "the realities" of slavery "under the best and happiest conditions, possess a romantic beauty all their own; and it has so happened in the course of time that this romantic feature . . . has become the essence, and almost the substance, of the old plantation as we remember it" (Harris qtd. in Turner 116). However, even if Du Bois and Harris differed in many ways, they did have something very important in common: both men struggled with what Du Bois referred to as "double consciousness." For both men, double consciousness was the product of an internal conflict about race and identity, and both of them used African American folklore—particularly conjure—as a source of metaphors to help them explore their psychological conflicts.

Du Bois first used the term "double consciousness" in 1897 in an *Atlantic* magazine essay, which he revised and republished in 1903 as part of *The Souls of Black Folk.* According to Du Bois, double consciousness is the psychological and spiritual condition of African Americans in a racially segregated and oppressive country—a "peculiar sensation" that includes both a feeling of "two-ness" and a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (11). This feeling of "two-ness" comes from simultaneously being both "a Negro" and "an American," and it is a symptom of the conflict between "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois 11). Du Bois claims that the "American Negro" longs to "merge his double self into a better and truer self" without having to sacrifice one of his two identities, both of which have something to "teach the world" (11). Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" is neither universal nor inevitable; it is a

condition created by the white supremacist ideology and discrimination that African Americans faced at the turn of the twentieth century.

Like Du Bois, Harris experienced a profound sense of "two-ness" and "unreconciled strivings" in his life and work. He first mentions the idea in 1897, in a letter about his novel *Sister Jane*, where Harris says that one of the novel's characters "represents my inner—my inner—oh well! My inner spezerinktum; I can't think of the other word. It isn't "self" and it isn't—oh, yes, it's the other fellow inside of me, the fellow who does all of my literary work while I get the reputation" (Julia Harris 345). He does not use the phrase "double consciousness," but Harris's language suggests that he is talking about much more than a feeling of ambivalence or indecisiveness. Harris so strongly distinguishes between his "self" and his "inner spezerinktum," (meaning ardor, energy, nerve, or ambition) that he does not feel responsible for his own "literary work." Later in the same paragraph, Harris laments "I wish I could trot the other fellow out when company comes. But he shrinks to nothing and is gone" (Julia Harris 345). Harris's inability to "trot the other fellow out when company comes" suggests that his "self" has no control over his "inner spezerintum," which only reveals itself in his writing. In a different letter, written in 1898, Harris again refers to the "other fellow" who resides within him:

I never have anything but the vaguest ideas of what I am going to write; but when I take my pen in my hand, the rust clears away and the "other fellow" takes charge. You know all of us have two entities, or personalities. That is the reason you see and hear persons "talking to themselves." They are talking to "the fellow." I have often asked my "other fellow" where he gets all his information, and how he can remember, in the nick of time, things that I have

forgotten long ago; but he never satisfies my curiosity. He is simply a spectator of my folly until I seize a pen, and then he comes forward and takes charge. (Harris qtd in Julia Harris 384-5)

In this letter as well as the last one, Harris portrays himself as weak, foolish, and untalented while "the 'other fellow' possesses all of the strength, creativity and talent. Unlike Du Bois, Harris claims that all people possess "two entities, or personalities," but he does not explain why he believes this or where the second personality comes from. According to Harris, the "other fellow" simply "takes charge" at its own convenience, but it remains as mysterious to Harris as a stranger. By claiming that he cannot control which of his two "entities" is dominant at any particular time, Harris suggests that the "other fellow" has its own will as well as its own personality. In fact, the "other fellow" even has its own memory, which, it seems, is superior to the memory of Harris himself. Possessing its own personality, will, and memory, Harris's inner "other fellow" sounds very much like Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness."

Unlike Du Bois, Harris seems at first to depict the two sides of his double consciousness as allies rather than antagonists, but a closer look at the language of his letters shows that the journalist side of Harris's consciousness felt somewhat threatened by the more literary "other fellow." Harris's letters graciously credit his "other fellow" with earning him fame, wealth, and accolades as a writer, but the relationship between his "self" and the "other fellow" is not an entirely friendly one. Harris admires the writing of the "other fellow" so much that he admits he often laughs aloud as he is reading it. However, according to Harris's 1898 letter, the "other fellow" "has nothing to do" with the editorials that Harris writes for his newspaper and even "regards them with scorn and contempt; though there are rare occasions when he helps me out with a Sunday editorial" (Julia Harris 385). Harris describes himself as "jolly, good-natured, and entirely harmless," but he portrays his literary consciousness as "a very sour, surly fellow" who

"would do some damage if I didn't give him an opportunity to work off his energy in the way he delights" (Julia Harris 385-6). Harris does not say what "damage" his "other fellow" might do if he tried to repress it, but the language does suggest that Harris feels vaguely threatened by the "secretive" entity, which he describes as "a creature hard to understand" (Julia Harris 385-6). Yet despite his inability to understand the mysterious creature inside him, Harris writes, "when night comes, I surrender unconditionally to my 'other fellow,' and out comes the story" (Julia Harris 386). Like many of the mysterious and dangerous creatures in folklore and Gothic romance, Harris's "other fellow" emerges only at night and will accept nothing but unconditional surrender from his rivals (Julia Harris 386). Although Harris does not say in his letters when he started surrendering his nights to his mysterious inner "creature," his claim that he owes his literary reputation to the "other fellow" strongly suggests that his awareness of his double consciousness goes back at least as far as 1879, when he gained his literary reputation by writing the first of his folklore-centered Uncle Remus stories.

Harris's letters never explain the origin of his "other fellow," but an examination of Harris's biography can offer insight into the circumstances that may have caused Harris to imagine his consciousness as two separate beings. Du Bois's criticism that Harris displayed his racial prejudice by living up to a "paternalistic role" is partly true, but it is also ironic because Harris struggled throughout his life with the issue of his own paternity. That struggle points to the most likely explanation of Harris's double consciousness and of the complexity of his racial views. As the shy, stuttering, illegitimate child of an unmarried woman and a father who abandoned them soon after his son's birth, Harris was plagued throughout his life by feelings of

rejection and depression caused by the absence of his father.[7] Like Frederick Douglass, Harris dealt with the absence of his biological father and his feeling of isolation from his peers by seeking surrogate father figures. In 1862 Harris left his home in Eatonton, Georgia to begin an apprenticeship as a printer's devil on a Georgia plantation called Turnwold. There, the adolescent Harris worked on the *Countryman*, a weekly Confederate newspaper published by the plantation's owner, Joseph Addison Turner. Turnwold was most likely the place where the seeds of Harris's double consciousness were first planted because it was here that he met the men who would become the most important father figures in his life.

One of these father figures was Turner, an eccentric plantation owner who strongly supported both slavery and the Confederacy and who, according to Harris "took an abiding interest in my welfare, gave me good advice, directed my reading, and gave me the benefit of his wisdom" (qtd. in Griska 215). From Turner, Harris gained a broad literary education with a particular focus on the Southern writers Henry Timrod and Edgar Allan Poe (Bickley "Joel"). The other major father figures in Harris's youth were "Uncle" George Terrell and "Old" Harbert, two slaves on Turner's plantation who befriended the lonely white boy and told him the African American folktales that would later become the basis of his life-long interest in folklore. Harris later credited these two storytellers as the inspiration for his most famous literary father figure, Uncle Remus. This abundance of caring father figures probably accounts for Harris's strong sense of nostalgia about his time at Turnwold, but it also created an irreconcilable conflict in Harris's mind. On one hand, to choose Turner as his surrogate father meant accepting his values and ideals, which included both support for slavery and a paternalistic belief that African

[7] Most Harris scholarship mentions this issue in passing, but one essay that deals in depth with Harris's feeling of rejection and search for a father figure is "'In Stead of a Gift of Gab': Some New Perspectives on Joel Chandler Harris's Biography" by Joseph M. Griska, Jr.

Americans were like children, requiring the fatherly protection of a benevolent white master. For example, when Turner heard rumors of a possible slave uprising, he casually dismissed them, claiming that "the people who treat their negroes right have nothing to fear from them" (Julia Harris 34). On the other hand, choosing the two slaves as his surrogate fathers meant that Harris would need to respect African Americans as adults with something to teach him, which required a rejection of Turner's paternalistic assumptions about white racial superiority. Harris's love for his white and black father figures created two "warring ideals" in his mind, which continued to shape his political and social views as well as his writing throughout his life.

After the Civil War, Harris left Turnwold behind to embark on a career in journalism. In 1876, Harris and his family moved to Atlanta and Harris got a job at the *Atlanta Constitution*, where he would continue to work until his retirement from journalism in 1900. There, Harris's double consciousness manifested itself in complex and often contradictory views about race and slavery. For example, in December 1877, Harris wrote an article in the *Atlanta Constitution* that expresses both his moral approval of slavery's abolition and his nostalgia for a past that only slavery made possible: "Now that the problem of slavery, which even before the desperate cast of the die in 1861 had begun to perplex the more thoughtful of the Southern people, is successfully (but O, how cruelly!) solved, even the bare suggestion of its reestablishment is unsavory; but the memory of the old plantation will remain green and gracious forever" (qtd. in Price 691). By 1880, Harris had combined his "green and gracious" memories of the "old plantation" with his genuine respect for African American folklore to produce *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, his first collection of Uncle Remus stories.

By combining the African American folklore that he remembered from his childhood with a fictional frame narrative, Harris created a hybrid genre that, because of its tremendous

popularity, quickly spawned countless imitations. For critics, the two-part structure of the Uncle Remus stories raises difficult questions about the relationship between the African American folktales and the frame narrative that depicts Uncle Remus telling those folktales to a little white boy. Mark Twain, whose own literary career was largely shaped by a sense of double consciousness and dual identities, once assured Harris that the frame narrative was far more important than the folktales themselves, which he compared to "alligator pears" (avocados), saying "one eats them only for the sake of the dressing" (qtd. in Brookes 40). Since then, many critics have reversed Twain's assessment, often praising Harris's efforts as a collector of folklore while criticizing the frame narrative for romanticizing plantation life and relying on racial stereotypes. In the 1920s, black critics such as Alain Locke and Stanley Braithwaite both described Harris as an "amanuensis" and credited African Americans with the real art of the Uncle Remus stories. In his *Gift of Black Folk* (1924), Du Bois also portrayed Harris as no more than a "successful translator" of a vernacular tradition that was "transplanted from Africa and developed in America" (qtd. in Wagner 178). Even Harris frequently referred to himself merely as a "compiler" of stories, and he wrote in 1881 that he owed the success of the Uncle Remus stories entirely to the appeal of the folklore, saying "I am perfectly aware that my book has no basis of literary art to stand upon" (qtd. in Brookes 40).

Harris's stories reflect the duality of his double consciousness not only because of their two-part structure but also because their frame is based on a dialogue between two characters who represent the relationship between young and old and between white and black. For the most part, Harris's stories represent their relationship as one of peace, harmony, love, and loyalty. In fact, Remus's absolute, selfless devotion to the white family that he serves is one reason why many modern readers find the stories objectionable. The introduction to *Uncle*

Remus: His Songs and Stories claims that Remus "has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery" and "has all the prejudices of caste and pride of family that were the natural results of the system" (47). However, not all of the stories are equally harmonious. Some of the stories do contain hints of the racial conflict and political tension that their author tries so hard to repress. Especially in Harris's first Uncle Remus book, the stories that most strongly challenge the frame narrative's overall nostalgia and denial of racial conflict are the stories that contain representations of conjure and witchcraft. To understand why witchcraft has such a strong effect on the stories, we must first turn back to Du Bois and to other popular representations of double consciousness in the late nineteenth century in order to see how double consciousness is related to the traditions of conjure and Gothic literature.

"Strivings of the Negro People," the first essay to explain Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness," was published in the *Atlantic* in 1897. Harris may or may not have read Du Bois's essay before writing his "other fellow" letters in 1897 and 1898, but the publication of Harris's early volumes of Uncle Remus stories, starting in 1880, could not have been influenced directly by Du Bois. However, it is possible that both writers were influenced independently by other sources in their cultural milieu, for "double consciousness" was hardly a new idea, though it had different meanings in different contexts. The medical diagnosis of "double consciousness" was used in the late nineteenth century to describe cases of split personality (now called dissociative identity disorder) in the emerging field of psychology. This diagnostic use of the term "double consciousness" appeared not only in psychology textbooks and professional publications but also in articles about psychology that were written for the general public, including an 1860 article in *Harper's Magazine* and another article in 1877 about the two distinct personalities of a woman named Mary Reynolds (Bruce "Du Bois" 237, 240-2). Even more

sensational representations of double consciousness achieved popularity in nineteenth-century Gothic literature, where the convention of the Gothic double (or doppelganger) was commonly used to represent opposing aspects of a character's consciousness or personality by writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, whose work Harris had read during his time at Turnwold, and Robert Louis Stevenson, who became a sensation in 1886 in both Britain and America for *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois uses some of these pre-existing meanings and associations to illustrate the effects of African Americans' "double consciousness." Drawing on conventional Gothic imagery, Du Bois depicts his growing double consciousness as a "shadow" and a "vast veil" that prevents him from accessing the joys and opportunities of white America (10). As he grows up, he refers to the people of his race as the "sons of night," and uses an image of "the shades of the prison–house" closing around him to evoke the feeling of entrapment and the dark and claustrophobic spaces that are typical in a Gothic novel (10). Du Bois uses the word "shadow" again and again in phrases such as "shadow of the mighty Negro past" and "the shadow of a deep disappointment," and he even imagines the threat of double consciousness as a violent, wild beast that attacks his "dark body" from within and makes him fear being "torn asunder" (11, 12). While these Gothic images, derived from a European literary tradition, represent the psychological terrors of double consciousness, Du Bois also uses his knowledge of black folklore and conjure to suggest that double consciousness can, in some ways, be a blessing as well as a curse. He writes, "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world" (10). In African American folklore, supernatural abilities, such as seeing ghosts and predicting the future, are attributed to seventh sons and to children who are born with a caul, a veil-like membrane that sometimes covers an infant's head at birth

(Du Bois 10). Du Bois's facility with both the European Gothic and African American conjure traditions is an illustration of the author's dual cultural inheritance, which simultaneously threatens to destroy him and endows him with special knowledge and insights that white Americans lack.

In *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1880) Harris never uses the term "double consciousness," but he does include one story that strongly evokes the traditions of Gothic literature and African American conjure. The story that most explicitly deals with conjure, "A Plantation Witch," is strikingly different from the rest of the stories in the book both because of its complex representation of race and its ability to extend some of the subversiveness of the folktales into the storytelling frame. This conjure story, which is located near the end of the section called "Legends of the Old Plantation," challenges the most common critical assessment of the Uncle Remus stories—that the folk tales themselves (typically about the exploits of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and other anthropomorphized animals) can be interpreted as an allegorical challenge to white Americans' assumptions about race and power, but the unrelenting nostalgia of Harris's storytelling frame ultimately contains and dilutes any subversive power, rendering the stories ideologically safe for white racist readers. Although this containment works fairly well in the first thirty stories of the volume, it begins to break down in "A Plantation Witch." I argue that this break-down starts when the magic of conjure and witchcraft seeps through the cracks in the frame and subtly complicates the relationship between Uncle Remus and the little boy who listens to his stories.

From the start, "A Plantation Witch" seems slightly different in tone from the stories that come before it. Usually, when the boy arrives at Uncle Remus's cabin to hear another story, Remus is cheerfully at work at some simple task that he can continue while telling his story.

However, the first paragraph of "A Plantation Witch" describes Uncle Remus "sitting in his door, with his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his hands, and he appeared to be in great trouble" (142). When the little boy asks him what is wrong, Remus replies, "Nuff de matter, honey—mo' dan dey's enny kyo fer. Ef dey ain't some quare gwines on 'round dis place I ain't name Remus" (142). After speaking about the queer "gwines on" in vague terms for a while, Remus tells the boy that he found "witch-stirrups" in a horse's mane, which means that there are witches in the area. Uncle Remus then begins to talk about witches, saying they "comes and dey conjus fokes" and they have the ability to transform "en change inter a cat en a wolf en all kinder creatures" (144). According to Remus, most people cannot tell whether someone is a witch, but "conjun fokes kin tell a witch de minnit dey lays der eyes on it" (144). Although Remus admits that he is not a conjurer, he claims that he has "bin livin' long nuff" to recognize a witch when he sees one, at least most of the time (144). When the little boy questions Remus's authority by interrupting the old man to object, "Papa says there aren't any witches," Remus responds in a way that is, at least for him, unusually assertive and challenging to the authority of the boy's father (144). Instead of trying to explain away the contradiction between himself and the boy's father, as he usually does, Remus simply says, "Mars John ain't live long es I is" (144). Although Remus indicates his subservience to the boy's father by calling him "Mars John," he also clearly implies that, at least on the subject of witches, "Mars John" does not know what he is talking about. Instead, Uncle Remus implies that his age and experience give him greater authority than a white man to speak about the reality and characteristics of witches.

Harris spends an unusually long time in "A Plantation Witch" describing the setting and mood of Remus's cabin, using Gothic language that reinforces the sense of fear that the child experiences while learning about witches:

> The moon, just at 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—to the right, to the left, in the air, on the ground, far away or near at hand, 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. (143)

The moon, the "wavering shadows," and the indistinct, untraceable chorus of the tree-frogs all contribute to the Gothic tone of the story, but there is something strange about the boy's thought that Uncle Remus's tone sounds like a chorus of "lost and long-forgotten whistlers" (143). That particular part of the description seems less creepy than melancholy, but Remus is never sad throughout the rest of the book. Usually, Harris describes Remus as proud, cheerful, and occasionally scolding when he thinks the boy has done something wrong, but the introduction's assertion that even Remus's memories of slavery are "pleasant" suggests that the former slave has nothing to be unhappy about (47). Combined with Remus's unusually low spirits at the beginning of the story, the melancholy image that the boy associates with Remus's tone subtly suggests that there may be something on Remus's mind that he is not telling the boy.[8]

Another strange aspect of Harris's first conjuring story is its tendency to establish a direct connection between the characters in the frame and the Remus's folklore. While trying to explain how he can recognize a witch, Remus gets sidetracked for a moment and begins to tell a story about the little boy's Uncle James. According to Remus, "Mars Jeems" once decided that he was going to "ketch wunner dem dar graveyard rabbits," but when he tried, he could not hit the creature with his gun and his dogs tucked their tails between their legs while the rabbit was

[8] Eric Sundquist suggests in *To Wake the Nations* that this scene with the chorus of tree-frogs may have inspired Charles Chesnutt to write "Tobe's Tribulations," which depicts a slave who is turned into a frog. I agree with this interpretation, but I suggest that Chesnutt's story is not so much a parody of "A Plantation Witch" as an extension of the subversive potential that is already present in Harris's story.

"caperin' 'round on a toomstone" (144). Remus explains that "Mars Jeems" was unsuccessful because rabbits that live in graveyards are "ha'nts," but in the context of a book full of Brer Rabbit stories, it is hard to miss the implication that the little boy's uncle went up against Brer Rabbit and was defeated. Harris has already acknowledged in his introduction to the book that the folklore about Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox "seems to me to be to a certain extent allegorical, albeit such an interpretation may be unreasonable," so he appears to be aware that Brer Rabbit represents African Americans while Brer Fox represents white people in the trickster folktales (44). However, this story takes the allegory one step further, suggesting that Brer Rabbit's enemies are allegorical characters that represent not only white people as a group but also specific white people, including members of the little boy's family.

Unlike the other stories in the book, "A Plantation Witch" does not cut away from the frame narrative to focus on the old times of Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox; instead Remus spends most of his time explaining the general characteristics of witches and only tells a very brief story about a black man he once knew who "kyo'd" his brother of being a witch. According to Remus, witches have "a slit in de back er de neck," which allows them to pull off their skin over their head as if it were a shirt (145). When Remus's old acquaintance looks outside in the middle of the night and sees his brother pulling off his skin and transforming into a bat, he sprinkles salt inside the abandoned skin and waits for his brother to return. When the witch returns and puts his skin on, he begins to scream and squirm on the ground because, as Remus puts it, "de salt on de skin wuz stingin' wuss'n ef he had his britches lineded wid yaller-jackets" (145). After this episode, the sting gradually fades and the brother gives up conjuring. Although Remus's story faithfully portrays conjure folklore, it is also a metaphor with many layers. For slaves, it is easy to see why the idea of pulling off one's skin and transforming into another creature would be an

attractive idea because American slavery depended on the dark skin of African Americans to visually identify slaves with ease. Even after the abolition of slavery, dark skin was still treated as a sign of inferiority by most white Americans, so the power to remove his or her skin would give a conjurer the power to escape both slavery and racial prejudice. Harris probably understood the racial symbolism of this story, at least on a basic level, but the story may have had an additional meaning for Harris because of his ideas about his own double consciousness. Writing in an era when evolutionary theories of anthropology and scientific theories about race denigrated black folklore as "primitive" and black people as biologically inferior to whites, Harris was not immune to the prejudices of his times, but he also felt a deep personal attachment to the folktales and black storytellers who had been so important to him as a shy, fatherless adolescent on Turner's plantation. When Harris wrote in his 1897 and 1898 letters that the "other fellow" who produced his best writing was a "secretive" and mysterious "creature" that lived inside him and came out only at night, he may have been thinking partly of the idea of the Gothic double or the psychological diagnosis of "double consciousness," but he also may have remembered the stories he had heard about conjurers and witches who could free themselves at night by taking off their skin and transforming themselves into animals. The fantasy of temporarily freeing himself from his daytime identity as a painfully shy, awkward, and emotionally raw "cornfield journalist" may have seemed very appealing to Harris, but the story also contains a chilling element of threat. What if he peels off his skin and temporarily escapes from his identity only to find that he cannot return to the privileges of whiteness? What if, like the witch's brother, someone tries to cure him of his double consciousness by taking his "other fellow" away? The significant differences between "A Plantation Witch" and the other Uncle

Remus stories in Harris's first book may be a sign of Harris's special identification with the witch and of his corresponding fear of that identification.

At the end of "A Plantation Witch," the little boy is frightened by all the talk about witches and conjuring, so Uncle Remus takes his hand and walks with him to the "big house" (146). Although he finds Uncle Remus's presence comforting, the boy still lies "awake a long time expecting an unseemly visitation from some mysterious source" (146). Instead, he is visited by the "strong, musical voice of his sable patron" (146):

> Hit's eighteen hunder'd, forty-en-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)

Although the little boy pays no attention to the words and merely feels "soothed" by Uncle Remus's voice, Harris (or perhaps his "other fellow") may be aware of the double meaning of Remus's sorrow song, which seems to express a desire to go to Heaven but may also be an expression of Uncle Remus's suppressed desire to leave the plantation and the white family that he has served for so many years. Remus's song (which Du Bois would describe as a "sorrow song") and its refrain, "I don't wanter stay here no longer," challenge Harris's insistence that Uncle Remus is a loyal, devoted, and contented servant with nothing but "pleasant memories" of slavery (146, 47).

Conjuring Africa: Uncle Remus, African Jack, and the Folklorists

> Daddy Jack appeared to be quite a hundred years old, but he was probably not more than eighty. He was a little, dried-up old man, whose weazened, dwarfish appearance, while it was calculated to inspire awe in the minds of the superstitious, was not without its pathetic suggestions. The child had been told that the old African was a wizard, a conjurer, and a snake-charmer; but he was not afraid, for, in any event—conjuration,

> witchcraft, or what not—he was assured of the protection of Uncle Remus. –Joel Chandler Harris, *Nights With Uncle Remus*

When Harris first introduced *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* to the American public in 1880, he insisted that "ethnological considerations formed no part of the undertaking which has resulted in this volume" (40). Untrained in the emerging field of folklore studies, Harris did not know that his folklore-based Uncle Remus stories would be considered ethnologically interesting when he began publishing them in the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1879. He first discovered the scholarly significance of his work when he started receiving letters from folklorists, including a letter from John Wesley Powell, the head of the Smithsonian Bureau of Ethnology, who told Harris that Uncle Remus's stories did not originate in Africa, as Harris had assumed, but were instead borrowed from the folklore of North American Indians (Wagner 118). Powell's letter was not only the spark that ignited Harris's interest in learning more about ethnology and folklore studies but also the start of an important controversy about the origin of the folktales collected in the Uncle Remus stories. In the introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, Harris acknowledges Powell's theory about the origin of the stories, but he also makes it clear that he is not convinced, calling the theory "extremely doubtful" in part because folktales similar to the ones in the Uncle Remus stories had been traced not only to certain tribes of North American Indians but also, by other scholars, to South America, India, Siam, and Egypt (40). Harris also doubts Powell's theory because he believes that the Brer Rabbit stories are "to a certain extent allegorical" as well as "thoroughly characteristic of the negro," adding that "it needs no scientific investigation to show why he selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the

fox" (44). The argument between Powell and Harris about the origin of the Uncle Remus stories became a major debate in the field of American folklore studies for years to come.

Between the publication of his first and second Uncle Remus books, Harris devoted himself to the study of folklore by subscribing to the *Folk-Lore Journal*, published in London, and buying a number of books on ethnology and folklore studies (Light 89). When he published *Nights With Uncle Remus* in 1883, Harris included a lengthy introduction that exhibited the great amount he had learned about folklore studies in the past three years and reiterated his belief that the stories originally came from Africa, explaining that perhaps "the Indians have not hesitated to borrow from the negroes" (20). However, Harris does not confine his argument about the stories' origin to the book's introduction; he also makes his argument a part of the stories themselves by adding to the frame narrative a new storyteller and conjurer named "African Jack." Unlike the first book, the second collection of Uncle Remus stories is set before the Civil War, making Uncle Remus a slave rather than an ex-slave, but this distinction is not very noticeable in the first twenty-four stories of *Nights With Uncle Remus,* which follow the same basic structure as the earlier stories, starting with Uncle Remus and the little boy in the frame narrative and then transitioning to the folktales themselves. Then, in the twenty-fifth story, titled "African Jack," the little boy enters Remus's cabin and finds Remus entertaining a "genuine African" called African Jack (called "Daddy Jack by the little boy) who "was brought to Georgia in a slave-ship when he was about twenty years old" and speaks in the Gullah dialect of the Sea Islands (137). Older than Uncle Remus, African Jack is "a little, dried-up old man" with an appearance "calculated to inspire awe in the minds of the superstitious," and the little boy is particularly excited to meet him because he has heard "that the old African was a wizard, a conjurer, and a snake-charmer" (137). At least in the first story, African Jack's "weazened,

dwarfish appearance" seems more calculated to inspire ridicule than awe. Uncle Remus jokes that the old man moves "mo' one-sideder dan ole Zip Coon" and another character even refers to him as an "ole Affikin ape" (141-2). Although the boy is excited and curious about meeting a real conjurer, Harris assures his readers that the child is not afraid of African Jack's "conjuration, witchcraft, or what not" because he is "assured of the protection of Uncle Remus" (137). Yet even though Harris does sometimes portray African Jack as an object of ridicule, the character's knowledge of Africa and his skillful storytelling earn him the respect of the other characters in the frame, thereby challenging readers' inclinations to view the conjurer as a racial caricature.

For the remainder of the book, African Jack is often present when Uncle Remus tells his stories, and he even tells several stories of his own. Two other characters—a young slave named 'Tildy and a middle-aged slave called Aunt Tempy—also appear in many of the stories' frame and tell their own folktales on a few occasions, but Remus and African Jack remain the book's two primary storytellers. Both Remus and the boy have no trouble understanding the conjurer's speech, but because African Jack's Gullah dialect is more difficult to read than Uncle Remus's central Georgia dialect, Harris includes a short glossary of Gullah vocabulary in the book's introduction. Even with the glossary, African Jack's dialect poses a significant challenge to Harris's readers, who may need to read certain lines several times before they can understand his meaning. Although many of Harris's white readers probably dismissed African Jack's heavy dialect as a sign of his ignorance, Harris treats the character's speech with respect by requiring his readers to work at understanding it. Although Harris could have made the reading experience easier by translating some of African Jack's more difficult phrases into standard English, he chose not to, and the result is a text that forces readers to choose between skipping many of the stories or engaging in the difficult intellectual work of learning the grammar and vocabulary of

the Gullah dialect. By forcing his readers to work at interpreting African Jack's speech, Harris suggests that what the character has to say is worthy of serious attention.

Because African Jack spent his youth in Africa, his stories represent not only Gullah folklore but also the African folklore tradition that Harris believed was the basis for African American folktales. African Jack's stories are varied, ranging from etiological stories such as "Why the Alligator's Back Is Rough" to conjure tales and animal trickster stories, which often include African animals such as lions as well as more familiar characters such as Brer Rabbit. A few times in *Nights With Uncle Remus*, Remus tells the little boy a story and African Jack responds by telling a different version of the same story, demonstrating that the African and African American stories are closely related. For example, after Remus tells a Brer Rabbit story called "In Some Lady's Garden," African Jack objects, "Me yent bin a yerry da tale so. 'E nice, fer true, 'e mek larf come; oona no bin-a yerry um lak me" (177). This means, more or less, "I didn't hear the tale that way. It's true that the way you tell it is nice and makes me laugh, but you haven't heard my version." Remus responds with "grave affability," saying "No . . . I speck not. One man, one tale; 'n'er man, 'n'er tale. Folks tell um diffunt. I boun' yo' way de bes', Brer Jack. Out wid it—en we ull set up yer, en hark at you en laff wid you plum twell de chickens crow" (177). Although Uncle Remus defers to African Jack, who is both older than Remus and his guest, both versions of the story seem equally complex and entertaining, which suggests that African American folklore is neither more nor less sophisticated than its African counterpart. As Kathleen Light has pointed out, the narrative complexity of African Jack's stories challenges the assumption of evolutionary anthropologists such as Powell that African folklore must be more primitive than the folklore of African Americans and North American Indians. If Uncle Remus represents white Southerners' ideal of a perfect slave, African Jack represents something far

more dangerous to white Americans' assumptions about race and civilization: the complexity of African folk culture. By adding the African conjurer to his circle of storytellers, Harris is making a controversial statement about the origins of African American folklore and the sophistication of black Americans' African heritage.

African Jack's status as a conjurer adds to his value and meaning as a symbol of the African roots of Uncle Remus's folklore. Like Frederick Douglass, Harris not only characterizes the conjurer as a "genuine African" but also puns on the term "rootworker," to suggest that the character represents Uncle Remus's "roots." When the little boy enters the cabin to hear a story one night, he finds Uncle Remus making shoe-pegs and African Jack "assorting a bundle of sassafras roots" (171). As a conjurer, African Jack also claims the ability to peel off his skin and transform himself into various animals. The conjurer's ability to transform himself physically not only excites the curiosity of the little boy but also serves as a metaphor for the possibility of transformation and adaptation that is crucial to the survival of any oral tradition.

Critics have generally found little to say and less to like about African Jack. One critic argued that Harris's purpose for including African Jack, 'Tildy, and Aunt Tempy is to satirize class distinctions in white society, but this does not seem very probable because Harris displays little interest in white social classes throughout the rest of the book (Stafford 98). Even critics who have seen some value in Harris's use of African Jack as a storyteller and symbol of African heritage generally condemn the romantic subplot that ends with African Jack's marriage to 'Tildy in the last chapter of the book. Eric Sundquist is particularly critical of the marriage plot, which starts with Jack and 'Tildy's comical courtship and ends with their wedding in the final chapter, "The Night before Christmas" (Sundquist *To Wake* 350-5). Although their courtship seems, more than anything, to be an excuse for slapstick comedy and the Christmas celebration

in the final chapter is excessively sentimental, Harris's decision to end the book with the marriage of 'Tildy and African Jack is thematically significant because it adds a further dimension to Harris's views on African American folklore. As Nina Silber has argued in *Romance and Reunion,* marriage between a Northerner and a Southerner became the dominant literary metaphor for sectional reconciliation after the Civil War. In fact, this metaphor was so pervasive and so important to the rhetoric of post-war reconciliation that Harris himself revised one of his earliest stories about Uncle Remus so that it would end with the marriage of Remus's Southern mistress to a man from the North. This marriage between the Southern Miss Sally and the Northern Marse John ultimately leads to the birth of a son who will become the "little boy" who listens to Uncle Remus's stories. If we consider African Jack's status as a symbol of African culture as well as the typical symbolism of marriage in the plantation romance tradition, we can see that Jack's marriage is more than a running gag or an excuse for sentimentality. By marrying African Jack to the young and highly Americanized slave 'Tildy, Harris is making an argument about the future of the African American folklore tradition. Unlike Uncle Remus, who appears to have no family and no one but the little white boy to bequeath his stories to, African Jack, in spite of his advanced age, marries a young black woman who appears to know very little about her African heritage. Through this marriage, Harris portrays a hopeful vision of the future of the African American folklore tradition.

"Under the Spell of Uncle Remus": Boyhood, Transformation, and the New South

> In course of time, the man who had been the little boy for ever so long came to have a little boy of his own. And then it happened in the most natural way in the world that the little boy's little boy fell under the spell of Uncle Remus, who was still hale and hearty in spite of his age.—Joel Chandler Harris, *Told By Uncle Remus* (1905)

In *Uncle Remus and His Friends,* published in 1892, Harris asks his readers to bid farewell to Uncle Remus and watch as the old storyteller "takes his place among the affable Ghosts that throng the ample corridors of the Temple of Dreams" (qtd. in Brookes 59). At the same time that he was retiring Uncle Remus from his storytelling career, Harris himself was retiring from his career as a folklorist. Although he had no professional training, Harris began educating himself about folklore studies soon after his first Uncle Remus stories began to appear in the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1879. When the American Folklore Society was founded in 1888, Harris became a charter member and was mentioned in the first issue of its journal as a significant contributor to the study of African American folklore. However, despite the tremendous popularity of his Uncle Remus stories, Harris continued to feel like an outsider in the community of professional folklorists, who, he felt, persistently failed to take him seriously and regarded him as a "collector" rather than a true "folklorist" (Baer 191).[9] By 1892, Harris had dropped his memberships in both the American and British folklore societies and began expressing opposition to the scientific study of folktales. In the introduction to *Uncle Remus and His Friends,* Harris not only announces his intention to retire Uncle Remus but also pokes fun at the professional folklorists who, he claims, appreciate the tales only for their scientific value. Long after 1892, folklorists continued to debate the origin of the Uncle Remus stories with articles such as "Uncle Remus Traced to the Old World," which was published in 1893 in the *Journal of American Folklore,* and "Some West African Prototypes of the Uncle Remus Stories," published in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1895, but almost none of these articles mentions any debt to Harris's argument about the stories' African origin in his detailed and scholarly 1883

[9] See Kathleen Light, "Uncle Remus and the Folklorists" for a possible explanation of Harris's rejection of folklore studies in 1892.

introduction to *Nights with Uncle Remus* (191). Nevertheless, despite his retreat from professional folklore studies and his increasingly reclusive behavior, Harris continued to be interested in folk tales, often using his children as collectors.

Then, in 1905, Harris resurrected Uncle Remus (in spite of having already banished him to his "place among the affable ghosts") with the publication of *Told By Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation*, which begins with "The Reason Why," a story that explains why Uncle Remus had "retired from business as a story-teller" and why he was now prepared to resume that business (Harris *Complete* 579). The simple explanation for his retirement was that the "little boy" to whom Uncle Remus had told his stories in the first four books had grown up and his parents had moved to Atlanta. The world, it seemed, had changed and Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit no longer had a place in it. But then Miss Sally and her husband tire of city life and decide to move back to the plantation, taking Remus with them, and "the man who had been the little boy for ever so long came to have a little boy of his own" (*Complete* 579). Harris's narrator goes on to describe how "in the most natural way in the world," the "little boy's little boy fell under the spell of Uncle Remus, who was still hale and hearty in spite of his age" (579). It is appropriate that Harris uses the word "spell" to describe Uncle Remus's effect on this new little boy because there is something supernatural about the whole situation. Even if you assume that Harris's placement of Uncle Remus "among the affable ghosts" was merely a metaphor for his retirement from storytelling, how can Remus still be alive, much less "hale and hearty," after all these years? Remus was already old when he shot this new little boy's grandfather in "A Story of the War," thereby enabling his marriage to Miss Sally and the subsequent birth of the original "little boy." Something strange seems to be happening to time itself, and the narrator's observation that the first little boy "had been a little boy for ever so long" and the use of phrases

such as "in the course of time" and "in the most natural way in the world" simply draw the reader's attention to how very unnatural the situation is (579). Uncle Remus seems to be ageless, stuck forever in the same "hale and hearty" old age as the white people who employ him continue to age and adapt to changes in the world around them. He is a supernatural being, but he is not like African Jack, who, as a witch, relished the power to transform himself; on the contrary, Remus seems impervious even to the natural transformations that everyone experiences with the passage of time. Remus's "spell" is not only his ability to captivate little boys with his exciting stories but also the ability to stop time and transport his listeners (along with Harris's readers) to a distant and, according to Harris, a better time.

Harris's decision to resurrect Uncle Remus in 1905 reflects the author's growing uneasiness with the realities of the "New South," which he had championed earlier in his career but now regarded with growing apprehension. When Harris started working for the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1876, the newspaper's managing editor was Henry Grady, one of the chief advocates of what came to be known as the "New South Creed," which argued that the South needed to modernize itself through reconciliation with the North, economic diversification, and industrialization (Wagner 127). In spite of his tendency to regard the plantations of the Old South with fondness and nostalgia, Harris became a vocal advocate in the *Atlanta Constitution* for sectional reconciliation and modernization, particularly in Atlanta, which became a symbol of the modernization and progress of the New South. However, as the "New South" developed into a place increasingly characterized by legalized racial segregation, disenfranchisement of black voters, lynching, and the use of vagrancy laws to force blacks into a new form of slave labor through the convict lease system, Harris became increasingly worried about where the South was headed (Wagner 127-32). In a syndicated article in 1900, Harris wrote that he hoped Christianity

would soon "eradicate and obliterate" Americans' "racial prejudice" (qtd. in Mixon 477) He also wrote several articles in 1904 for the *Saturday Evening Post* in which he advocated expanding opportunities for blacks, denounced lynching, and praised the accomplishments of Booker T. Washington, calling him "an exception in any race" (Cochran 23). In 1906, the year after Harris resurrected Uncle Remus, a four-day race riot in Atlanta left 25 blacks dead and150 seriously injured; Harris responded with plans to "fit" his new *Uncle Remus's Magazine* with "policies of persuasion with respect to the negro" that he hoped would lead to "the obliteration of prejudice against the blacks, the demand for a square deal, and the uplifting of both races so that they can look justice in the face without blushing" (Harris qtd. in Mixon 476-7). By the time he published *Told by Uncle Remus* in 1905 Harris's growing unease about the changes occurring in the New South had become a central theme of his Uncle Remus stories.

In "The Reason Why," as Remus gets to know Miss Sally's grandson, he realizes that the social and environmental changes wrought by the New South have had a corrosive effect on his boyhood. Observing that the new little boy is "a beautiful child, too beautiful for a boy," the text declares that the child is "like a girl in refinement" and that "[a]ll of the boyishness had been taken out of him" (579). In addition to his excessive beauty and "refinement," this new little boy is "frailer and quieter" than his father and displays a disturbing tendency to be excessively "polite and thoughtful of others" (579). All of this refinement disturbs Uncle Remus, who takes it upon himself to transform this girlish little boy into a paragon of boyish masculinity. However, Harris is not merely concerned about one child's loss of his "boyishness." Metaphorically, all of the faults and weaknesses of the boy represent the social ills of the New South that Harris wants to critique and destroy with the power of his writing. The boy's frailty and ignorance about

country life represent Harris's fear that the New South's industrialization will destroy Southerners' hardiness and their connection to the land.

The most subversive of Harris's metaphors connecting the little boy to a critique of the New South is the implied association between the South's social, political, and environmental corruption and the idea of extreme and excessive whiteness. To emphasize the point that Uncle Remus is the right person to cure the new little boy of his girlishness, Harris equates the little boy's "fragility" with the fact that he has "hardly any color in his face" (579). The boy's first spoken words in the text, directed at Miss Sally, reinforce this idea of a link between effeminacy and excessive whiteness: "Grandmother, you have been sitting in the sun, and your face is red. Mother never allows me to sit in the sun for fear I will freckle. Father says a few freckles would help me, but mother says they would be shocking" (581). In this passage, the red-haired, freckled Harris seems to be suggesting that too much attention to purity and whiteness can be unhealthy and effeminate. Commenting on the social effects of racial segregation, one Atlanta reporter wrote in 1881 that "the largest proportion of Negroes are never really known to us. They are not employed in private homes nor in the business houses, but drift off to themselves, and are almost as far from the white people, so far as all practicable benefits of associations are concerned, as if the two races never met" (qtd. in Rabinowitz 138). By the start of the twentieth century, the South's ideology of white supremacy had become so extreme that Jim Crow segregation was firmly in place throughout the South and slave labor was replaced by exploitative sharecropping practices and by convict labor, supplied by the large number of African Americans arrested on trumped-up charges such as vagrancy. By mocking the new little boy for his extreme whiteness and his obsession with avoiding anything, including freckles, that might mar his whiteness, Harris is critiquing the ideology of white supremacy, the fear of racial amalgamation, and the

legally-imposed segregation of the New South. Harris may not believe that blacks and whites are fully equal, but he does suggest that the New South's commitment to racial segregation is bad for both races.

By the final story of *Told By Uncle Remus,* the old storyteller has brought about a dramatic transformation in the frail, quiet, and polite little boy that he met in the first story. In fact, the transformation has been so dramatic that Uncle Remus has to devote his final story to reigning in the boy's excessive wildness and stubbornness. Harris writes,

> [T]he youngster was allowed liberties he had never had before. The child, as might be supposed, was quick to take advantage of such a situation, and was all the time trying to see how far he could go before the limits of his privileges—new and inviting so far as he was concerned—would be reached. They stretched very much farther on the plantation than they would have done in the city, as was natural and proper, but the child, with that adventurous spirit common to boys, was inclined to push them still further than they had ever yet gone; and he soon lost the most obvious characteristics of a model lad. . . . It was natural, under the circumstances, that the little fellow should become somewhat willful and obstinate, and he bade fair to develop that spirit of disobedience that will make the brightest child ugly and discontented. (714-5)

The transformation wrought by Uncle Remus's stories is remarkable. The boy who was once frail, girlish, and obedient to a fault is now willful, obstinate, and a bit rowdy, possessing "that adventurous spirit common to boys." The boy's mother (and, to a lesser extent, his grandmother) are to blame for allowing the boy to take a few too many "liberties," but Harris's language suggests that this new problem is far less dire and far easier to fix than the old one because the boy's faults are "natural, under the circumstances" and are merely indicative of his boyish high spirits. Once again, Uncle Remus is the one who has to step in and correct the child, but this time his job is much easier—less a matter of transformation than an ordinary matter of discipline. While Remus required a whole book of stories to undo the damage caused by the boy's exposure

to city life in the New South, he only needs one last tale, "The Hard-Headed Woman," to remind the child not to take his lesson too far.

As I have already argued, at the beginning of *Told By Uncle Remus,* the little boy represents Harris's assessment of the social ills of the New South's white population, one of which is the excessive purity of its whiteness, which is caused by Jim Crow segregation and fear of racial mixing. By the final story, however, the boy's excess obstinacy and disobedience represent Harris's worries about a different part of the New South's population—the new generation of African Americans, which is rapidly replacing the older generation represented by Uncle Remus. In one of his novels, *Gabriel Tolliver,* Harris describes the situation of newly-freed blacks with the same language that he uses to describe the little white boy's behavior in the final story of *Told By Uncle Remus*:

> He [Gabriel Tolliver] thought that the restless and uneasy movements of the negroes were perfectly natural. They had suddenly come to the knowledge that they were free, and they were testing the nature and limits of their freedom. They desired to find out its length and breadth. So much was clear to Gabriel, but it was not clear to his elders. And what a pity that it was not: How many mistakes would have been avoided! What a dreadful tangle and turmoil would have been prevented if these grown children could have been judged from Gabriel's point of view! For the boy's interpretation of the restlessness and uneasiness of the blacks was the correct one. Your historians will tell you that the situation was extraordinary and full of peril. Well, extraordinary, if you will, but not perilous. Gabriel could never be brought to believe that there was anything to be dreaded in the attitude of the blacks. (qtd. in Turner 115).

Like the little white boy in the frame of "The Hard-Headed Woman," the free blacks are, according to Gabriel (and Harris), merely testing the limits of their freedom, which may cause a certain amount of temporary "restlessness" but is "perfectly natural" under the circumstances and not at all "perilous." By referring to adult African Americans as "grown children," Harris displays his own paternalistic racial prejudice, but he also rejects the racial fear and hatred that

permeated the Jim Crow South and led to many of the worst examples of discrimination and racial violence. Harris seems to be saying that Southern blacks and Southern whites both have lessons to learn, but the white population's problems are more deeply ingrained and more difficult to resolve.

The story that Remus uses to chastise the little boy for his willfulness and disobedience, "The Hard-Headed Woman," is noticeably different from the other stories in *Told By Uncle Remus*. Throughout the rest of the book, Remus's goal has been to cast a metaphorical "spell" on the little boy's imagination with his storytelling and then to use those stories to teach him how little boys are supposed to behave. In order to transform the obedient, girlish boy of the first story into a true paragon of Southern boyhood, Remus tells tale after tale about male characters (usually Brother Rabbit) who use their wits to get what they want, punish their enemies, or escape from difficult situations. Therefore, all of the stories leading up to the last one have been non-magical animal tales primarily focused on the adventures of male characters such as Brother Rabbit, Mr. Cricket, and Mr. Dog. The volume's final story, however, contains no talking animals and instead focuses on humans and conjuring. The story's main character is an obstinate, willful woman whose husband uses a magical spell to punish her. Although the main focus of the story is its critique of the woman's hard-headedness, the story's magic serves a significant purpose. By ending the book with a conjure story, Harris underscores the importance of the transformation that Uncle Remus has performed on the boy's character. Uncle Remus may not be a conjurer in the same sense that African Jack is, but the spell cast by his storytelling ability is a kind of magic that Harris values even more than the physical transformations and love-charms of witches.

"Vanishing Remains": Mary Alicia Owen and Imperialist Nostalgia

> I have frequently been asked, "What is Voodoo worship?" frankly I answer, "I don't know." It seems to be like the old woman's recipe for fruit-cake—"a little of this, and a little of that, and a little of most anything, but a heap depends on your judgment in mixing." "To be strong in de haid"—that is, of great strength of will—is the most important characteristic of a "Cunjerer" or "Voodoo." –Mary Alicia Owen, "Among the Voodoos" (1891)

Born in 1850, the oldest child in a wealthy white family in St. Joseph, Missouri, Mary Alicia Owen developed her interest in folklore during her childhood, when she would listen to the stories of her family's slaves. Unlike Harris, who focused his efforts on collecting animal trickster tales and included conjure tales only occasionally, Owen devoted the early years of her career as a folklorist specifically to the investigation of conjuring practices, which she sometimes referred to as "Voodoo." While Harris and Powell debated the origin of the Uncle Remus stories, Owen took for granted the mixed cultural heritage of the folklore that she collected from the blended African American and Native American communities of Missouri. Moreover, while Harris portrayed African American folktales as an essential ingredient in the construction of boyhood, Owen portrayed both male and female conjurers and used her interest in folklore to challenge the conventions and stereotypes of white womanhood. For example, the opening lines of "Among the Voodoos," Owen's 1891 presentation at the Second International Folklore Congress, domesticate the seemingly exotic practice of "Voodoo worship" by comparing it to an old woman's recipe for fruit-cake. At the same time, by interacting with black and Native American men and women, as she routinely did in the course of her field work, Owen challenged the assumption that strict racial segregation was necessary to preserve the virtue and purity of white Southern women. Although Owen, like Harris, was not immune to racial prejudice, her

1893 collection of folklore, which structurally mirrors the Uncle Remus books, poses a subtle challenge to the complacent nostalgia behind Harris's portrayal of black storytelling.

One explanation for the nostalgia of the Uncle Remus stories was Harris's personal experience as a teenager living and working on a Georgia plantation, but the stories would not have achieved the tremendous popularity that they did if they did not tap into a form of nostalgia that could be shared, or at least imagined, by white Americans throughout the nation. Such a sense of national nostalgia lay at the foundation of the field of American folklore studies. When the American Folklore Society was created in 1888, the first issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* included a letter proclaiming that "the collection of the fast-vanishing remains of Folk-Lore in America" was vitally important as a response to America's rapid modernization (Newell 80). Increasing industrialization, homogenization, and the official closing of the frontier in 1890 gave a sense of urgency to "salvage ethnography"—especially to projects designed to preserve, at least on paper, the customs and beliefs of Native Americans. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's term "imperialist nostalgia" aptly describes the U.S. government's paradoxical yearning to preserve in writing the Native American cultures it was simultaneously destroying, but the concept also applies, in more complicated ways, to efforts to preserve African American folk culture after the abolition of slavery.

Allen Batteau has argued that as the frontier was closing at the end of the nineteenth century and racism was becoming increasingly codified, white Americans increasingly deified both nature itself and the Native American cultures that they associated with the natural landscape (Rosaldo 71). Renato Rosaldo uses the term "imperialist nostalgia" to refer to the tendency among imperial powers to feel nostalgic about peoples and cultures that they destroy through their imperial policies. The term aptly describes the "salvage ethnography" projects

conducted by the U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology during the late nineteenth century, which aimed to preserve in writing the folklore and other oral traditions of Native American cultures that were simultaneously being destroyed by U.S. imperialism. The Bureau's director stressed the urgency of salvage ethnography in a report to Congress with the following warning: "The field of research is speedily narrowing because of the rapid change in the Indian population now in progress; all habits, customs, and opinions are fading away; even languages are disappearing; and in a few years it will be impossible to study our North American Indians in their primitive conditions, except from recorded history" (Elliott 10). The report's language obscures the source of the threat to Native American cultures with verbs such as "disappearing" and "fading away" even as it maintains a genuine sense of concern over the impending loss. According to Rosaldo, the paradoxical impulse to preserve and destroy at the same time rests on nostalgia's conventional association with childhood memories to establish a pose of "innocent yearning" that conceals complicity with brutal domination:

> In this ideologically constructed world of ongoing progressive change, putatively static savage societies become a stable reference point for defining (the felicitous progress of) civilized identity. 'We' (who believe in progress) valorize innovation, and then yearn for more stable worlds, whether those reside in our own past, in other cultures, or in the conflation of the two. (Rosaldo 70)

Rosaldo's idea of conflation is key because combining childhood nostalgia with an evolutionary model of cultural difference suggests that though racial and cultural others may bear fond associations, they belong exclusively to the past and thus can claim no right to a future.

A very similar kind of nostalgia tainted efforts to preserve African American folk culture in the late 19th century. In an 1892 essay, Thomas Nelson Page laments the disappearance of "the old-time Negro" of the antebellum South with language that links the demise of slavery to the

destruction of the natural world: "That the 'old-time Negro' is passing away is one of the common sayings all over the South, where once he was as well known as the cotton-plant and the oak tree." (Page 301) Page's anxiety about the threatened extinction of the "old-time Negro" is rooted in nostalgia for a "relation of warm friendship and tender sympathy" that he insists existed between slaves and their owners before the Civil War—a relation that he illustrates with a sentimental description of white men who become teary-eyed as they drift into reminiscences of their beloved childhood slaves (304). Page depicts the mythology of the benevolent master-slave relationship as a dying tradition that should be preserved. Like the imperialist nostalgia that motivated salvage ethnographies of Native American folklore, Page's nostalgia for the "old-time Negro" finds comfort and stability in an imagined past. One manifestation of widespread nostalgia for Page's "old-time Negro" was the surge of interest in African American folklore that swept the nation in the decades following Reconstruction. Not coincidentally, this avid interest in collecting, preserving, and consuming African American folklore—and conjure tales in particular—coincided with the rise of new ways of policing African Americans' behavior, including Jim Crow segregation, disfranchisement, and lynchings.

Owen's 1893 text *Voodoo Tales as Told Among the Negroes of the Southwest* embodies both the late nineteenth-century interest in salvage ethnography and the era's popularization of folk tales packaged in the frame-narrative format made popular by Joel Chandler Harris. In spite of these resemblances, however, Owen's book is surprisingly resistant to the complacency of imperialist nostalgia. Like most works of salvage ethnography, Owen's book does evoke nostalgia. However, Owen's decision to focus specifically on conjuring, which is not the focus of most of Harris's stories, significantly differentiates the political significance of the two texts. With her peculiar blend of anthropology, autobiography, and fiction, Owen demonstrates how

late nineteenth-century conjure tales can simultaneously depend on, celebrate, and undermine the imperialist nostalgia of post-Reconstruction ethnographic projects.

Although Harris and Owen both use frame narratives that position white children as intermediaries between the storyteller and the reader, Owen replaces Harris's solitary black male storyteller with a group of five women, all of whom claim various mixtures of African and Native American ancestry. These five women take turns telling stories to a little white girl called "Tow Head," but they also tell their stories to one another, using the tales to bribe, insult, tease, flatter, bargain, and compete with one another in a social environment that is always influenced but never completely determined by the presence of the white child. For example, when Granny modestly declines an invitation to tell Tow Head one of her stories and has to be flattered into it by the other women, Owen's narrator commends her for "having thus poetically defined her rank, and at the same time paid her friends a compliment" (15). Differences in age, temperament, ethnic identification, and knowledge of conjure distinguish the five storytellers, contributing to their competitions for power within the social circle of the frame narrative. Because of this important distinction, Owen's text does not suggest, as Harris's does, that the folkloric tradition embodied in the animal tales exists purely for the consumption and gratification of the white child who listens to them. Instead, Owen depicts a full-fledged storytelling economy that is notable both for its ethnic cross-pollination and for its many layers of social meaning.

Because conjure frequently involves magical transformation and the workings of unseen forces, its prominence in Owen's collection also has the potential to highlight the mystification involved in contemporary anthropologists' use of magical words such as "vanishing" and "disappearing" to describe the demise of America's indigenous and minority cultures. In many of the book's conjure tales, characters experience problems that seem at first to have no readily

apparent cause, but as the story progresses they discover the source of their curse. Objects and characters may seem to disappear into thin air, but invariably the reader discovers that some powerful conjurer is behind the trick, using magic and illusions to achieve his or her own ends. By writing stories that explicitly highlight and problematize the question of causation, Owen makes it more difficult for her readers to ignore the causes behind the cultural disappearing acts that necessitate the work of salvage ethnography. Yet perhaps Owen's most significant challenge to the nostalgia of Harris's Uncle Remus stories lies in her characterization of Aunt Mymee, a character who serves as the female counterpart of both Uncle Remus and African Jack.

Aunt Mymee and the Power of (Self-)Possession

> Have I made myself clear as to the power of the "cunjer-stone"? Understand, pray, that nothing is required of him who holds it. Possession is not only nine points of the law, it is all of the law; it is initiation, it is knowledge, it is power. –Mary Alicia Owen "Among the Voodoos" (1891)

In her 1891 lecture "Among the Voodoos," Owen insists that if one wants to wield the powers of the conjure-stone, possession is the only thing that matters. This statement is, at least in part, self-serving because Owen later admits that the stone she has brought with her "was stolen from its unworthy owner" before it "fell into my hands" (248). Owen does not reveal who stole the conjure-stone or exactly how it "fell into her hands," but her insistence that possession is "all of the law" suggests that none of those ethical considerations really matter anyway (247). However, the "law" of possession is not just Owen's excuse for possessing stolen goods; it is also a central theme of her conjure stories, which suggest that, like the conjure-stone, America is governed exclusively by the law of possession.

The haunting presence of conjure in both the collected folk tales and the frame of Owen's 1893 book creates an undercurrent of danger beneath the apparent tranquility of the nostalgically

child-centered frame narrative. Aunt Mymee, who acts as Tow Head's black mammy, is first seen holding Tow Head in her lap and agreeing to let the girl stay awake to hear another story—a scene of domestic tranquility seemingly designed to bring a tear to the eye of Thomas Nelson Page's nostalgic Southerner. But the narrator soon disrupts the nostalgic tableau, revealing that Aunt Mymee is not only Tow Head's caretaker but also a skilled conjurer. In fact, she is such a skilled (and feared) conjurer that her fellow storytellers "sighed in secret over the recklessness of white folks in turning such an uncanny body loose among the children" (11). Unlike Harris who provides Uncle Remus as the little boy's stalwart protector against the magic of African Jack, Owen combines the two characters into one, making Aunt Mymee a source of both fear and protection in Tow Head's imagination.

Aunt Mymee's danger lies partly in her magical skills and partly in her inscrutability—the threat that at any given moment she might merely be thinking about her own colorful personal life or plotting a magical curse against her companions:

> If Aunt Mymee knew what they [the other storytellers] thought she gave no sign; for when not engaged in confidential discourse with Tow Head she smoked in silence. Perhaps she was thinking of the stalwart sons killed in the civil war; perhaps of the Negro husband, the Mulatto husband, the Indian husband, and the virtues that made her take them, and the failings that made her 'turn 'em all loose'; perhaps she was meditating some awful 'trick' or magical curse. Whatsoever the thought was, she kept it locked in her own cunning brain. The child's caresses she received with secret delight at Granny's uneasiness and jealousy, but that light emotion made no ripple the eye could detect, she smoked on and on in seeming peacefulness and innocence (11-12).

Owen's attention to Mymee's interiority is itself a significant departure from the frame narrative of Harris's Uncle Remus stories. Although Uncle Remus occasionally teases the little boy to whom he tells his stories, Harris only rarely gives his readers any indication that the black storyteller has any problems or grievances of his own, and although the folk tales themselves—especially those involving Brer Rabbit—suggest that innocence can be a disguise and virtue a

trick, the innocence, peacefulness, and love between Uncle Remus and his white listener are never directly called in question. In contrast, Aunt Mymee's inscrutability and dangerous power disrupt the nostalgic tone of Owen's frame narrative by undermining the safety and stability of the storytelling scene. The passage's profound distrust of Mymee's "seeming peacefulness and innocence" implicitly casts doubt not only on her personal motives but also on the reliability of all such nostalgic memories of safety and innocence shared between a white child and a black mammy. If Tow Head can remain oblivious to all of Mymee's hidden depths, perhaps all such memories of mythologized interracial domestic tranquility are fundamentally unreliable. Owen's Aunt Mymee is, in all outward respects, a copy of the mythical "old-time Negro" who inspires Page's nostalgia, but her magical powers and inscrutable interiority invest her with a sense of danger that undermines the reader's sense of complacency.

Even the name "Mymee" is an inscrutable riddle with multiple layers of meaning. From the mouth of Tow Head, the name might seem to be merely a childish distortion of the words "my mammy," suggesting the child's sense of possession as well as her incomplete or distorted understanding of the black woman's full identity. However, when spoken by Mymee herself, the name becomes a powerful assertion of self-ownership in defiance of the system of slavery, which made her the legal property of someone else. Whenever Mymee names herself, she is claiming possession of herself as "my me," not her master's "me" or her husbands' or Tow Head's. One could argue that it is also possible that Mymee is simply the character's name. After all, Charles Chesnutt wrote a story about a character named Jemima who also went by the nickname "Aunt Mimy." If Owen's readers understood "Aunt Mymee" to be a nickname for Jemima, they might simply imagine Owen's conjurer to be a stereotypical minstrel show character similar to the black mammy who made her debut as the marketing image for a pancake mix at the 1893

World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. However, Owen's decision to spell the name as "Mymee" instead of "Mimy" suggests that she is aware of the name's implications of self-possession. Moreover, Aunt Mymee's terror and despair when she temporarily loses possession of the magical luck-ball that she has named for herself suggests that self-possession is an important aspect of Owen's conception of the character. The multitude of possible meanings attributable to her name further contributes to Aunt Mymee's tendency to subvert nostalgia for the mythical nurturing black mammies that many post-Reconstruction Southerners fondly recalled from their childhood memories.

Owen's suggestion of an ideological link between slavery and conjure appears again in her 1896 novel, *The Daughter of Alouette*, which tells the story of a young woman of Native American descent who is raised by a white family but becomes fascinated with exploring her heritage after her encounters with a black conjurer named Ahola. In the novel, Ahola uses slavery as a metaphor to describe her power as a conjurer: "White men buy slaves and hold their bodies in uncertain fee. I own them to the core of their willing souls. The flesh that cowers from the overseer's lash, tears itself gleefully against the spikes of my dwelling, scorches itself to shriveled blackness in the flame of my altar fires, if I do but point a finger." (Owens *Daughter* 167).

An important difference between Harris's and Owen's texts is the extent of the connection between the frame narrative and the folk tales. In Harris's Uncle Remus stories, the dangers faced by characters such as Br'er Rabbit are usually fully contained within the folk tales and do not seem to threaten the characters in the frame narrative. Thus, although the animal fables themselves depict an unstable social order in which Brer Rabbit is defeated and powerless one moment and victorious the next, the power dynamics and racial hierarchies of the characters

in the frame narrative remain fixed and unviolable. In Owen's text, however, the characters in the frame narrative seem to share many of the fears and problems of the characters in the folk tales. For instance, Aunt Mymee's companions fear her conjuring skills just as the animals of the forest fear the conjuring powers of Rabbit and Old Woodpecker. The most striking example of this resonance between frame and folk tale occurs when Tow Head listens to the story of how the crows were permanently turned from white to black by the smoke of a fire and feels "secretly distressed at the suffering of the poor crows, having a very vivid realization of it owing to an experience of her own" (42). Owen's narrator later explains that, having once been locked in the smoke-house, Tow Head can sympathize with the crows' suffering from smoke inhalation, but the ambiguity of the passage suggests that the child's discomfort may also arise partly out of the suggestion that one's color—and thus one's racial status—may not be permanently fixed. Indeed, Tow Head, who we learn is often chastised by her mother for the amount of time she spends with the five mixed-race storytellers, does have some "experience of her own" with the judgment of being—or acting—insufficiently "white." In a post-Reconstruction world of Jim Crow, racial segregation, and one-drop rules, any such fears of racial instability threaten to disrupt the social order, but in a book heavily populated with characters of mixed race, who often choose the degree of black or Indian ancestry that they wish to claim for themselves, a book where birds turn into men and men into trees, it is perhaps not surprising that Tow Head worries that her own whiteness may not be permanent.

The porous boundaries between Owen's frame narrative and her collected folk tales are central to subverting the potential for imperialist nostalgia in the text as a whole. Yet this may seem counter-intuitive given that these porous boundaries create the potential for a kind of conflation unnervingly similar to the one that Renato Rosaldo identified as the origin of

imperialist nostalgia. But if imperialist nostalgia comes from a conflation of childhood nostalgia with a sense of imagination about cultures that supposedly represent a stable past, then Owen's book challenges its nostalgia not by rejecting the conflation but by rejecting the concept of stability. If belief in progress makes nostalgic imperialists yearn for a more stable world, what could be more frightening than the radical instability of a book of conjure tales, in which time, causation, race, culture, innocence, and even identity are all as unstable and unknowable as the magical powers of a conjurer? By showing us the contours and limits of the conjure tale's susceptibility to imperialist nostalgia, Owen's text can, I think, help us imagine the relationship between the ethics of memory and the ethics of cross-cultural encounters.

Chapter 3

"Back from recollection's vaults": Magic and Memory in *Huckleberry Finn*

-Let me make the superstitions of a nation and I care not who makes its laws or its songs either.
--Mark Twain, from Following the Equator (1897)

Mark Twain famously defined a "classic" as "a book which people praise and don't read." Yet Twain's own classic, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, seems to have avoided this fate, becoming, in spite of (or possibly because of) its tendency to inspire controversy, one of the most frequently-read books in America's high school and college classrooms. However, what people read and what they remember are not the same thing. As Jonathan Arac has pointed out in *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target*, the cultural project of turning *Huckleberry Finn* into an "American classic" has fostered widespread misremembering of what actually occurs in the novel—from scholars' persistent belief that Huck's companion is named "Nigger Jim" to readers' amnesia about the ending, when Huck and Tom turn Jim's escape from slavery into an elaborate game. In a 1985 Washington Post article sub-captioned "The President Defends the Values of an American Classic," Ronald Reagan gives his own mis-remembered and misleading summary of the novel, "Huck works hard to keep Jim free, and in the end he succeeds,"—a summary that exaggerates both the constancy of Huck's commitment to Jim's freedom and the agency that Huck has over Jim's ultimate fate (qtd. in Arac 105).

Perhaps the most persistent form that this cultural amnesia tends to take is the one expressed by film critic Roger Ebert in his review of a 1993 Disney adaptation, *The Adventures*

of Huck Finn, starring Elijah Wood.[10] Ebert, who claims to have read Twain's novel more than a dozen times, criticizes the movie for its failure to capture what he remembers as the most important event of the book: "Huck is bound to admit, after Jim explains it to him, that black people have the same feelings as everyone else, and are deserving of his respect. This process of Huck's conversion is one of the crucial events in American literature" (Ebert 2). But however "crucial" it may be to his concept of American literature, the event that Ebert describes never occurs in the novel. Far from undergoing a "conversion," Huck never even considers the possibility that helping Jim might be the right thing to do; even when he decides to help Jim escape from the Phelps farm, he does so in spite of his conviction that his actions are morally wrong and will condemn him to Hell. The controversial "evasion" sequence of the final 11 chapters, in which Huck and Tom turn Jim's escape from slavery into an "adventure" for their own amusement, suggests that Ebert's memory of Huck's moral development is grossly exaggerated. As Stephen Railton has said, "it is by no means clear" that *Huckleberry Finn* deserves to be called a *Bildungsroman,* or novel of growth, no matter how many readers, teachers, and study guides seem to remember it as one (Railton 23).

The book's less famous readers also tend to "speak of *Huckleberry Finn* enthusiastically but remember it imperfectly," according to John C. Gerber (Gerber 4). As evidence, Gerber cites a survey conducted by graduate students at the State University of New York in Albany. The students interviewed about four hundred adults whom they selected at random in Albany, NY. Their comments include the following:

> --A town councilman: The book makes me think of carefree childhood days when every day was an adventure. Huck is happy and carefree without a problem in the world.

[10] The film itself also contributes to Americans' cultural amnesia by eliminating the "evasion" sequence altogether. The movie ends after Huck and Jim are rescued from a near-lynching following the deception of the Wilks family.

> --A young businesswoman: The life-style is definitely one of escapism. It makes me think of summertime and gives me that lazy-day feeling one gets when sitting underneath a tree chewing on a piece of grass.
> --Her mother: Tom and Huck bring back Norman Rockwell paintings; they are so carefree.
> --A housewife: I always get Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn mixed up. They were rowdy little boys, but they could get adventure and excitement out of life without harming people—which is more than you can say today for the kids who are taking drugs. (Gerber 5)

All of these readers seem to have forgotten about Huck's many serious problems—including physical abuse, the recurring threat of death, and a guilty conscience—and about the harm that both Huck and Tom do to others with their schemes and pranks. For these readers, the novel's satirical edge vanishes and the book becomes a pleasant vehicle for nostalgia and escapism.

Calling *Huckleberry Finn* a "wonderful book that has been loaded with so much value in our culture that it has become an idol," Arac argues that Americans' idolatry of *Huckleberry Finn* has bred a tradition of selectively forgetting those aspects of the novel that disrupt our most cherished national narratives of consistent progress toward racial harmony. According to Arac, this tradition of cultural amnesia has transformed the text into a "talisman of self-flattering American virtue" (62). Arac's choice of the word "talisman" is, I think, instructive because it suggests a link between the ideological uses of selective memory and the forces of magic that appear throughout Twain's narrative. Derived from the Greek word "*teleo,"* meaning "to consecrate," a talisman is an object that must be "charged" with magical power by someone who prepares it for a definite purpose. The best way to understand how and why *Huckleberry Finn* functions as an ideological and political "talisman" in American culture today is to look at what the text itself has to teach us about the rituals of consecration and about the relationship between magic and memory.

Magic and folklore are more than mere manifestations of "local color" and minstrel show

humor in Twain's novel. I argue that scholars and readers should examine the depictions of folklore and superstition in *Huckleberry Finn* far more seriously and closely than they usually do because conjuring is Twain's metaphor for the twin powers of memory and prediction that are at the heart of the novel's critique of post-Reconstruction America. In *Huckleberry Finn,* conjure becomes a metaphor for two competing ways of reading: Jim's fortune-telling and Huck's transformative retrospection. Twain subtly uses conjure to teach his readers how to read his novel—and how not to read it. Those who read like Huck will use the transformative powers of selective memory to conjure a narrative that supports what they want to believe about slavery, race, and American history; for these readers, *Huckleberry Finn* will function as an ideological talisman and a pleasant, comforting story about an antebellum white boy's conversion to racial enlightenment. However, those who read like Jim will interpret the novel's "signs" to see how the text looks toward the future and critiques not only the society of the antebellum South but also that of Twain's post-Reconstruction contemporaries.

Twain had no way of knowing how his novel would be remembered and misremembered in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but he did have good reason to worry about the cultural amnesia regarding slavery and Reconstruction that was infesting American literature and politics during the late nineteenth century. Perhaps we will continue to struggle with our memories of *Huckleberry Finn* as long as America continues to grapple with the political compromises and cultural legacies of the post-Reconstruction era. But by examining the novel's representations of magic and supernatural folklore, I hope to show how *Huckleberry Finn* can help us better understand the transformative power of ritualized forgetting that has become the chief obstacle to an honest and ethical appreciation of Twain's "classic" novel.

Con[jure] Man: Jim, Superstition, and Magic

MAGIC, n. An art of converting superstition into coin. There are other arts serving the same high purpose, but the discreet lexicographer does not name them."
*--**Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary (1911)***

Scholars who comment on the role of folklore and magic in *Huckleberry Finn* often do so in order to criticize Twain's reliance on minstrel stereotypes in his characterization of Jim. For example, Fredrick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann criticize a scene in which Jim becomes a local celebrity among the slave population of St. Petersburg by claiming to have been visited by witches: "Jim and the other slaves have the superstition-steeped minds that give the whole scene a minstrel flavor" (145). In the preface to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* Twain writes that "the odd superstitions touched upon were all prevalent among children and slaves in the West at the period of this story—that is to say, thirty or forty years ago" (437). Twain's linking of children and slaves through their mutual belief in folklore suggests that superstition is a key element of the "'boyish' naivete" that Ralph Ellison identifies in the minstrel mask that obscures the dignity and adulthood of Jim's character.[11]

In *Form and Fable in American Fiction,* Daniel G. Hoffman claims that there is something more than minstrel stereotypes at work in the novel's representations of magic and the supernatural. According to Hoffman, the "world of supernatural omens" transcends the condescension of regional and racial stereotypes because it contains a good deal of genuine truth: "The superstitious imagination recognizes evil as a dynamic force; it acknowledges death. It is

[11] Ralph Ellison. "The Negro Writer in America: An Exchange," *Partisan Review.* XXV (Spring 1958) 215-6. Qtd. in Daniel G. Hoffman. *Form and Fable in American Fiction.* 336-7. Jim's maturity has also been the subject of significant failures of memory for some of the novel's readers. Booker T. Washington once described Jim as "a poor, ignorant negro boy who accompanies the heroes of the story, Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, on a long journey down the Mississippi on a raft." (Qtd. in Arac, p. 102)

truer to the moral demands of life than is either the smug piety of Christian conformity or the avoidance of choice by escaping to fantasy and romance" (320). Going further, Hoffman explains, "Jim's and Huck's beliefs in witches, ghosts, and omens are not merely authentic touches of local color; they are of signal importance in the thematic development of the book and in the growth toward maturity of the principal characters" (320-1). Jim's "growth toward maturity" is most evident, Hoffman says, in his shifting attitude toward magic, which begins with gullible, childish naivité in the opening chapters and ends with his development "as seer and shaman, interpreter of the dark secrets of nature which the white folks in the church deny" (321). I agree with Hoffman that Jim's and Huck's dealings with supernatural folklore are more than mere "local color" and that they are an important part of the book's thematic development. However, I disagree with Hoffman's interpretation of the role of superstition in Jim's "growth toward maturity" because I believe that Jim's dealings with magic exhibit a great deal of maturity right from the beginning, starting with the novel's opening chapters. Hoffman says that Jim's superstitious beliefs are initially a metaphorical reflection of his enslaved condition; they are, according to Hoffman, "the manacles upon his soul" in the opening chapters of the novel, when Jim is "enslaved to his fears" of witches and ghosts (331). However, as other scholars have shown,[12] Jim's seemingly superstitious stories about witches putting his hat in a tree after riding him "all over the world" and about the devil giving him a five-cent coin allow him to enhance his personal pride, his social prestige, and his financial status:

> Jim was monstrous proud about it, and he got so he wouldn't hardly notice the other

[12] For an example, see Lott, Eric. "Mr. Clemens and Jim Crow: Twain, Race, and Blackface." *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain.* Ed. Forrest G. Robinson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995, 129-52.

> niggers. Niggers would come miles to hear Jim tell about it, and he was more looked up to than any nigger in that country. Strange niggers would stand with their mouths open and look him all over, same as if he was a wonder. . . . Jim was most ruined, for a servant, because he got so stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches. (36)

Far from being a source of psychological slavery, Jim's stories about his encounter with witches are a source of pride, a subtle way of undermining his practical value as a slave while enhancing his personal sense of value and importance. When Huck writes that Jim was "so stuck up" that he "was most ruined, for a servant," he implies that Jim's stories about witches actually undermine the psychological degradation that make the institution of slavery possible. Superstition does not psychologically enslave Jim; it frees him.

I think the best way to regard Jim is not as a foolishly superstitious minstrel stereotype but as a "conjure man" in a way that is analogous to Charles Chesnutt's later use of the phrase "conjure woman" to describe the profession of the character known as Aunt Peggy. According to historian Jeffrey E. Anderson, conjure falls between the two extremes of syncretic religion and low-level supernaturalism or superstition. While religions "seek to honor the gods and spirits who people the believers' world," conjure seeks a more direct route to accomplishing specific practical goals through appeals to the spirit world (Anderson x). Conjurers may subscribe to a variety of different religions, including Christianity, but conjure itself is broader than any particular faith. At the same time, conjurers possess specialized knowledge and abilities that set them apart from ordinary individuals with supernatural or superstitious beliefs. Anyone can know that spilling salt brings bad luck, as Huck explains in Chapter 4, but only a skilled conjurer like Jim has the ability to do complex magic, such as telling fortunes (for a fee) with an ox's hair-ball.

Like the King and the Duke, Jim is also a con artist. His "art" is his magic, and his status

as a conjurer enables him to transform ordinary, worthless objects into valuable ones. Jim's magic is very real in precisely the transformative sense that Ambrose Bierce hits upon in his wry definition of "magic" from *The Devil's Dictionary.* Jim's magical power lies in his ability to transform "superstition into coin." As Bierce notes in his definition, there are "other arts serving the same high purpose," and the King and the Duke employ several of these "arts," including certain forms of conjuring and folk magic when they perform scams involving "layin' on o' hands," telling fortunes, "dissipating witch-spells," finding water and gold with a divining rod, and conning money out of the attendees at a religious camp meeting (188, 194-5). However, readers who believe in the minstrel stereotype that all blacks are gullible and superstitious tend to dismiss the possibility that Jim might be a clever and successful con artist.

When Jim uses his hair-ball to tell Huck's fortune, he insists that the hairball will not divulge its secrets unless Huck gives it some money. Huck offers the hair-ball a counterfeit quarter, suggesting that "maybe the hair-ball would take it, because maybe it wouldn't know the difference" (74). Jim responds by examining the coin and finally accepting it, saying "he would manage so the hair-ball would think it was good" (74). Clearly, the scene suggests, it is Jim, not the hair-ball, who is in charge of this transaction, and while Jim is smart enough to know the difference between a counterfeit coin and a real one, he is also smart enough to know that what a thing actually *is* is ultimately not as important as how it is perceived, especially when it comes to commercial transactions. When Jim explains that "he would split open a raw Irish potato and stick the quarter in between and keep it there all night, and next morning you couldn't see no brass, and it wouldn't feel greasy no more, and so anybody in town would take it in a minute, let alone a hair-ball," he implies that he intends to deceive the townspeople, not the hair-ball, with his homespun magic trick (45). Although readers never see the results of the magic trick first-

hand, Huck implies that it is a realistic and reliable method of transforming a valueless coin into a valuable one when he mentions "I knowed a potato would do that, before, but I had forgot it" (74). This seemingly insignificant comment of Huck's not only validates the practicality of Jim's magic in this instance but also foreshadows the links between magic and forgetting that gain prominence as the novel continues.

Yet even some critics who have acknowledged how cleverly Jim manipulates Huck in the hair-ball scene have considered the incident to be psychologically unbelievable and inconsistent with Twain's overall characterization of Jim. Ray W. Frantz, Jr. writes, "In this passage occurs the only instance of Jim's realizing that a superstition is a hoax, for he tells Huck that money must be put in the hair ball before it will work. In having Jim so trick Huck, Twain somewhat weakens the character of Jim" (Frantz 316). Frantz does not explain why the scene "weakens" Jim as a character, but his words imply that he thinks Jim is either too stupid or too noble to trick Huck. Even more condescendingly, Victor Royce West claims "How he [Jim] could be high priest of this fetish, know its secret, and yet retain his deep-rooted faith in every superstition that came to his attention, is scarcely explicable even when one considers his ignorance and his racial background" (West 73). West does not even try to reconcile the scene with his preconceptions about Jim's ignorance and superstition. Both critics fail to recognize that Jim's intelligence and self-awareness in this scene are typical of the character's engagements with folklore and magic throughout the novel.

For example, Jim's other conjuring trick involving the transformation of a coin is, if anything, even more complex and more impressive than the one he performs with the raw potato. When Tom Sawyer leaves Jim a five-cent coin as compensation for his theft of some candles and his prank with Jim's hat, Jim could merely spend the coin and treat it as payment. Instead, Jim

combines the social power of superstition with the rhetorical power of his skills as a storyteller to transform Tom's coin into a magic talisman:

> Jim always kept that five-center piece around his neck with a string and said it was a charm the devil give him with his own hands and told him he could cure anybody with it and fetch witches whenever he wanted to, just by saying something to it; but he never told what it was he said to it. Niggers would come from all around there and give Jim anything they had just for a sight of that five-center piece; but they wouldn't touch it because the devil had had his hands on it. (62)

Using this coin as a "charm," Jim can repeat his magic trick over and over again, continually using his powers as a storyteller to generate more and more coins, as well as other forms of material and psychological wealth. Thus, Jim has the ability to "charge" an object with magical power to turn it into a talisman and then to "charge" his customers a fee for his services. This type of magic is not the product of childish superstition but the work of a man—one who is both a clever con man and a powerful conjure man.

The Snake Skin Talisman: Huck and the Magic of Forgetting

*Again, in the stress of modern life, how little room is left for that most comfortable vanity which whispers in our ears that failures are not faults. –**Agnes Repplier, "On the Benefits of Superstition" from Books and Men (1888)***

If Jim is the master conjurer of Twain's novel, Huck, as Daniel Hoffman suggests, is the "sorcerer's apprentice" (320). Huck learns a great deal about magic and about reading "signs" by listening to Jim, but he also participates in a distinct folklore genre: the practical joke. As Alan and Carol Hunt have pointed out, "Twain has a folklorist's understanding of the practical joke" as well as a folklorist's understanding of conjuring and folk magic (197). Pranks can be benevolent, malevolent, or initiative in their intent; traditionally, pranksters are insiders and their victims are outsiders in relation to a particular social group or status (Hunt 198). Conjure, on the other hand, is usually practiced by outsiders and marginal or oppressed individuals or groups.

Twain brilliantly combines the two genres of folklore in what I will call "the snake skin episode" in Chapter 10. In the snake skin episode, Huck tries to assert his insider status by playing a practical joke, but, at the same time, he goes beyond the level of "sorcerer's apprentice" and practices his own conjuring trick, with Jim as his victim.

The framing of the snake skin episode within Chapter 10 highlights its complex relationship with both memory and magic. The chapter begins with a conversation between Huck and Jim about the strategy of forgetting as a means of avoiding unwanted ghosts:

> After breakfast I wanted to talk about the dead man and guess out how he come to be killed, but Jim didn't want to. He said it would fetch bad luck; and besides, he said, he might come and ha'nt us; he said a man that warn't buried was more likely to go a-ha'nting around than one that was planted and comfortable. That sounded pretty reasonable, so I didn't say no more. (63)

Jim's suggestion that they remain silent about the dead man as a means of warding off bad luck and ghosts links their collaborative forgetfulness to the rituals that Huck has previously performed to keep away bad luck, such as turning in circles and tying up a lock of his hair to "keep witches away" (4). Burial may be a ritualized act of commemoration, but, according to Jim, its most important function is to aid in the process of forgetting by preventing the dead from haunting the living. Readers do not have direct access to the Jim's motives for remaining silent, but we discover later that, far from setting the ghost to rest, Jim's insistence on silent forgetfulness ensures that the dead man, who is actually Huck's Pap, will continue to haunt Huck's mind and prevent him from feeling safe enough to return to town. All of this talk about death, haunting, and the self-protective power of forgetting sets the stage for the snake skin episode that immediately follows.

The episode that I am discussing actually involves three separate snakes. First, Huck finds a snake skin and brings it back to Jim, who warns him that touching a snake skin is "the

worst bad luck in the world" (113). Then, several days later, Huck finds a second snake—a rattlesnake—near their cavern. He kills it and decides to put its body "on the foot of Jim's blanket, ever so natural, thinking there'd be some fun when Jim found him there" (114). By nightfall, Huck claims he "forgot all about the snake" until Jim lies down and is bitten by its mate. After four days of sickness and swelling, Jim recovers from the snake bite, but Huck, covering his tracks, throws the snakes in the bushes and writes, "I warn't going to let Jim find out it was all my fault, not if I could help it" (114). Although Huck blames himself for Jim's injury, he does not fault himself for bad intentions or reckless actions but merely for "being such a fool as to not remember that wherever you leave a dead snake its mate always comes there and curls around it" (114). In this scene, Huck's claims of forgetfulness function both as self-indictment and self-justification. By blaming his memory instead of his actions for the bad consequences that ensue, Huck begins a strategy of privileging the internal over the external that becomes even more apparent in his failure to follow through on his resolutions during the novel's final chapters. Ultimately, both Huck and Jim attribute Jim's rattlesnake bite to the "bad luck" Huck had incurred from handling a snake skin days earlier. By blaming the snake skin for his lapse in memory, and thus for the negative consequences of his practical joke, Huck treats the snake skin as a surrogate for a fault he does not wish to acknowledge.

Although Huck is not literally a conjurer, his prank is metaphorically linked to magic in a number of ways. First, the abundance of snakes and snake skins in the scene would easily have suggested magic to post-bellum readers, for whom snakes were among the most recognizable elements of conjuring in popular representations of the South. Da, a snake god, was worshipped as the chief of the earth deities by the Fon speakers of West Africa, and he remained a powerful figure in New Orleans, where he was known as Blanc Dani (Anderson 29-30). Marie Laveau, the

"Voodoo Queen of New Orleans" who garnered national attention both in life and after her death in 1881, had a pet snake that, according to legend, she treated as a baby (Anderson 88). In Missouri, where African and Native American mythologies about snakes were often blended, several plains tribes designated Grandfather Snake the guardian of the Missouri River, and hoodooists honored Grandfather Rattlesnake as their most powerful spirit (Anderson 66). As interest in conjure grew, newspapers and magazines across the nation printed and reprinted sensationalized accounts of African American folk beliefs, and many of these stories include snakes and snake skins. One 1865 article from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in New York describes a ceremony in Mobile, Alabama led by a "High Fetish Priest with a snake skin around his neck" ("Voodooism in Mobile"). An 1879 article from the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* describes a "voudou" practitioner in Dallas who "carries with her a stuffed snake skin as part of her outfit." The same article later describes a "young negress" who wastes away from a mysterious illness until she cuts open her pillow and finds it filled with "voudou materials" such as hens' claws, bird beaks, roots, and snake skins ("Voodooism. Superstition").[13] Twain may have been inspired to write the episode by reading a story in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* by Thomas Bangs Thorpe, a Southwestern humorist whom Twain admired. In the story, a slave

[13] Daniel G. Hoffman points out in "Jim's Magic: Black or White?" that although "avoidance of snake-skins might seem to the unreflective reader to be a 'Negro' belief," attitudes toward snakes that are derived from African religions tend to be reverent rather than fearful, with African tradition regarding the wearing of snake skin as an omen of good luck and a guarantee of strength. Thus, Hoffman concludes that Jim's fear of snakes and snake skins is "a Christian rather than a voodoo doctrine" (51). I believe Hoffman's distinctions are interesting but not particularly relevant to my argument because I am concerned less with tracing origins than with establishing a connection between this episode and popular representations of Southern conjuring, which has roots in African, Native American, and European beliefs and practices. Moreover, I do not believe that the Christian and African traditions about snakes are as irreconcilable in this scene as Hoffman implies. Jim says that handling a snake skin gives a person bad luck, but he also eats the snake's meat and wears its rattles to get the power to cure himself once he is bitten.

in Hispaniola murders his master's daughter by putting a dead snake in her bed, knowing that the snake's venomous mate will be drawn to the body and will bite the girl while she sleeps. The story attributes the slave's ability to use the snake as a weapon to one of "those arts peculiar to semi-savage minds" (qtd. in Purdon 51).[14]

Huck's prank with the dead snake seems magical not only because of its literal similarities to popular conjure stories but also because it appears to involve the raising of the dead. Huck puts a dead snake in Jim's bed and a living snake materializes in the same spot, as if by magic. The apparent rise of the dead snake mirrors the resurrection of Huck, who has staged his own death in order to escape his father and is mistaken for a ghost when he first encounters Jim on Jackson's Island. In the novel's original manuscript, Jim spends his first evening with Huck in their cavern telling the boy a ghost story about his youthful encounter with a dead man who seemed to come to life and attack him.[15] Although Twain's reasons for cutting Jim's ghost story from the novel are unknown, it is possible that the scene's parallels to the rattlesnake prank in the following chapter were too strong and therefore made Huck's prank seem malicious rather than merely thoughtless. Appropriately, when their raft later gets smashed, leaving both Huck and the reader to assume that Jim is dead, the slave who arranges their reunion announces Jim's figurative rise from the dead by telling Huck that he is going to see "a whole stack o' water-moccasins" (149). Thus, the snake skin episode figuratively mirrors the novel's preoccupation

[14] Liam O. Purdon, "Huck's Rattlers and Narrative Sucker Bait in Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." *English Language Notes,* December 2002. It is not known whether Twain read this particular story, but Purdon suggests that he probably did because he purchased a second-hand collection of the magazine in which it was published in 1877, after he had started writing *Huckleberry Finn.*

[15] This scene was apparently cut from Twain's manuscript during the late stages of composition and production, probably in 1883. The original manuscript, which included the ghost story, was discovered in 1990. See "Jim's Ghost Story," from Mark Twain. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Stephen Railton (ed.) Broadview Editions, Toronto, Canada: 2011, 375-8.

with ghosts and the rising of the dead.

Another dimension of the snake skin episode's magical affiliation is its link to the kind of magical thinking that Arac identifies in the selective memories of *Huckleberry Finn*'s late twentieth-century readers. By blaming the snake skin for the "bad luck" that leads to Jim's snake bite, Huck can displace his own guilt and attribute Jim's injury to the mysterious, impersonal forces of luck and magic. Huck's magic, then, is the magic of the skilled prestidigitator whose slight-of-hand keeps you focused on one thing when you should really be looking at something else. His magic trick seeks to displace a complicated story of injury and guilt onto a simple and familiar magical talisman. In this case, Huck's snake skin talisman is consecrated by the power of forgetting. Undeniably, *Huckleberry Finn* is a novel about skin. However, the snakeskin talisman is de-contextualized, a detached skin whose magical properties allegedly emerge at the moment when it is separated from its living, breathing inhabitant. In Twain's novel, the skin that that really exerts power over the characters' fates is the skin inhabited by the characters themselves.

After Jim's recovery, the snake skin episode seems to disappear from the narrative for a while, only to resurface at several of the novel's key junctures. When Huck and Jim pass Cairo in the fog, and thus fail in their only real plan to get Jim to freedom, they once again turn to Huck's handling of the snake skin to explain their bad luck. "I awluz 'spected dat rattle-snake warn't done wid its work," Jim says (158). After missing Cairo, the pair has one last plan to get Jim to the North by taking the canoe upstream. When Huck wakes up to find that the canoe has been stolen, he again attributes their loss to bad luck from handling the snake skin. Yet, even as he acknowledges the degree to which the snake skin episode continues to haunt him, he also vows to make a conscious effort to forget about it:

> We didn't say a word for a good while. There warn't anything to say. We knowed well enough it was some more work of the rattlesnake skin; so what was the use to talk about it? It would only look like we was finding fault, and that would be bound to fetch more bad luck—and keep on fetching it, too, till we knowed enough to keep still. (159)

Huck's conviction that talking about the snake skin episode and "finding fault" will "fetch more bad luck" highlights his faith in forgetting as a powerful exorcism charm. Treating his ill-omened handling of a snake skin as a surrogate for the darker memory of his dangerous prank with the dead rattlesnake, Huck continues to perform the ritual of forgetting that he began on Jackson's Island.

During the explanation of his bad luck in passing Cairo and losing the canoe, Huck appears to make a narrative slip due to a mistake in remembering what details he had previously disclosed to the reader. Claiming that he and Jim "both knowed well enough" that the loss of the canoe "was some more work of the rattlesnake skin," Huck confuses the two separate snake-related events that I have been referring to collectively as the snake-skin episode (159). Although Huck states in Chapter 10 that the dead snake he puts in Jim's bed is a rattlesnake, he does not specify the species of snake whose skin he touches earlier in the chapter, thereby bringing himself "bad luck." This discrepancy between Huck's original reference to a generic snake skin and his more recent reference to an ill-omened rattlesnake skin creates a sense of ambiguity about which event and whose "fault" he is referring to when he cautions himself not to dwell on the past. Despite Huck's determination to forget the snake skin episode and leave it in the past, it returns to haunt him again and again.

The reverberations of Huck's rattlesnake prank primarily occupy the first half of the novel, tapering off in the second half as Huck and Jim slip quietly into subordinate roles while the King and the Duke seize control of both the raft and the narrative. But once Huck learns that

Jim has been imprisoned on the Phelps farm, the story's focus returns to the relationship between Huck and Jim and to the supernatural presence of the violent prank that haunts them. As Huck arrives at the Phelps's farm, he describes the atmosphere as "still and Sunday-like," with a breeze that "makes you feel mournful, because you feel like it's spirits whispering—spirits that's been dead ever so many years—and you always think they're talking about *you*" (289, Twain's emphasis). With these words, Huck signals the return of supernatural forces in the narrative. Huck's vague sense of uneasiness, expressed as a feeling that something in the spirit world is talking about *him*, might be an echo of the guilt he had expressed in the previous chapter after deciding, against the objections of his conscience, to free Jim, but it can also be read as the foreshadowing of Huck's imminent return to the magic of forgetting during the novel's final eleven chapters.

Since the novel's publication, readers have frequently cited Huck's resolution in Chapter 31 to "go to Hell" rather than abandon Jim to slavery as the most memorable and moving scene in the novel. According to Arac, such readers often forget the following eleven chapters, including Huck's failure to follow through on that resolution and his participation in Tom Sawyer's plan to make a game out of Jim's escape, because such memories would complicate the sense of self-satisfaction that they hope and expect to take away from the novel. This repeated misremembering of *Huckleberry Finn's* ending mirrors the ritualized forgetting that Huck performs during the ending as he is caught up in Tom Sawyer's scheme to mimic the daring prison escapes in adventure novels. Although Huck does object to several of Tom's more outrageous ideas, he also uses the ritualized repetition of Tom's literary conventions to defer freeing Jim—an action that he resolves to perform but about which he feels intensely guilty because his conscience tells him it is wrong. Just as the physical performance of magic rituals

helps Huck to exorcise the haunting power of bad luck in the novel's early chapters, the repeated physical action involved in tasks such as digging in the dirt with case-knives and collecting rats and snakes for Jim's prison helps to ritualize—and thus defer—the illegal and subversive action that Huck has promised to perform. Subconsciously, this may be why Huck refers to Tom's plot as "the evasion." Tom's elaborate and wasteful scheme takes to a ridiculous extreme Joseph Roach's definition of violence as "the performance of waste," and in doing so it ritually reenacts the violence of the practical joke that has been haunting Huck ever since the snake skin episode on Jackson's Island. When Tom demands that Jim catch and "tame" a rattlesnake as his jailhouse pet, the memory of violence embodied in the snake skin episode again rises to the surface of the narrative, in spite of Huck's efforts to tame and forget it (333). In both the snake skin episode and the final "evasion," Huck's responsibility for the violence committed against Jim lies not in any ill will or malicious intent but in his repeated acts of forgetting.

Conjuring American Nationhood

*"Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality."—**Ernest Renan "What Is a Nation?"(1882)***

In an essay written just a few years before the publication of *Huckleberry Finn,* the French philosopher Ernest Renan deftly connects the power of forgetting with the process of nation-building, a process that had particularly high stakes for Twain and his contemporaries in post-bellum America. Having barely survived a bloody and protracted civil war, the United States urgently needed to reestablish a sense of national unity and identity. As Renan suggests, selective forgetting became a "crucial factor" in the creation of a post-bellum American national identity. As the political goals of Reconstruction were abandoned, the nation was embarking on a new kind of reconstruction, the reconstruction of cultural memory.

Although *Huckleberry Finn* is set before the Civil War, many Twain scholars have sought to understand the novel, and particularly its controversial ending, as a satire of abusive practices in the Jim Crow South, such as the convict-lease system that continued to re-enslave many African Americans long after the legal abolition of slavery.[16] I argue that *Huckleberry Finn* can be read not only as a veiled commentary on particular laws and practices in the Jim Crow South, but also, more broadly, as an exploration of the collective psychology that enabled Americans in the North and South to transform their cultural memories of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction in politically expedient ways. Twain's depiction of the dangerous and transformative powers of magic and memory in *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that the writer had a keen understanding of and concern for the political implications of selective forgetting in post-Reconstruction America.

Twain began writing *Huckleberry Finn* in 1876, soon after finishing *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. That same year, the contested presidential election of Rutherford B. Hayes led to a set of political compromises that included the abandonment of Reconstruction, which had been in place since the end of the Civil War. The withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877 signaled the renewal of a spirit of reconciliation and reunion among the majority of white American citizens, who were eager to put the sectional strife of the Civil War behind them. Forgetting the demands of full citizenship for African Americans that Republicans had made during Reconstruction, most whites in the North and South were willing to accept or ignore such abuses as the convict-lease system, Jim Crow segregation laws, poll taxes, literacy tests, and routine racial violence and intimidation in exchange for sectional reconciliation.

[16] Critics who have interpreted the ending as a satire on the Jim Crow South include Victor Doyno, Toni Morrison, Shelly Fisher Fishkin, etc. The earliest version of this argument was Spencer Brown, "*Huckleberry Finn* for Our Time," (1967).

In order to create a sense of unified nationhood, Northerners and Southerners needed to agree on a shared narrative of slavery, the Civil War, and its aftermath. As historian David Blight has argued, the reunion of the North and South occurred at the expense of African Americans because "the memory of slavery, emancipation, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments never fit well into a developing narrative in which the Old and New South were romanticized and welcomed back to a new nationalism" (Blight 4). Popular plantation tales such as those by Virginian Thomas Nelson Page depicted slavery as a benign institution in which loyal, contented slaves served heroic, indulgent masters and refined, virtuous mistresses. Commemorations of the Civil War stressed the shared courage and sacrifices of the soldiers while denying that slavery had been the cause of the war. According to this developing narrative of national memory, slavery was not a social evil but, as Blight puts it, an "impersonal force in history, a natural phenomenon subject only to divine control and beyond all human responsibility" (Blight 91). Like Huck's use of the magical powers of the snake skin to evade responsibility for his mistakes, the national narrative that was being constructed during the post-Reconstruction era used the power of forgetting to evade the nation's responsibility for the evils of slavery.

The former Confederate cavalry leader John Mosby was one of the few white Southerners during the post-Reconstruction period who disputed the growing national consensus that the Civil War had nothing to do with slavery. Becoming a Republican after the war, Mosby claimed that he no longer went to Confederate veterans' reunions in the 1890s because he hated the "oratorical nonsense" of speakers who denied that the South had fought for or was responsible for slavery. Referring to one such speech, he rhetorically asked, "Why not talk about witchcraft if as he said, slavery was not the cause of the war[?] I always understood that we went to war on account of the thing we quarreled with the North about. I never heard of any other

cause of quarrel than slavery" (Mosby, qtd. in Blight 298). Mosby, whose devastating and humiliating guerilla raids on the much larger Union army earned him the nickname of "Gray Ghost," had good reason to understand the psychological impulse to ascribe supernatural causes to human actions. Yet his insistence that those who denied slavery's centrality to the conflict might as well blame the war on "witchcraft" suggests that he understood his contemporaries' selective memory of the war's causes as a form of superstition that was worthy of ridicule.

In 1885, Twain was reading excerpts from *Huckleberry Finn* on a "Twins of Genius" lecture tour with New Orleans writer George Washington Cable when controversy erupted over Cable's political essay, "The Freedman's Case in Equity." As Cable noted in the essay, by 1885, there was "scarcely one public relation of life in the South where he [the freedman] is not arbitrarily and unlawfully compelled to hold toward the white man the attitude of an alien, a menial, and a probable reprobate, by reason of his race and color" (Cable in Railton 397). Unlike Cable, Twain stayed silent about the controversy during the tour and continued to entertain audiences with readings from his novel, but Twain's reluctance to inspire political controversy in a way that might alarm or alienate his readers should not invalidate the attempts of scholars to read his novel as a response to the political issues of his times. Covert satire may not be very effective at changing people's minds or at forcing them to confront issues that they do not want to face, but it may still be able to help us understand the links between memory and identity on the psychological and national levels in Twain's time and in ours.

During the post-Reconstruction era from which *Huckleberry Finn* emerged, African Americans, free from slavery but lacking the social and economic equality promised to them under Reconstruction, were, in the words of Joseph Roach, "forgotten but not gone" (2). The emerging narratives of national identity sought not only to erase violence from slavery and

slavery from the story of the Civil War, but also to erase African Americans themselves from the nation's political landscape. An editorial from *The Nation* magazine in April 1877 expressed the popular mood among white Americans when it announced, "The negro will disappear from the field of national politics. Henceforth the nation, as a nation, will have nothing more to do with him" (5 April 1877: 202). Another editorial from *The Chicago Tribune* in the same month eagerly hailed "the retirement of the negro from politics," declaring the nation's racial problems solved:

> And now, in 1877, the long controversy over the black man seems to have reached a finality. . . The colored men have nothing more to ask; there is nothing which national politics can give them as a class. They are fairly started and established in the race of life. They are as free and secure in their freedom as all other men, and, like all other men, must take their chances. The color-line in politics has been obliterated, the colored race, politically, is henceforth merged in and lost in the general mass of the people. (24 April 1877: 4, qtd. in Railton 385)

As these editorials suggest, the vast majority of white Americans were, by now, eager to declare "mission accomplished" on the subject of racial justice and move on to other issues. By falsely and ludicrously declaring the obliteration of the color-line and the disappearance of "the negro" from America's national politics, these articles, and others like them, made it easy for white Americans to forget the severe limits that Jim Crow laws continued to place on African Americans' freedoms. Indeed, they made it easy for many white Americans to forget that African Americans had any place at all in the nation's political identity. With the mystical language of "disappear[ance]," the articles seem to solve the nation's racial problems by conjuring African Americans out of existence.

In today's allegedly "post-racial" age, the rhetoric of these 1877 editorials sounds all too familiar. Perhaps that is one reason why we should continue to read Twain's novel—because the insights that it offers about magic and memory in America's cultural and political identity

continue to resonate in the twenty-first century. According to Joseph Roach, "the most persistent mode of forgetting is memory imperfectly deferred" (4). Because the novel's rituals manage only to defer memory, not to bury it, *Huckleberry Finn* whispers a warning to us, as it did to post-Reconstruction America, whether or not we choose to heed it: like Huck's guilt over his rattlesnake prank, which returns to haunt him again and again in various forms, the long-term consequences of slavery and racism do not go away simply because the nation chooses to ignore them.

Given the power of forgetting as a form of evasion, it is appropriate that the snakes of Huck's conjuring trick make their final appearance during the "evasion" episode in the novel's final eleven chapters. When the snakes that Tom and Huck collect to be Jim's jailhouse pets get loose inside the Phelps home, they produce an image that is both comical and unnerving:

> No, there warn't no real scarcity of snakes about the house for a considerable spell. You'd see them dripping from the rafters and places, every now and then; and they generly landed in your plate, or down the back of your neck, and most of the time where you didn't want them. (330)

The Phelps's snake-infested house becomes a perfect metaphor not only for Twain's novel but also for a reunited American nation that was struggling in the post-Reconstruction period to deal with a selectively-forgotten past that continued to rise to the surface no matter how many times it was repressed. As Twain was writing his novel, in the aftermath of the Civil War, America was no longer a "house divided" by slavery, but it remained (and still remains) a house infested by the violence and oppression that were and are slavery's most pernicious legacies.

Fortune-Telling: Jim and Twain Predict the Future

That which we do is what we are. That which we remember is, more often than not, that which we would like to have been; or that which we hope to be. Thus our memory and our identity are ever at odds; our history ever a tall tale told by inattentive idealists. – **Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (1964)**

In the preceding passage, Ellison not only views memory and identity as two sides in a perpetual conflict but also suggests that memory itself embodies a sort of conflict or doubleness that addresses both the past and the future: memory can be both a lie and a hope. According to this account of memory, forgetting and selective memory are not always (or, at least, not entirely) destructive. As Joseph Roach puts it, Ellison sees "amnesia as the inspiration to imagine the future" (33). Expanding on Ellison's insight, Roach writes that "memory operates as an alternation between retrospection and anticipation that is itself, for better or worse, a work of art" (Roach 33). Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* embodies Roach's claim perfectly, for it is both a "work of art" and a work of memory in that it revisits the antebellum South of Twain's childhood. I argue that a key to understanding Twain's art lies in what Roach calls the alternation between "retrospection" and "anticipation," or, as I prefer to call it, fortune-telling. I have already discussed the transformative power and ethical lapses of Huck's retrospection (particularly in the snake skin episode) as well as the structural retrospection of the novel as a whole. Now, I want to focus on the other side of Twain's art: his fortune-telling. To understand Twain's art as a fortune-teller, we should start by examining the fortune-telling arts of Jim, the novel's master conjurer.

Fortune-telling is the key element of Jim's conjuring repertoire. Claiming that "there was a spirit inside of it, and it knowed everything," Jim uses a hair-ball found in the fourth stomach of an ox to "do magic," as Huck puts it (74). The magic that Jim does is fortune-telling, and Huck, who is worried about his future, consults Jim not only to hear his "whole fortune" but also to get some specific information about what his father plans to do (75). Jim's predictions are fairly vague and ambivalent, stating that Huck's "ole father doan' know, yit, what he's a-gwyne

to do," but Huck discovers the answer to his question as soon as he goes back to his room and discovers his pap sitting there, waiting for him. In this scene, as in many others, Jim uses his skills as a fortune-teller to make predictions that not only satisfy his customer but also help him to acquire the respect, good-will, and material goods that he wants and needs. Thus, as a skilled fortune-teller, Jim conjures time by using his magic to imagine and influence the future.

Jim continues to use his fortune-telling powers in similar ways after he has escaped from slavery. As soon as they meet on Jackson's Island, the two runaways begin to share their stories. Huck quickly agrees not to turn Jim in, but the full extent of his commitment to Jim is not immediately clear. Jim has been on the island for several days with no food other than the "strawbries en sich truck" that he can gather, but Huck arrives on the island with supplies: meal, bacon, coffee, sugar, a coffee pot, a frying pan, and tin cups (102). When Huck returns with his supplies and shares his breakfast with Jim, Huck declares that "the nigger was set back considerable, because he reckoned it was all done with witchcraft" (102). But readers should be careful not to accept such statements on faith; Huck does not have access to Jim's actual thoughts, only to his words and actions. After breakfast, they discover a nice cavern "as big as two or three rooms bunched together," and the discovery prompts the first disagreement between Huck and Jim: "Jim was for putting our traps in there, right away, but I said we didn't want to be climbing up there all the time" (108). Huck's use of the word "our" in this scene is interesting. The two runaways have not discussed how long Huck plans to stay on the island or how many of his supplies he intends to share with Jim after their initial breakfast, but Huck already seems to assume that his traps belong to both of them. How this assumption developed, though, is not entirely clear because Twain does not record the exact dialogue between the two characters. Does Huck automatically assume that he will share his things with Jim or is Jim the one who first

uses the phrase “our traps” when he suggests putting them in the cavern? Readers cannot know the answer to this question with any certainty, but they do know that Jim resolves the dispute about where to put their stuff when he uses his fortune-telling skills to interpret a “sign” and says that the “little birds had said it was going to rain, and did I want the things to get wet?” (108). Jim’s prediction not only suggests his superior knowledge of the future, and therefore his usefulness as a companion, but also subtly conveys the assumption that the supplies belong to both of them, so what they do with them should be a mutual decision.

When Jim’s prediction about the rain comes true, Huck writes that “soon it darkened up and began to thunder and lighten; so the birds was right about it,” but Jim makes sure that *he,* not the birds, gets credit for the prediction by responding to Huck’s expression of comfort and satisfaction with a statement that reinforces his fortune-telling credentials: “Well, you wouldn’t a ben here, ‘f it hadn’t a ben for Jim. You’d a ben down dah in de woods widout any dinner, en gittn’ mos’ drownded, too, dat you would, honey. Chickens knows when its gwyne to rain, en so do de birds, chile” (110). Jim’s speech suggests that they owe their mutual comfort to Jim’s ability to predict the future as much as they owe it to Huck’s willingness to share his supplies. In this way, Jim uses his fortune-telling powers to shape the future power dynamics of his relationship with Huck. He uses his knowledge of “signs” and magic to enhance the equality of their relationship.

Many critics have argued that the attachment between Huck and Jim receives its most poignant articulation in Chapter 11, when Huck learns that slave-hunters are heading toward the island to look for Jim and warns, “Get up and hump yourself, Jim! There ain’t a minute to lose. They’re after us!” (75). According to these critics, Huck’s use of the pronoun “us” and his seemingly instinctive conflation of Jim’s danger with his own reveal the full development of an

emotional bond between the two characters. Praising the "exhilarating power of Huck's instinctive humanity" in this scene, Leo Marx says that Huck's "unpremeditated identification with Jim's flight from slavery is an unforgettable moment in American experience" (Marx 292). Though the excitement of this scene may tempt readers to interpret Huck's cry of "They're after us!" as the crucial turning point in the relationship between the two runaways, I believe that a closer look at the chapters set on Jackson's Island shows that Huck's identification with Jim is not entirely "instinctive" and "unpremeditated." As I have shown, Jim has been using his skills as a conjurer and fortune-teller to establish a bond of identification and mutual respect with Huck since their first day together on the island.

Even the snake-skin episode is an important part of the development of an emotional bond between Huck and Jim. Like Huck's warning that the slave-hunters are "after us," Jim's speculation that "handling a snake-skin was such awful bad luck that maybe we hadn't got to the end of it yet" takes for granted the existence of a unified "we" through which their individual luck and misfortunes become mutual (65). When both Huck and Jim attribute Jim's rattlesnake bite to the "bad luck" that Huck had acquired by touching a snake-skin, they bind their fates in a way that anticipates Huck's identification with Jim during their escape from the island. Their bond depends on Huck's and Jim's mutual willingness to forget their very different status in relation to the law and their different experience of the dangers and hardships they face. When Huck warns that the slave-hunters are "after us" and when Jim attributes *his* snake bite to *Huck's* bad luck, they both must agree to forget that only Jim is being hunted and that only Jim is actually bitten.

Recognizing Jim's strategic use of fortune-telling and other magical knowledge strengthens our understanding of Jim's agency in the relationship. Jim actively participates in

framing his snake bite as a shared misfortune even though he remains silent while he and Huck prepare to escape the island on their raft. We cannot know for certain whether Jim is aware of Huck's rattlesnake prank, but his outward insistence on blaming the snake-skin for his injury serves his interests by contributing to the emotional bond that will ensure Huck's collusion in his escape. However, recognizing Huck's nearly-fatal practical joke as a key element of the characters' emotional bond with one another also problematizes our understanding of the bond itself, lending a vague shadow of violence to Huck's and Jim's relationship that suggests their relationship is not as harmonious or idyllic as some readers remember it to be.

Twain once again reminds readers of Jim's fortune-telling skills in the novel's final chapter when Tom gives Jim forty dollars "for being prisoner for us so patient, and doing it up so good" (364). Most critics, including Arac and Railton, have condemned this scene as a condescending representation of a dehumanized Jim who gladly accepts the paltry sum of forty dollars as compensation for the demeaning and unnecessary trials that Tom imposes on him in the name of "adventure." According to Railton, Jim's response to Tom's payment shows that "while most modern readers are uncomfortable rather than amused by what Tom does to Jim, Jim himself is ultimately grateful" (28). However, I argue that a closer look at Jim's response to the payment reveals a very different perspective on Twain's final representation of Jim and his magical abilities. While the novel does state that Jim is "pleased most to death" to receive his forty dollars, nothing in Jim's words or demeanor suggest that he is particularly grateful to Tom for giving it to him. Instead, Jim interprets the payment not as a gift from Tom but as a fulfillment of the prediction that he made in Chapter 8:

> "*Dah,* now Huck, what I tell you?—what I tell you up dah on Jackson islan'? I *tole* you I got a hairy breas', en what's de sign un it; en I *tole* you I been rich wunst, en gwineter to be rich *agin;* en it's come true; en heah she *is! Dah,* now! Doan' talk to *me*—signs is

> s*igns*, mine I tell you; en I knowed jis' 's well 'at I 'uz gwineter be rich agin as I's a stannin' heah dis minute!" (364-5, Twain's emphasis)

Jim's language in this passage does not express gratitude; it expresses his pride at having correctly read the "signs" and predicted his future. And perhaps readers should not be too quick to feel condescending about Jim's pride in his prediction. Not only has Jim received forty dollars but he has also just learned that he is legally free, not just provisionally free as a runaway slave. As Jim had said to Huck in Chapter 8 during their earlier conversation about the meaning of his hairy breast, "I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars" (107). Now that Jim has discovered that he legally owns himself, he has good reason to believe he is "rich" and good reason to say that the prophecy of his hairy breast has finally been fulfilled, not by Tom but by the forces of fate.

Jim's interpretation of his hairy breast is a fairly simple example of his sign-reading, but it serves as a reminder of the resourceful, confident Jim of the earlier chapters, before Tom's "evasion" reduced him from a skilled conjure man to a passive prisoner. Indeed, the scene specifically mirrors the one in Chapter 2 when Tom steals some candles, puts Jim's hat in a tree as a prank, and then leaves Jim a nickel as compensation. In that scene, as in the final chapter, Tom's payment is a weak attempt to alleviate any guilt he may feel about his disrespectful treatment of Jim. However, in both scenes, Jim uses his storytelling abilities to ignore Tom's agency and enhance his own, interpreting the money as a symbol of *his* special relationship with the forces of fate and magic. I am not trying to suggest that this one scene makes up for all of the demeaning elements of Tom's (and Twain's) final "evasion," but it does suggest that, in the final chapter, Twain has not entirely forgotten the pride, confidence, and ingenuity of the earlier, more humanized Jim—the conjure man who could turn Tom's nickel into a powerful and profitable

magical charm from the devil.

In the final chapter, Jim combines his power as a fortune-teller with the power of retrospection to transform Tom's payment into a confirmation of Jim's magical skills. However, the novel also contrasts Jim's fortune-telling technique for conjuring time with Huck's transformative retrospection. The conflict between fortune-telling and retrospection is, perhaps, most evident in the scene after Huck and Jim get separated in the fog, when Huck, coming upon Jim asleep in the raft, decides to play yet another cruel and thoughtless prank on his companion. Huck slips quietly onto the raft and then baffles Jim's joy and relief that he is still alive by pretending that he had never left and that the fog and their frightening separation were just figments of Jim's dreaming imagination. Huck's prank in this scene mimics the structural retrospection of the novel as a whole by prompting Jim to look back and reinterpret his past actions and experiences. It also mimics a more sinister historical phenomenon: the tendency of white Americans in the late Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction periods to pursue what Shelley Fisher Fishkin calls "the erasure of the slave past from the nation's cultural memory" ("Race" 283). In this scene, as in the snake-skin episode, readers should carefully observe how Huck uses the power of retrospection in ethically questionable ways that mirror the ethically questionable rituals of selective amnesia that were increasingly dominating post-Reconstruction America's national narratives.

The fact that Huck's prank involves the denial of a traumatic separation makes the parallel to postbellum reconciliationist narratives especially striking. The separation of Huck and Jim on the river can be seen as a metaphor for the horrors of slavery—an institution that routinely ripped apart black families, tearing children from parents, husbands from wives, brothers from sisters, and friends from friends. Indeed, it was this aspect of slavery's horrors that

Twain emphasized in "A True Story" (1874), a narrative about a slave mother who is forcibly separated from all of her children and then joyfully reunites with one of them years later, during the Civil War. The conspicuous whiteness of the fog and the nearly parental bond that Jim has established with Huck by this point in the novel suggest that Twain may well have had this metaphor in mind when he wrote the scene. When Huck insists that his separation from Jim in the fog is just a figment of Jim's imagination, his lie parallels the erasure of suffering from idyllic plantation tales and other popular post-war narratives about slavery.

Moreover, the harrowing scene of separation in the fog may also serve as a metaphor for the Civil War itself, with Huck's lie representing the nation's growing amnesia about slavery's role in causing the war, even as commemorations for the fallen soldiers became increasingly common. According to David W. Blight, reconciliationist impulses in the North and South after the end of Reconstruction led to a widespread "politics of forgetting" in which "shared grief at war's costs coupled with Northern respect for the *sincerity* of Southern devotion to their cause" (Blight 215). When Huck insists that he has been with Jim the whole time, he seeks, metaphorically, to erase and deny both the forced separation of slave families and the political and institutional separation between the North and the South, as if neither the Civil War nor the horrors of slavery ever really happened.

For a while, Huck does manage to convince Jim that the previous night's terrors were merely a dream, and Jim responds by returning to his fortune-teller role from earlier in the novel. He begins to "'terpret" his supposed dream as a set of symbols sent to him in a coded warning:

> He said the first tow-head stood for a man that would try to do us some good, but the current was another man that would get us away from him. The whoops was warnings that would come to us every now and then, and if we didn't try hard to make out to understand them they'd just take us into bad luck, 'stead of keeping us out of it. The lot of tow-heads was troubles we was going to get into with quarrelsome people and all

> kinds of mean folks, but if we minded our business and didn't talk back and aggravate them, we would pull through and get out of the fog and into the big clear river, which was the free States, and wouldn't have no more trouble. (150)

This interpretation, strongly reminiscent of Jim's earlier fortune-telling, transforms Jim's literal memories of objects and events from the night before into a dreamscape of portentous images that are laden with hidden symbolic meanings. Through his act of interpretation, Jim simultaneously embodies the role of the conjuring fortune-teller and that of a truth-conjuring storyteller. Like Uncle Julius, the storytelling ex-slave of Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales, Jim can only tell the truth of what he remembers by transforming that truth into a surreal narrative of magic and metaphor. With Huck's voice telling him that all of the terror, physical hardship, loss, and grief that he remembers from the night before were merely figments of his imagination, that "there didn't any of it happen" and "there ain't nothing in it," Jim, like Julius and Chesnutt, shrouds his story in symbols and supernaturalism to make it acceptable to his white audience.

For Jim, though, the worst indignity is that he seems, at least for a while, to be genuinely in doubt of his own memories. For a few minutes, Jim appears to accept Huck's version of events over his own, and his doubt of his own memory sends him psychologically reeling, creating doubt even about his own identity: "Well, looky-here, boss, dey's sumf'n wrong, dey is. Is I *me*, or who *is* I? Is I heah, or whah *is* I? Now dat's what I wants to know" (149). Jim's uncharacteristic use of the word "boss" to refer to Huck in this scene suggests that Huck's prank has fundamentally undermined the equality of their relationship. Jim's apparent identity crisis may have seemed very familiar to many former slaves living in a post-Reconstruction American society that was determined to forget both the horrors of slavery and the promises of Reconstruction as quickly as possible. As Jim correctly points out, "dey's sumf'n wrong" with Huck's forgetful narrative. The novel's readers should imitate Jim by using a metaphorical

interpretation to penetrate the scene's hidden meanings.

When the sky clears up and Huck jokingly asks Jim to "'terpret" the leaves and rubbish and smashed oar on the raft, Jim realizes that he has been fooled and, in outrage, turns to Huck with what many readers remember as his most dignified and moving speech of the novel:

> "What do dey stan' for? I's gwyne to tell you. When I got all wore out, wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn' k'yer no mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake' up en fine you back agin all safe en soun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss' yo' foot I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' 'bout, wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed" (150).

Jim's speech suggests, as Lionel Trilling puts it, that the "pride of human affection has been touched, one of the few prides that has any true dignity" (Trilling 87). While I agree with Trilling that Jim's anger stems largely from the betrayal of his genuine affection for Huck, I believe there is also another source for his anger, and even more for his shame. Jim feels angry and ashamed not only because Huck fooled him into believing something that was not true but also because Huck fooled him into doubting his own memory. As a conjurer, Jim knows how to predict the future by interpreting signs in the past and present, whether those signs come from a hair-ball, a flock of birds, or a bizarre dream. But Jim's gifts as a fortune-teller succumb, at least momentarily, to the powerful magic of Huck's manipulative and transformative retrospection, a magic that seeks to change the future by changing the way we remember the past.

While Jim focuses his fortune-telling powers on his immediate future, Twain's fortune-telling looks further into America's future, toward the post-Reconstruction period when he was composing *Huckleberry Finn* and when the nation's collective memory of slavery and of the role of slavery in the Civil War were being obscured by reconciliationist narratives of idyllic plantation life and a Civil War that had nothing to do with slavery. Twain's contemporary

readers may not have recognized this metaphorical meaning of the novel, but I argue that Twain uses Jim's fortune-telling as a subtle signal to his readers that the novel does contain hidden forecasts of the future, if only readers can conjure well enough to interpret them.

Calling Twain a fortune-teller is more than just a fancy way of saying that he is writing about post-Reconstruction politics because I believe the term enriches our understanding of Twain's strategies for relating the past to the present and the present to the future. Fortune-telling, at least as Jim practices it, is a profession and a survival skill, not a hobby, so the art of forecasting the future is always mediated by the need to satisfy a customer. Jim refuses to tell Huck's fortune with the hair-ball until Huck gives him a fake (but passable) coin, and even then his reading of Huck's fortune is rather vague. Similarly, the money-conscious, popularity-seeking Twain forecasts his country's bleak future in a way that is oblique enough to leave room for doubt about the author's meaning and intentions. Like a good conjurer, Twain knows better than to leave his customers feeling unsatisfied.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as Idol and Target

We boast our emancipation from many superstitions; but if we have broken any idols, it is through a transfer of idolatry. –**Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Character" (1844)**

Huckleberry Finn's exploration of the cultural work performed by ritualized forgetting goes well beyond the issue of hypercanonization that predominantly concerns Arac. The novel does not represent selective memory as a narrow symptom of textual idolatry but as a broad strategy for dealing with all kinds of supernatural and psychological threats. However, Twain's definition of a "classic" as "a book which people praise and don't read" suggests that he almost certainly would have been sympathetic to Arac's concerns about the dangers of canonization. Although most of Twain's engagement with memory in *Huckleberry Finn* focuses on the

relationship between Huck and Jim, the novel does link ritualized forgetting specifically with literary idolatry and hypercanonization through its engagement with Shakespeare.

Twain, who lived at a time when Shakespeare was becoming an increasingly sacred icon in American culture,[17] had a keen interest in Shakespeare's works and in his cultural status. Twain even worked on a burlesque version of *Hamlet* while he was writing *Huckleberry Finn*. According to Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain first mentioned the idea of adding a character to *Hamlet* and writing a burlesque during a backstage conversation with Edwin Booth when he went to see the actor in the play, probably in 1873, and Twain returned to the idea years later, after a visit to Boston in 1881.[18] Twain ultimately set the project aside, unfinished, after struggling to reconcile the irreverent aims of parody with a desire to avoid altering Shakespeare's words. As he put it in a letter to William Dean Howells on September 3, 1881, "of course the added character must *not* be spoken to; for the sacrilegious scribbler who ventured to put words into Shakespeare's mouth would probably be hanged" (qtd. in "Burlesque Hamlet" 49). Thus, Shakespeare, and specifically *Hamlet,* were on Twain's mind when he was writing his novel. Twain was particularly fascinated by *Hamlet*'s ghost, who reportedly had been played by Shakespeare himself. In fact, the ghost is the only character from Shakespeare's play who interacts onstage with the character that Twain adds to his unfinished burlesque.

Throughout *Huckleberry Finn,* subtle Shakespearean influences crop up again and again, from the Romeo and Juliet love plot that sparks the final battle between the Grangerfords and the

[17] For a detailed account of Shakespeare's rise from popular culture to nearly "sacred" status, see Lawrence W. Levine's *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1988.

[18] Mark Twain. "Burlesque Hamlet." *Mark Twain's Satires & Burlesques.* Ed. Franklin R. Rogers. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, p. 50. Rogers suggests that Twain's encounter with Booth probably occurred in 1873.

Shepherdsons to the King Lear outfit that Jim dons immediately after telling Huck the story of how he once punished his daughter for not answering him as he expected. According to Anthony Berret, the novel's most sustained Shakespearean influence is *Hamlet*.[19] Haunted by a terrifying father who seems to have returned from the dead, Huck's situation subtly mirrors that of Shakespeare's Hamlet. The most direct and most memorable of Twain's engagements with Shakespeare is in the Duke's bumbling attempt to remember and perform Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy:

> To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin
> That makes calamity of so long life;
> For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane,
> But that the fear of something after death
> Murders the innocent sleep,
> Great nature's second course,
> And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune
> Than fly to others that we know not of.
> There's the respect must give us pause:
> Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst;
> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
> The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
> The law's delay, and the quietus which his pangs might take,
> In the dead waste and middle of the night, when churchyards yawn
> In customary suits of solemn black,
> But that the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns,
> Breathes forth contagion on the world,
> And thus the native hue of resolution, like the poor cat i' the adage,
> Is sicklied o'er with care,
> And all the clouds that lowered o'er our housetops,
> With this regard their currents turn awry,
> And lose the name of action.
> 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. But soft you, the fair Ophelia:
> Ope not thy ponderous and marble jaws,
> But get thee to a nunnery—go! (204)[20]

[19] See Anthony J. Berret, *Mark Twain and Shakespeare: A Cultural Legacy* for an extended discussion of the similarities between *Hamlet* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*

[20] The pastiche is composed of lines from *Hamlet, Macbeth*, and *Richard III*.

The soliloquy that the Duke remembers is a pastiche, composed of jumbled line fragments from several of Shakespeare's tragedies. In the context of the play, it would make no sense. In the context of Twain's novel, the Duke's speech functions as a ritualized performance of textual misremembering.[21]

Unlike Twain's unpublished burlesque of *Hamlet*, which literally copies the entire text of the play and then embellishes it between the scenes with some original dialogue and sight-gags, *Huckleberry Finn* treats the *Hamlet* soliloquy not as a text to be copied but as a cultural artifact existing in memory. Promising to call the "sublime" speech "back from recollection's vaults," the Duke performs an elaborate ritual of remembering (203). As Huck describes him, "he went to marching up and down, thinking, and frowning horrible every now and then; then he would hoist up his eyebrows; next he would squeeze his hand on his forehead and stagger back and kind of moan; next he would sigh, and then he'd let on to drop a tear" (203). This ritual of remembering, which Huck finds almost as "beautiful" as the performance of the speech itself, is also a ritual of forgetting. It produces a speech riddled with revisions, some of which, such as the change from "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" to "sling the arrows of outrageous fortune,"

[21] The altered version of Hamlet's soliloquy in *HF* could be a product of Huck's faulty memory rather than the Duke's, but I think the textual evidence suggests otherwise. The pastiche soliloquy that appears in Twain's novel not only rearranges and subtly alters lines from Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy but also inserts lines from other parts of *Hamlet* and from other Shakespearean plays, including *Macbeth* and *Richard III.* Since Huck's reactions to the performances suggest that he has little, if any, familiarity with Shakespeare before encountering the Duke, Huck probably is not responsible for the alterations. Moreover, the style of misremembering evident in the soliloquy is altogether different from the style of misremembering that we get from Huck throughout the novel. When Huck misremembers stories and lessons from school, as he does in the following passage about Henry VIII, he jumbles names and facts and dates, but he tells the story in his own words:

> My, you ought to seen old Henry the Eight when he was in bloom. He was a blossom. He used to marry a new wife every day, and chop off her head next morning. . . . He made every one of them tell him a tale every night; and he kept that up till he had hogged a thousand and one tales that way, and then he put them all in a book, and called it Domesday Book. (222)

seem suspiciously suited to the Duke's active acting style and to his aggressive, opportunistic behavior.

Calling Hamlet's soliloquy "the most celebrated thing in Shakespeare," the Duke calls upon the speech's canonization to justify his choice to perform it (203). The Duke's characterization of the soliloquy as "sublime" and his decision to treat it as a stand-alone performance, without any attempt to integrate it into the overall plot or structure of the play, speak to Arac's discussion of "the sublime" as a way of understanding, and perhaps resisting, the way idolatry affects readers' experiences of *Huckleberry Finn's* Chapter 31. Just as readers tend to treat their emotional investment in Huck's vow to rescue Jim as a self-valorizing excuse to ignore the more troubling implications of the final chapters, the Duke's memory of Hamlet's soliloquy as a "sublime" experience helps him to de-contextualize and misremember it.[22]

The Duke, like many nineteenth-century performers, treats Hamlet's soliloquy as an isolated set piece rather than as an integrated part a play. Similarly, critics of *Huckleberry Finn* tend to regard the pastiche soliloquy as an isolated, virtuoso performance of Twain's parodic skill rather than as an integral part of the novel. However, the speech that Twain parodies has a good deal of relevance to Huck's story. Like Hamlet, Huck seems preoccupied with death, the "undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns" (204). Huck is, indeed, a traveler in an "undiscovered country" in more ways than one. First, his encounter with Jim on Jackson's Island occurs only after he fakes his own death, making Huck's subsequent journey—his

[22] Although the Duke thinks that Shakespeare is "sublime," the Arkansas townspeople evidently do not. Only twelve people come to the show and, according to Huck, the audience "laughed all the time" and "everybody left, anyway, before the show was over, but one boy which was asleep" (217). The Duke says this is because "these Arkansas lunkheads couldn't come up to Shakespeare" (217). I suspect that the show's failure may have something to do with the Duke's pretentiousness and the silliness of the King's "peeled head" and "white whiskers" beneath the "ruffled night-cap" of Juliet's costume (195).

"supremely effortless flight into a dark and silent unknown," as one critic put it—an evocative metaphor for death itself.[23] Moreover, Huck's journey down the river with Jim gives him and his readers a glimpse at a side of America so harsh and cruel that it hardly seems to belong to the same country as Tom Sawyer's sleepy St. Petersburg. Huck and Jim really do seem to be travelers in an "undiscovered country" that is a combination of Twain's childhood memories and his satirical imagination.

The line from Hamlet's soliloquy that seems to express the strongest thematic resonance with Twain's novel is one that is entirely missing from the Duke's pastiche soliloquy: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" (III, i, 84). Certainly, Huck's conscience represents his most cowardly and least admirable impulses, for it is Huck's "conscience" that makes him feel "wicked and low-down and ornery" for "stealing a poor old woman's nigger" in Chapter 31 (199). Anthony Berrret, who also notices the philosophical similarities between Hamlet's axiom about conscience and Huck's battle with his conscience in Chapter 31, writes that it is "odd that Twain omitted the line" from his pastiche soliloquy (162). However, viewed in the context of Twain's thematic preoccupation with selective memory, it should not seem at all "odd" that the most important line is missing from the pastiche soliloquy; it is precisely the line that both Huck and the Duke would be most likely to forget.

Huckleberry Finn **as Idol and Superstition**

"Thus, the `childhood memories' of individuals come in general to acquire the significance of `screen memories' and in doing so offer a remarkable analogy with the childhood memories that a nation preserves in its store of legends and myths." –**Sigmund Freud,** ***The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*****, 1901**

[23] Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway* (New York, 1952), chap.6. Quoted in Daniel G. Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction,* p. 319.

Although the Duke's soliloquy might seem to have little in common with the magic rituals that Huck and Jim use to keep away such evils as witches, ghosts, bad luck, and guilt, I would argue that the similarities are instructive if we pay attention to the breadth and complexity with which Twain understands the term "superstition." Late in his life, Twain wrote and published an excerpt from his autobiography titled *Is Shakespeare Dead?* in which he ridicules "Stratfordolaters" who refuse to question the "superstition" that underlies their ideas about Shakespeare and his plays:

> Am I trying to convince anybody that Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare's Works? Ah, now, what do you take me for? . . . No-no, I am aware that when even the brightest mind in our world has been trained up from childhood in a superstition of any kind, it will never be possible for that mind, in its maturity, to examine sincerely, dispassionately, and conscientiously any evidence or any circumstance which shall seem to cast a doubt upon the validity of that superstition. I doubt if I could do it myself. We always get at second hand our notions about systems of government; . . . and our preferences in the matter of religious and political parties; and our acceptance or rejection of the Shakespeares and the Arthur Ortons and the Mrs. Eddys. . . And whenever we have been furnished a fetish, and have been taught to believe in it, and love it and worship it, and refrain from examining it, there is no evidence, howsoever clear and strong, that can persuade us to withdraw from it our loyalty and devotion. (127-9) [24]

Twain uses the term "superstition" in this passage to refer broadly to any unexamined, "second-hand" belief system that a person acquires from his or her social environment. One's "acceptance or rejection" of Shakespeare is, according to Twain, no more based on independent thought and a dispassionate examination of evidence than one's religious or political beliefs are. According to Twain, Shakespeare can even become a sort of magical "fetish" in the minds of the idolatrous.

The implications of this expansive and psychologically complex definition of superstition are immense. For one thing, it suggests another challenge to Daniel Hoffman's interpretation of

[24] In *Is Shakespeare Dead?* Twain questions whether William Shakespeare actually wrote the plays that are attributed to him. However, both the passage that I quote and the book as a whole seem to me to be more concerned with the issue of Shakespeare's cultural status than with Shakespeare's identity.

the role of folklore in Twain's novel. Hoffman over-states the freedom of Jim's later engagements with magic when he says that Jim becomes "free from the corruption of civilization" because he can "interpret the signs that are older than Christianity" (335). I think Hoffman is wrong to characterize any engagement with magic or superstition in *Huckleberry Finn* as "free from the corruption of civilization." For Twain, there is no amount of maturity or magic that can entirely free one of civilization's corrupting influences; superstition is always fundamentally social.

For example, when Huck accidentally kills a spider in his room in Chapter 1, his socially choreographed, ritualized response exposes the social scaffolding hidden behind his feeling of being all alone in figuring out the consequences of his act:

> I didn't need anybody to tell me that that was an awful bad sign and would fetch me some bad luck, so I was scared and most shook the clothes off of me. I got up and turned around in my tracks three times and crossed my breast every time; and then I tied up a little lock of my hair with a thread to keep witches away. But I hadn't no confidence. You do that when you've lost a horse-shoe that you've found, instead of nailing it up over the door, but I hadn't ever heard anybody say it was any way to keep off bad luck when you'd killed a spider. (4)

Huck's claim that he "didn't need anybody to tell" him that killing a spider was a bad sign is true only in the sense that he has already internalized what people have told him before and thus needs no additional reminder. Worrying that he "hadn't ever heard anybody say" the horse-shoe charm would work for dead spiders, he reveals the extent to which all of his thoughts, interpretations, beliefs, actions, and even his physical and emotional responses in the passage are socially determined. What little emotional relief he gets from his self-protective ritual comes from his knowledge that he is not making it up as he goes but repeating a choreographed set of actions performed by others in similar circumstances. Huck tries to ward off his bad luck by performing a ritual designed for another omen, thereby combining the social power of repetition

with the individualized spirit of improvisation and revision. His lack of confidence in his improvisational use of the ritual exposes the degree to which Huck's responses are determined by social precedent (if not by Miss Watson's social precedent) and the way in which Huck's ritually-forgotten fears refuse to vanish.

Such early representations of magic rituals set the stage for interpreting Huck's later use of social rituals to alleviate his fear and guilt. In Chapter 31, Huck is "so scared" of God's retribution for trying to help Jim escape that he "most dropped in my tracks" and attempts to pray away his guilt, only to discover that "you can't pray a lie" (200). Huck's prayer is no less a ritual of exorcism than the choreographed ritual of turning and crossing himself that Huck performs when he accidentally kills a spider. For Twain, the "conscience" that tells Huck he will go to Hell if he "steals" Jim out of slavery in Chapter 31 is just as much a superstition as Huck's belief in the bad luck of killing a spider.

Twain's view of superstition as a powerful social force is strikingly evident in an aphorism that he coined for *Following the Equator*: "Let me make the superstitions of a nation and I care not who makes its laws or its songs either." In post-Reconstruction America, the superstition of white supremacy had already overcome the laws of Reconstruction and was well on its way toward rendering the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments meaningless. Similarly, the nation's "songs"—its art and literature as well as its literal songs—were saturated with words such as "freedom," "liberty," and "equality," but even those depictions of the national character were overpowered by the superstition of white supremacy. Mark Twain was and is an iconic American literary figure, but he knew that even his literary powers were no match for the force of his nation's superstitions. Ironically, if Arac's argument about *Huckleberry Finn* is correct, Twain's novel has become a sort of fetish at the center of a modern-day superstition. However,

we cannot hold Twain entirely accountable for the idol, or talisman, that *Huckleberry Finn* has become. Twain may have created the novel, but we have created the superstition.

If, as Arac suggests, a simplified, misremembered version of *Huckleberry Finn* functions in today's culture as "a talisman of self-flattering American virtue," it does so by seeking to erase the moral messiness and violence of America's racial past and of Twain's novel while replacing them with a much simpler narrative—one that has all the power of an idol but no connection to the social or political realities of post-Reconstruction America. The myth of Huck's "conversion" to total moral enlightenment by the end of the novel enables Americans who identify with the "quintessentially American" Huck to believe that they are living in a "post-racial" age and that they can shed their history and leave it behind as easily as a snake sheds its skin. By pointing out the ways in which *Huckleberry Finn* addresses Arac's concerns about the amnesiac effects of its idolatry, I do not pretend to resolve those concerns. The reading I offer of *Huckleberry Finn* as an exploration of magic, superstition, and selective memory cannot end the debate about the novel's social value, but it does give the text a powerful voice in structuring the terms of that discussion.

Chapter 4: Goophered Geography and Sites of Memory: Mapping the Gothic Regionalism of Chesnutt's Conjure Tales

> "We're right over Illinois yet. And you can see for your-self that Indiana ain't in sight."
> "I wonder what's the matter with you, Huck. You know by the color?"
> "Yes, of course I do."
> "What's the color got to do with it?"
> "It's got everything to do with it. Illinois is green, Indiana is pink. You show me any pink down here, if you can. No, sir; it's green."
> "Indiana pink? Why, what a lie!"
> "It ain't no lie; I've seen it on the map, and it's pink."
> --- Mark Twain *Tom Sawyer Abroad* (1894)

The conversation that takes place between Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer during a balloon ride in *Tom Sawyer Abroad* (1894) illustrates some of the difficulties faced by realist and regionalist writers in the late nineteenth century. What, after all, is a more fitting metaphor for realism than a map? Because its practical function is to help people navigate the real world, a map is supposed to be a precise, faithful, and accurate representation of the landscape that it depicts. Smoothing out a rough border or straightening a winding river might make the representation more pleasing to the eye, but it would render the map useless because it would fail to give readers and travelers a true picture of reality. Yet no matter how carefully the cartographer or writer strives for truth and accuracy, a representation must always depend on certain conventions. In the scene quoted above, Huck misreads the map of the United States because he is unfamiliar with these conventions. He fails to understand that the contrasting colors of the different states are supposed to make their borders easier to see but are not intended to be taken literally. Of course, Huck's ignorance about the conventions of maps is only one reason for his comical error; another factor that contributes to Huck's misunderstanding is his total lack of familiarity with Indiana. If he had ever been to Indiana and seen it first-hand, he would know that the entire state is not colored pink. In this respect, Huck is a bit like the readers

of regionalist fiction, who crave accurate representations of places and communities that they have never encountered but may lack the understanding to interpret those representations with the nuance that they deserve.

In this chapter, I will explore the significance of the geographic metaphor in the phrase "site of memory" by showing how the conjure tales of Charles W. Chesnutt carve a space for cultural memory at the intersection of regionalism and Gothic fiction. The idea that regionalism can be Gothic may seem, on the surface, to be counter-intuitive. Both scholars of regionalist fiction and late nineteenth-century regionalist authors have generally portrayed regionalism as a strain of American realism that pays particular attention to realism's call for realistic settings and careful attention to how people really speak to one another. The grandiose, florid language, the gloomy, nightmare-ish settings, and the brooding, aristocratic heroes of conventional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic fiction would seem utterly out of place in the small, rural towns and villages of Maine or Louisiana or North Carolina where American regionalists typically set their stories.

There are, however, some important similarities between regionalist and Gothic literature. For example, both Gothic and regionalist fiction are often considered to be types of escapist fiction, and both are often associated with women and racial minorities. Dating back to the careers of Ann Radcliff, Mary Shelley, and the Bronte sisters, women have been exceptionally successful as authors of Gothic fiction, and the convention of placing a beautiful, young heroine in danger—often the danger of forced marriage or sexual assault—became common practice for male and female authors of Gothic fiction, starting with the very first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1763). Even Poe frequently named his stories and poems after dead or dying female characters, and he famously wrote in "The

Philosophy of Composition" that "the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (Poe 680). Moreover, as Teresa Goddu has argued, American Gothic literature has often relied on fears of racial violence and the horrors of slavery to provide a pretext for the terrors and daring escapes of Gothic heroes and heroines. Regionalism, too, especially in the late nineteenth century, came to be associated largely with female and minority writers such as Kate Chopin, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Zitkala-Sa, Charles Chesnutt, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. The association became so strong that Eric Sundquist has argued that the distinction between realism and regionalism lies not in particular qualities of the texts themselves but in the social status of the author: "economic or political power can itself be seen to be definitive of a realist aesthetic, in that those in power (say, white urban males) have been more often judged 'realists,' while those removed from the seats of power (say, Midwesterners, blacks, immigrants, or women) have been categorized as regionalists" (Sundquist "Realism" 503). For many nineteenth-century readers, Gothic literature was a thrilling but guilty pleasure while regionalism was a way to travel to distant parts of the country without leaving home. Both Gothic and regionalist fiction also tend to be preoccupied with the past, with regionalist works usually being set in small, isolated places that have escaped modernization while Gothic works explore how places and characters are haunted by the past.

Set in and around a fictionalized version of Fayetteville, North Carolina, Charles W. Chesnutt's conjure tales collectively constitute a geographical as well as literary community that combines the conventions of late nineteenth-century American regionalism with the supernatural elements that we typically associate with the Gothic. However, Chesnutt's relationship to the Gothic tradition is difficult to define. According to Robert Hemenway, part of the difficulty stems from the ambiguity of the "Gothic code" itself, which Hemenway says is "difficult to

define, but easy to classify." From a historical perspective, Chesnutt's conjure tales, rooted as they are in African American folklore, seem to owe relatively little to the European Gothic tradition, which began with the rise of European terror fiction between 1760 and 1820. However, when Hemenway describes the Gothic mode psychologically, as a "primal psychic state where nature is animistic," his description seems to capture much of what makes Chesnutt's conjure stories unsettling. As Hemenway says, "[o]ne likes to think that there are fixed laws of material existence, physical proportion, and biological difference, that divisions of nature like time and space are secure, but the Gothic challenges the rational assumptions upon which explanations of nature are based" (102). Uncle Julius's stories of men turning into trees and mules and babies being transformed into birds certainly challenge the fixed laws of material existence and the rational divisions of nature. Ultimately, however, Hemenway concludes that although the content of Chesnutt's conjure stories is "Gothic in the extreme," the stories themselves are "not a part of the Gothic tradition, primarily because Chesnutt found the Gothic sociology inadequate to his purpose."[25]

I argue that Chesnutt's conjure tales are, in fact, an important part of the American Gothic tradition because they replace Hemenway's "Gothic sociology" with a kind of Gothic geography, or, rather, a "goophered geography" that undermines the regressive racial politics that Hemenway sees at the heart of the Gothic tradition. In the Introduction to *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography,* David Punter claims that "a unified Gothic geography is an impossibility":

> Just as Gothic castles from Udolpho to Gormenghast exist in a world where there are no maps, where halls, corridors, and stairways go on for ever, where rooms that were there

[25] Hemenway, Robert. "Gothic Sociology: Charles Chesnutt and the Gothic Mode." *Studies in the Literary Imagination,* 7:1 (1974: Spring), 101-119.

> in the night have vanished by morning, so Gothic itself challenges that very process of map-making by means of which we might hope to reduce the world to manageable proportions; while, of course, it remains constantly fascinated by the very impossibility which it so convincingly propounds. (Punter 4)

Punter's characterization of the surreal geography of Gothic fiction might seem at first to have little relevance to Chesnutt's conjure stories, which typically take place outdoors and describe distances and directions with surprising precision as the characters move from one place to another. However, a closer look at the geography of Chesnutt's conjure tales shows that they are just as un-mappable and unpredictable as the corridors and stairways of a haunted castle.

Frederick Douglass and the Gothic Geography of Slavery

Chesnutt's literary career took off in 1899 with the publication of three books, two of which—*The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*—were collections of short stories published by Houghton Mifflin. The third was a biography of Frederick Douglass that Chesnutt wrote for the Beacon Series on Eminent Americans. Given that Chesnutt was writing many of his conjure stories at the same time as he was working on his biography of Douglass, which quotes extensively from Douglass's autobiographies, it would be surprising if Douglass did not have a significant influence on Uncle Julius's representations of slavery in the conjure tales. Nevertheless, the connections between Douglass's autobiographies and Chesnutt's conjure stories are far from obvious. Sandy Jenkins, the conjurer of Douglass's autobiographies, is entirely missing from Chesnutt's brief biography, possibly because Chesnutt felt uncomfortable about the implied connection between Sandy's superstition and his betrayal.

As Chesnutt knew, for Frederick Douglass education was the key to freedom. While much has been written about the emphasis that Frederick Douglass places on literacy as a key to both motivating and enabling his quest for freedom, few scholars have noted the importance of

geographical knowledge. Literacy is not the only component of a good education that Douglass suggests is a threat to slavery and a boon to any slave who might wish to, as Hugh Auld puts it, run "away with himself." Indeed, Douglass insists that slaveholders are as determined to prevent their slaves from learning geography as they are to prevent their slaves from learning to read:

> To look at the map and observe the proximity of Eastern shore, Maryland, to Delaware and Pennsylvania, it may seem to the reader quite absurd to regard the proposed escape as a formidable undertaking. But to *understand*, some one has said, a man must *stand under*. The real distance was great enough, but the imagined distance was, to our ignorance, much greater. Slaveholders sought to impress their slaves with a belief in the boundlessness of slave territory, and of their own limitless power. Our notions of the geography of the country were very vague and indistinct. (Douglass 609)

Douglass's assessment of the slaveholders' psychological manipulation is astute, and the effect of this manipulation is truly Gothic. The closer the slave is to freedom, the more important it is for the owner to maintain the slave's absolute ignorance about geography and firm belief in the "boundlessness" of slave territory. When Douglass imagines his reader looking at a map, he is determined to make the reader understand how psychological distance can be much more important than physical distance for a slave with no knowledge of the outside world. When Douglass describes the terrain he imagined separating himself from freedom, his language becomes even more Gothic:

> We were hemmed in on every side. . . . On the one hand stood slavery, a stern reality glaring frightfully upon us, with the blood of millions on its polluted skirts, terrible to behold, greedily devouring our hard earnings and feeding upon our flesh. . . . On the other hand, far away, back in the hazy distance where all forms seemed but shadows under the flickering light of the north star . . . stood a doubtful freedom, half frozen, and beckoning us to her icy domain. . . . The reader can have little idea of the phantoms which would flit, in such circumstances, before the uneducated mind of the slave. (610)

Douglass's Gothic description of the psychological landscape separating himself from freedom may well have inspired Chesnutt's depictions of the Southern landscape in his conjure tales.

Mapping the Terrain of Chesnutt's Conjure Tales

At the start of "The Goophered Grapevine," even before he introduces Uncle Julius, Chesnutt allows his readers to accompany John, the narrator, and his wife, Annie, on a long, slow drive through the countryside to the vineyard property that will soon become the narrative and geographical center of many of Julius's conjure tales. On the way, the two Northerners become lost and stop to ask for directions:

> Once, at a crossroads, I was in doubt as to the turn to take, and we sat there waiting ten minutes—we had already caught some of the native infection of restfulness—for some human being to come along, who could direct us on our way. At length a little negro girl appeared, walking straight as an arrow, with a piggin full of water on her head. After a little patient investigation, necessary to overcome the child's shyness, we learned what we wished to know, and at the end of about five miles from the town reached our destination. (5)

The narrator, lost and stuck at a crossroads, ludicrously attempts to deny his obvious status as an outsider by claiming to exhibit "the native infection of restfulness," but the little girl, "walking straight as an arrow" seems to know exactly where she is and where she is going even if her answers to John's questions follow a circuitous path that he attributes to "shyness." This encounter foreshadows the future interactions between John and Julius, which often begin with John's condescension toward Julius's apparent "embarrassment" and end with Julius telling a story that, in a circuitous but carefully-crafted way, offers the Northern couple insight into the local landscape, along with the people and the traumatic history that inhabit it. This scene, which foregrounds the power of local knowledge and the threat of disorientation, serves as an entry point to the significance of real and imagined place in Chesnutt's fictional landscape.[26]

[26] Lorne Fienberg writes about the importance of the crossroads in this scene as a symbol of the liminality of Julius's and Chesnutt's positions. My concern is less with the symbolism of the crossroads than with the state of being lost and with the encounter and exchange that the narrator's disorientation precipitates. Fienberg, Lorne.

Set in the vicinity of Fayetteville in Cumberland County, North Carolina, Chesnutt's conjure tales maintain their geographical continuity. Though born in Cleveland, Ohio, Chesnutt moved to Fayetteville with his family when he was eight and developed strong ties to the region. Like William Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County, the common setting of Chesnutt's conjure tales links the author's works together in ways that create a sense of continuity and familiarity. By examining the physical terrain of Chesnutt's conjure tales, we can gain insight into the ways in which geographical continuity, contested ownership, and disorientation shape the meanings of Chesnutt's conjure tales, both individually and collectively.

At the local level, Chesnutt maintains a striking degree of fidelity to the Fayetteville region's important landmarks and geographical features.[27] The stories mention by name three of the surrounding counties—Robeson, Bladen, and Sampson—and also identify local waterways such as Rockfish Creek and Beaver Creek. The Cape Fear River, a major feature of the region that flows just east of Fayetteville, is usually identified by Uncle Julius only as "de ribber," reflecting the ex-slave's intensely local perspective, but the narrator, a Northerner with a more distant perspective, specifically mentions "Cape Fear" in "Tobe's Tribulations" (111). The Fayetteville area became a center of government and commerce partly because of its location as an inland port and the hub of the early "Plank Roads" system, which was key to overland travel from the 1840s to 1850s. Historical maps of Cumberland County show the Lumberton Plank Road and two Wilmington Roads—one on each side of the Cape Fear River—extending south

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"Charles W. Chesnutt and Uncle Julius: Black Storyteller at the Crossroads." *Studies in American Fiction.* 15 (Autumn 1987): 161-73.

[27] For an account of Chesnutt's use of actual Fayetteville landmarks and buildings in his first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), see Andrews, William L. "Chesnutt's Patesville: The Presence and Influence of the Past in *The House Behind the Cedars." College Language Association Journal.* 15 (1972): 284-94.

from Fayetteville. Although Chesnutt makes no mention of a second Wilmington Road--"Wim'l'ton" in Julius's dialect—he refers to the Lumberton and "Wim'l'ton" roads frequently, using them to connect the various plantations and settlements of his landscape, and also to connect the stories to one another. For example, every time Uncle Julius mentions Aunt Peggy in a story, he gives her more or less the same introduction: "Aun' Peggy, de free-nigger conjuh 'oman down by de Wim'l'ton Road." Although the exact wording of this introduction varies slightly each time, Julius invariably identifies Aunt Peggy by her name, her occupation, and her location. His consistency in doing so creates the sensation of listening to a refrain, suggesting that the tales are as intimately connected as the different verses of a single song. The repetition of familiar landmarks resonates with the repetition of characters to create a sense of community, but because the landmarks tend to remain relatively stable over time, they also connect the living with the dead, creating a sense of community across time as well as across space.

By bringing together scraps of information from different stories, readers can locate many of Chesnutt's fictional landmarks with relative ease. John's vineyard, for example, is five miles from Patesville/Fayetteville, according to "The Goophered Grapevine." "Po' Sandy" reveals that Sandy's schoolhouse lies on the northeast corner of John's property and fronts on the Lumberton plank-road. These descriptions alone are enough to locate John's property on a site that an 1884 map identifies as having "light sandy soil" suitable for growing grapes.[28] The same map shows the Beaver Creek Cotton Mill, whose construction is mentioned at the beginning of "Lonesome Ben," and another map from the 1860s locates the saw mill from "Po' Sandy" just

[28] McDuffie, D.G. "McDuffie's map of Cumberland County, North Carolina." (1884). North Carolina Maps. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Call number MC.029.1884m; MARS Id: 3.1.1.27.7.

north of John's property.[29] Most of Chesnutt's other fictional landmarks, including plantations, swamps, and haunted sites, are described with varying degrees of specificity in relation to their distance and direction from John's vineyard. Marrabo McSwayne's plantation, which figures prominently in many stories, including "Po' Sandy" and "Lonesome Ben," is also fairly easy to locate—just beyond the sawmill to the north of John's property. For other landmarks, though, Chesnutt often provides only vague descriptions such as "down on Wim'l'ton Road" and leaves the rest to his readers' imaginations.

In addition to roads and streams, Chesnutt may even have drawn some of the names of his characters from real Fayetteville families and places.[30] The many Scottish names that populate the conjure tales, including McAdoo, McSwayne, McLean, McGee, McDonald, and M'Guire, accurately reflect the origins of many settlers in the Cape Fear region. In a more specific parallel, the Fayetteville State Colored Normal School (now called Fayetteville State University), with which Chesnutt had strong ties as a pupil, teacher, and principal, moved to its

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[29] "Map of Fayetteville, North Carolina and surrounding area." (circa 1860-1865). North Carolina Collection. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Call number: Cm912.26 186?.

[30] Although this chapter focuses on the conjure tales, Chesnutt incorporated local names and places from the Fayetteville area into many of his other stories and novels as well, and these references did not escape the notice of his contemporaries. Indeed, one anonymous "old inhabitant" of Fayetteville responded to Chesnutt's story "The Banquet" by wielding the authority of local knowledge to accuse Chesnutt of distorting the truth and of exaggerating the hardships endured by Fayetteville's African American population:

> The scene is not only laid in North Carolina by admission but in Fayetteville by description. Mary Myrover is a Fayetteville name. St. John's Episcopal church is a Fayetteville institution and is minutely described, except that it does not date from colonial times. There are several local touches, such as the profusion of flowers, the funeral customs, that remind an old inhabitant of Fayetteville. The old inhabitant desires to record a few facts.
>
> . . . Mr. Chestnutt speaks of the colored people being denied access to the house of mourning and even to the galleries of the church during the funeral. One who has buried many dead in Fayetteville, including his own, may be permitted to testify to the fact that the sympathy of the colored people was always tendered and gratefully accepted and that there was not a single burial of the dead in which they did not occupy the galleries of the church and throng around the grave.

Anon. "Fiction and Fact." *The Wilmington Messenger*, (Jan. 28, 1900): 7.

current location on Murchison Road in 1908.[31] Although this move occurred several years after Chesnutt depicted members of the Murchison family in "The Dumb Witness" and "Hot-Foot Hannibal," he may have chosen the name for its local resonance. Likewise, the name of Marrabo Utley, whose plantation is mentioned in "Hot-Foot Hannibal," may have local roots. The Taylor-Utley House, listed today as one of Fayetteville's historic landmarks, was purchased by Joseph Utley in 1857.[32]

Patesville and Fayetteville

Chesnutt generally makes no attempt to conceal his use of real places in his conjure stories, but a striking exception to this rule occurs at the beginning of "The Goophered Grapevine" when the narrator describes his destination: "a quaint old town, which I shall call Patesville, because, for one reason, that is not its name" (3). Chesnutt's decision not only to change the name of Fayetteville but also to call attention to the name change in such an obvious fashion suggests that both the real and fictional names deserve careful scrutiny. The word "pate" in Patesville suggests an anatomical reading of the landscape in which Fayetteville/Patesville serves as the head, with its body unfolding to the south. In this reading, John's vineyard and Uncle Julius's house seem to be at the geographical as well as narrative heart of the stories. Distant outposts such as Colonel Washington McAdoo's plantation in Sampson County, where Cindy is sent in "A Deep Sleeper," are the appendages, and slaves are the blood that circulates among the various plantations throughout the region, going wherever their masters choose to send them. This anatomical reading of the landscape inverts the usual direction of transformation

[31] Whitfield, Jan S. "Fayetteville State University's History." Charles W. Chesnutt Library, Fayetteville State University. http://library.uncfsu.edu/archives/HistoryFSU.htm.

[32] "Historic Sites." Fayetteville Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. (2010). http://www.visitfayettevillenc.com/historicsites/index/list/page/3.

in the stories, in which human bodies are fused with the features of their physical environment—turned into trees and buildings in "Po' Sandy," into clay and muddy creek water in "Lonesome Ben," and into grapevines in "The Goophered Grapevine." Nevertheless, viewing the region as a living organism highlights the extent to which Chesnutt's conjure tales are interconnected across space and time, like the functioning networks of a body's organs. It should be no surprise that Chesnutt locates the head, and thus the mind, of this organism in Fayetteville, the site of the Fayetteville State Colored Normal School (called the Howard School until 1877) where Chesnutt received his own education and later became a teacher and then a principal. But though the mind behind Chesnutt's body of work may lie in "Patesville," his conjure tales focus on the geographical region of the body, where African Americans contend with the infection of slavery through the healing power of circulating stories.

However significant the fictional name "Patesville" may be, though, the narrator's ambiguous assertion that he calls the town Patesville "because, for one thing, that is not its name" suggests that the deliberate obfuscation of the name "Fayetteville" is at least as important as the suggestion of an embodied community. The most obvious explanation for such an omission is that Chesnutt does not want his readers to know where he has set his stories or wants them to believe that the stories are set in a purely fictional place. But this explanation falls short in the face of textual evidence that Chesnutt is more than willing to give his readers accurate names of major roads and waterways in the area as well as the names of the state, region, and three surrounding counties. So why should Chesnutt hold back the name of Fayetteville while revealing so many other place names? I suspect the choice has something to do with the town's namesake—General Lafayette—and with the extent to which Julius's conjure tales are intricately concerned with the complex significance of enshrining a person in a place.

A man with no shortage of names, Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roche Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, was an officer in the French Royal Army in 1775 when he decided to join the American Revolution, eventually rising to the rank of Major-General. In 1783, at the end of the war, Campbellton, North Carolina, became the first of many American towns to change its name to Fayetteville to honor Lafayette's contributions to American independence. When Lafayette returned to the United States in 1825 for the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Revolution, he visited Fayetteville, North Carolina. Today, the carriage in which he arrived is on display at the Fayetteville Independent Light Infantry Armory & Museum. On a rainy day in March, Lafayette was honored at several banquets and receptions, and offered the town a warm toast: "Fayetteville. – May it receive all the encouragements and attain all the prosperity which are anticipated by the fond and grateful wishes of its affectionate and respectful namesake."[33] Chesnutt well knew that the "prosperity" of Fayetteville came first at the expense of slaves and then at the expense of legally emancipated but economically and politically subjugated African Americans. As the narrator mentions in "The Goophered Grapevine," Patesville is "a county seat and a commercial emporium" and "one of the principal towns in North Carolina" largely because of its "considerable trade in cotton," the main cash crop of the plantation economy (p?). The relatively facile and triumphant story of American independence evoked by Lafayette's name makes Fayetteville an ironic setting for Chesnutt's stories of slavery and of the "peculiar" institution's lingering consequences in the post-Reconstruction South. As usual, though, Chesnutt partially obscures his irony by making it visible only to those readers who possess enough local knowledge to recognize the thinly disguised setting of his stories.

[33] Graham, Nicholas. "This Month in North Carolina History: March 1825—Lafayette visits Fayetteville." UNC University Libraries. http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/ref/nchistory/mar2004/mar.html.

Chesnutt's decision to locate his stories in and around Fayetteville while veiling the irony of the town's name mirrors the strategy he employs when he mentions the four-faced clock tower of Patesville's Market House in "The Goophered Grapevine" but never calls attention to the historical ironies embodied in that building, which was built in 1832 to house a slave market as well as the Town Hall. Later, the North Carolina legislature met in the same building to ratify the U.S. Constitution. Chesnutt does give some hint of the region's connection to the American Revolution in "The Dumb Witness" when he describes the lineage of the Murchison family: "The first great man of the family, General Arthur Murchison, had won distinction in the war of independence, and during the Revolutionary period had been one of the most ardent of the Carolina patriots. . . Elected a delegate to the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia in 1787, it was largely due to his efforts that North Carolina adopted the Federal Constitution the following year" (63). Yet even this passage makes no direct reference to Murchison's fellow Revolutionary General, Lafayette, or to the location of the State House where the Constitution was adopted. Chesnutt's coyness about alluding to the historical ironies embedded in the town of Fayetteville mirrors the coyness of Uncle Julius's conjure tales,

In spite of the disparities between Lafayette's and Chesnutt's stories of American independence, Lafayette's enshrinement in Fayetteville also parallels Julius's attempts to enshrine the memory of slavery in the swamps, creek beds, marshes, trees, vineyards, saw mills, abandoned buildings, and other landmarks of his rural community. A historical map of Fayetteville from the period of Lafayette's visit visually enacts some of these similarities. This detailed map of the roads, businesses, creeks, schools, churches, and homes of Fayetteville, circa 1825, bears the following title on its right side: "This plate of the town of Fayetteville North Carolina, so called in honor of that distinguished patriot and philanthropist Gen'l La Fayette, is

respectfully dedicated to him by the publisher." Just above the title is a small oval portrait of Lafayette, and just below it is a drawing of the Lafayette Hotel, which was hurriedly completed just in time for its namesake's visit.[34] Despite Chesnutt's apparent misgivings about invoking Lafayette in his conjure stories, this map resonates with the thematic content of Chesnutt's work by suggesting the complex network of meanings that are evoked by the act of verbally inscribing a person in a place. The portrait of Lafayette that appears above the map's title suggests the purely commemorative function of Fayetteville's name while the picture of the Lafayette Hotel represents the artistic construction and even economic opportunism that can coexist with the act of commemoration. Finally, the presence of the word "patriot" in the title suggests the possibility that commemoration can be a form of appropriation because it elides Lafayette's identity as a Frenchman and appropriates him for what the map suggests is a purely American narrative. Writing at a time when popular plantation tales tended to depict contented slaves and benign masters and when a wave of national amnesia about slavery and its role in the Civil War was sweeping the country,[35] Chesnutt crafts his conjure tales in part to commemorate the lives and folklore traditions of the those who came before him—particularly of the Fayetteville storytellers whose conjure tales first inspired his childhood imagination.[36] Julius, too, functions as a commemorator every time one of his stories inscribes the life of a slave into a particular landmark. At the same time, both Chesnutt and Julius have their own economic and artistic goals beyond commemoration, and they are more than willing to appropriate what they need to meet

[34] McRae, John. "This plate of the town of Fayetteville North Carolina, so called in honor of that distinguished patriot and philanthropist Gen'l La Fayette is respectfully dedicated to him by the publisher." (circa 1825). North Carolina Collection. UNC Chapel Hill. Call Number: Cm912c F28 1825.

[35] Blight, David W. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001.

[36] Chesnutt, Charles W. "Superstitions & Folklore of the South." (1901)

them. By erasing Lafayette's name from the town of Fayetteville, Chesnutt inverts the usual tendency of maps to erase blacks from the visible landscape by assigning labels to white property owners while ignoring the black slaves and sharecroppers who frequently inhabit that property. Julius's conjure tales serve as gestures in opposition to the cartographical erasure of black life by re-inscribing the names of former slaves throughout the Fayetteville region.

Sandy Run: American history, rooted in place

Chesnutt's most ingenious act of re-inscription occurs in "Po' Sandy," the second of Chesnutt's conjure stories, which he first published in 1888, after the success of "The Goophered Grapevine." At the start of the story, John and Annie plan to build a kitchen with wood from an old, run-down schoolhouse on their property. However, Julius advises them not to destroy the building, explaining that it is haunted by the ghost of a slave named Sandy. Sandy asked his wife to use her conjuring skills to turn him into a tree so that he could escape from his master, who continually moves him from one plantation to another. Tragically, after Sandy's magical transformation, he is cut down and milled for lumber, which is used to build the structure on John's property. The story's frame narrative ends with John and Annie abandoning their original plans while Julius finds his own use for the building. When the Sandy Run Colored Baptist Church experiences a "split" over the issue of temperance, Julius and his fellow "seceders" relocate their meetings to the abandoned schoolhouse that he claims is haunted by Sandy's restless spirit. Both the story's title character and the Sandy Run Colored Baptist Church get their names from a real waterway—Big Sandy Run. In the name "Sandy Run," Chesnutt reflects the irony of his character's fate. Sandy tries to escape the devastating rootlessness and uncertainty of slavery by having his wife turn him into a tree, but when his conjured disguise causes him to be milled and used as lumber, he finally achieves the stability he wanted at the cost of both his

life and his humanity. Sandy hopes to put an end to his perpetual running back and forth from plantation to plantation at the whims of his master, but his attempt at escape leaves him in a state not only of permanent immobility but also of voicelessness, isolation, and fragmentation—a literal manifestation of the estrangement from his own humanity that he experienced as a slave.

The full significance of Chesnutt's choice of names becomes apparent only when you realize that "Sandy Run" is not merely the name of a fictional church congregation that inhabits Sandy's schoolhouse but also a real feature of the landscape in Cumberland County, North Carolina. Big Sandy Run is both fixed in space and perpetually running, perpetually changing with the flow of its waters. This combination of permanence and restlessness also characterizes Sandy's spirit, which, according to Uncle Julius, haunts the schoolhouse built from his lumber. Through his story, Chesnutt infuses the name "Sandy Run" with the power to reflect both the relentless commands of Sandy's master and the slave's ill-fated attempt to find a better life for himself and his wife. In doing so, Chesnutt mirrors Uncle Julius's technique of transforming features of the landscape by using the power of storytelling to alter their meaning. Julius's story transforms the abandoned schoolhouse on John's property from a handy source of cheap, recycled lumber into a haunted place worthy of awe and respect—at least in the eyes of Annie. By similar means, Chesnutt uses the power of his story to transform an ordinary stream in the middle of Cumberland County into a site of symbolic meaning and historical commemoration.

Chesnutt's choice of the name Sandy for his story's protagonist (and for its title) not only derives from his attention to Cumberland County's local geography but also, I believe, gestures all the way back to the troublesome Sandy Jenkins from Frederick Douglass's autobiographies. Although the biography of Douglass that Chesnutt's published in 1899 never mentions Sandy Jenkins, Chesnutt must have been familiar with the character because his book quotes passages

from Douglass's autobiographies directly. When, in "Po' Sandy," Sandy's wife transforms him into a tree to prevent their master from separating them, the metamorphosis evokes Douglass's characterization of Sandy Jenkins as a conjurer, or "root man," and it also links the character to Chesnutt's and Douglass's shared African "roots."

Although Douglass worried primarily about the threat Sandy posed to others as a "betrayer," Chesnutt's story is equally concerned about the violence that threatens Sandy himself. When Sandy is chopped down and milled for lumber, he is cut off from his roots and forced to serve the interests of whites just as conjure traditions in the post-Reconstruction period were increasingly cut off from their original contexts and used to support white Americans' mythologized historical, biological, and anthropological narratives. Conjure does not protect Sandy from white violence, but it is worth noting that the product of that violence is the building and then abandonment of a schoolhouse—an apt symbol of the forgotten promises of Reconstruction and a gentle reminder of the determination of many black schools to ignore or destroy conjure for the sake of racial uplift. In the end, however, Uncle Julius's storytelling ability enables him to gain access to the schoolhouse built out of Sandy's remains and to put the building to his own uses while respecting the ghost that haunts it. In this, Julius resembles Chesnutt, who uses his own storytelling powers to reclaim the conjure tale for himself.

Contested Ownership: Color Lines and Property Lines

It is no coincidence that when John hires Uncle Julius after hearing his tale in "The Goophered Grapevine," he employs him as a carriage driver. Just as John and Annie need Julius to explain the meaning of the regional word "goophered," they also need assistance in navigating the local landscape. In the opening paragraph of "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," the narrator gives his theory of Julius's relation to the land:

> We found old Julius very useful when we moved to our new residence. He had a thorough knowledge of the neighborhood, was familiar with the roads and the watercourses, knew the qualities of the various soils and what they would produce, and where the best hunting and fishing were to be had. He was a marvelous hand in the management of horses and dogs, with whose mental processes he manifested a greater familiarity than mere use would seem to account for, though it was doubtless due to the simplicity of a life that had kept him close to nature. Toward my tract of land and the things that were on it--the creeks, the swamps, the hills, the meadows, the stones, the trees--he maintained a peculiar personal attitude, what might be called predial rather than proprietary. He had been accustomed, until long after middle life, to look upon himself as the property of another. When this relation was no longer possible, owing to the war, and to his master's death and the dispersion of the family, he had been unable to break off entirely the mental habits of a lifetime, but had attached himself to the old plantation, of which he seemed to consider himself an appurtenance. We found him useful in many ways and entertaining in others, and my wife and I took quite a fancy to him. ("Mars Jeems's Nightmare" 90)

This passage appreciatively conveys the economic value of Julius's localized knowledge of the region, but it also reflects John's obtuseness regarding the contested status of his proprietary rights. Certainly, some of Julius's stories do depict characters who occupy a predial relation to the land as a consequence of their enslavement. The most prominent of these is Henry in "The Goophered Grapevine," who cyclically grows strong and feeble through his attachment to the grapevines until they finally send him to his grave. However, the complacency with which John uses the phrase "my tract of land" suggests that he remains unaware of his proprietary struggles with Julius and with the ghosts of the dead that recur throughout the stories.

The process of mapping the terrain of Chesnutt's conjure tales brings into sharp focus the struggles over contested ownership that permeate the narrative and the physical landscapes of Chesnutt's fictional North Carolina community. White landowners such as John, and before him Dugal' McAdoo, lay claim to most of the property in the region, but such legal property rights do not prevent Uncle Julius from using the power of his stories to lay his own claims of possession on the land and the resources it contains, both for himself and on behalf of the slaves who lived

and died there as property. John seems largely aware of the ways in which Julius uses his stories to try to gain access to valuable resources such as the old schoolhouse in "Po' Sandy" and the honey-filled tree in "The Gray Wolf's H'ant," but he seems oblivious to the ways in which these stories also challenge his rights of ownership on a more fundamental level. Tobe's marsh, Sandy's schoolhouse, Lonesome Ben's creek bed, and the Gray Wolf's haunting ground are all, legally, on John's property, but Julius's stories provide John, his wife Annie, and the reader with new ways of naming each site as well as new ways of understanding their possession. While John may possess the deed to his tract of land, each individual site is also spiritually "possessed" by the ghost or metamorphosed body of a former slave.

Land is not the only thing to which John lays claim. As narrator of the frame narrative in each conjure tale, John attempts to take possession of Uncle Julius's stories as well as of the physical territory on which many of them are situated. Just as John's property literally surrounds and contains each of the haunted landmarks within it, his frame narrative surrounds and contains Uncle Julius's dialect story within the pages of each conjure tale. Yet without Julius's story at its center, John's narrative would be as hollow, barren, and worthless as the neglected, pockmarked grounds of the old Murchison place in "The Dumb Witness" when Viney refuses to reveal the location of a hidden will to the master who cut out her tongue. The land surrounding the Murchison estate, described by John as "barren" and "rough and uneven, lying in little hillocks and hollows, as though it had been dug over at hazard, or explored by some vagrant drove of hogs" is the physical manifestation of the narrative devastation wrought by the denial of black speech and storytelling (60). Viney, whose name evokes the predicament of the conjured slave Henry in "The Goophered Grapevine," finds herself in a relationship with the land that is the mirror image of Henry's. Rather than suffer and die like Henry in response to the violence done

to the land, Viney projects her direct experience of violence onto the landscape as her silence provokes Malcolm Murchison to dig up and destroy his own property. This intimate connection between land and speech suggested by "The Dumb Witness" is also evident on John's property, which is filled with landmarks—from Lonesome Ben's creek bed to Chloe's willow tree—that would not be landmarks without Julius's stories to give them meaning.

Mapping the Psychological Landscapes of Antebellum and Postbellum America

Although Chesnutt's conjure tales generally map onto the actual physical terrain of the Fayetteville region fairly accurately, there are occasionally times when the landscape described by the stories does not match the landscape depicted on historical maps of the region—often in rather startling ways. These discrepancies shed light on the important distinctions between psychological and physical landscapes and on the ways in which both distance and direction can operate metaphorically. In "A Deep Sleeper," for example, Uncle Julius's conjure story pointedly privileges the psychological landscape over the physical one. In spite of her wish to remain with her lover Skundus, Cindy is sent by her master to the plantation of Colonel Washington McAdoo, which Julius says is "down in Sampson County, 'bout a hundred mile erway" (45). Geographically, what Julius says is impossible because any spot a hundred miles away from Cindy's original home would be well beyond the borders of Sampson County, but such a literal understanding of Julius's words obscures their psychological resonance. However literal and accurate Julius's estimates of distance are at other times, in this story Julius seems to be engaging in a moment of free indirect discourse, merging his own narrative perspective with that of the young lovers whose separation he describes, and whose frustration and longing he evokes by exaggerating the distance between them. Julius's typical narrative style depends heavily on understatement and on a bluntness bordering on callousness, such as when he

describes Cindy as "kinder down in de mouf" about being sent away from her home and family (47). Thus, for him, an emotional measurement of distance is a way of expressing empathy covertly, and thus of asking but not demanding empathy from his listeners. Moreover, an emotional rather than literal measurement of distance underscores the extent to which all of Julius's stories overlay the physical landscape with a psychological and figurative landscape. The psychological measurement of distance lends a surreal, dreamlike quality to the tale that complements the story's figurative depiction of sleep as a force powerful enough to distort time and space. Of course, the real power at work in the tale is not the power of sleep but the power of good storytelling, which both Julius and Skundus use for their own ends, thereby demonstrating that their power to manipulate others equals their skill at manipulating distance.

Mapping the title character's movements in "Tobe's Tribulations" reveals yet another insight into the relationship between the psychological and physical landscapes. Here, Chesnutt combines a distorted representation of distance and direction to suggest a critique of the forces undermining African Americans' freedom in the post-Reconstruction period. When Tobe decides to escape slavery, he asks Aunt Peggy to tell him the "easies' way fer ter git ter de Norf en be free" because he wants to eat and sleep as much as he chooses and never have to work "less'n I felt lak it" (114). Despite her misgivings about Tobe's unrealistic expectations, Aunt Peggy temporarily turns him into a bear to help him on his journey. As Julius narrates, "Tobe sta'ted out to'ds de Norf, en went fifteen er twenty miles widdout stoppin'" before falling asleep, but after a month of hibernation as a bear, Tobe reverts to his human form and returns to Aunt Peggy, saying that "bein' ez I hadn' got no fu'ther 'n Rockfish Crick, I des 'lowed I'd come back en git dat gopher w'at I paid fer fix' right" (116). However, Julius's and Tobe's descriptions of the runaway's movements are inconsistent with one another; not only is Rockfish Creek

significantly fewer than fifteen or twenty miles from both Marrabo McSwayne's plantation and Aunt Peggy's house, but it is also south, not north, of those landmarks. Thus, Tobe's comment to Aunt Peggy indicates that his first escape attempt fails not only because he falls asleep but also because he has been headed in the wrong direction. Tobe's second escape attempt also ends in failure as Tobe succumbs to the black stereotypes of idleness and chicken-stealing and is forced to run south again to escape the hounds of a pursuing fox hunt. The story ends with Tobe, dehumanized by his permanent transformation into a frog, inhabiting a marsh on John's property and voicing his sadness and frustration in a "nocturnal concert" that John interprets alternately as a "strident din" and a soothing "lullaby" but which Annie interprets as "the lament of a lost soul" (111-13). The failure of Tobe's emancipation and the failure of John to recognize the sorrow or humanity of Tobe's voice suggest that the story can be read as a national allegory for the failures of post-Reconstruction America to protect and respect the rights and dignity of former slaves. Chesnutt highlights the allegorical resonance of his story with Julius's veiled, ironic allusion to the persisting limits on blacks' freedom: "Co'se ef [Tobe] had waited lak de res' un us he'd a be'n free long ago. But he didn' know dat, en he doan know it yet" (119). If Tobe still "doan know" that the slaves are free, Julius coyly suggests, that may be because the freedom of African Americans in the 1890s looks far too much like slavery.

While all of these clues support the reading of "Tobe's Tribulations" as an allegory for postbellum racial politics,[37] the discrepancy between the story's explicit and implicit geography—between the northward journey that Julius describes and the southward journey suggested by Tobe's comment about Rockfish Creek—adds an important dimension to that

[37] For more on "Tobe's Tribulations" as a postbellum political allegory, with a focus on Tobe's "voice" rather than on geography, see Sundquist, Eric J. "Charles Chesnutt's Cakewalk." *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1993, 313-323.

allegory. Tobe's progress toward freedom is not merely stalled by his month-long hibernation—an emphasis that might suggest the nation was simply weary of moving forward with the difficult pursuit of racial equality begun under Reconstruction. Instead, Tobe's geographical disorientation suggests a more profound social problem. Written in 1898, a time when Jim Crow laws, black disfranchisement, and lynchings were widespread throughout the South, Chesnutt's story suggests that the nation, like Tobe, is fundamentally lost, headed in the wrong direction. In this respect, "Tobe's Tribulations" bears a remarkable similarity to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in which Huck and Jim start out with a vague plan to convey Jim to freedom but end up drifting further and further south down the Mississippi River after passing Cairo in the fog. Like Twain, Chesnutt chooses not to call direct attention to the southern trajectory of his character's escape attempt or to the allegorical implications of that journey. Both writers rely instead on their readers' knowledge of regional geography to suggest the irony of their characters' voyages. This is a risky choice because it may shield the geographical irony from the attention of readers who are unfamiliar with the lay of the land, but it has the advantage of figuratively mirroring the discrepancy between the openly articulated goals of Reconstruction and the silent consensus behind the Compromise of 1877 that signaled the ending of Reconstruction and the renewal of the South's commitment to subjugating African Americans. Only by mapping the landscape of Chesnutt's conjure tales collectively rather than individually can readers gain a full sense of the irony and metaphorical power of their geography.

"Tobe's Tribulations" is not the only story in which Chesnutt depicts a slave who tries to reach freedom in the North and ends up south of where he started. In "Lonesome Ben," Ben tries to run north but becomes disoriented when clouds block out the North Star, and he ends up hiding in the woods between Dugal' McAdoo's plantation and Marrabo McSwayne's, a site just

south of where he started. Ben's directional disorientation may reflect the changes that take place in his body as the clay he eats transforms him into a light-skinned, clay-colored "merlatter," rendering him unrecognizable to his white master and to his black wife and son, all of whom shun him (56). Like "Tobe's Tribulations," "Lonesome Ben" uses the image of a slave running south as an allegory to suggest a broad sense of social disorientation. Indeed, the "big bullfrog" that taunts Ben with the words "Turnt ter clay! Turnt ter clay!" (58) just before his complete absorption into the landscape underscores the important link between the two tales. However, "Lonesome Ben" associates its protagonist's geographical disorientation not with national post-Reconstruction politics but with the isolation, confusion and self-alienation experienced by light-skinned African Americans living in a racially segregated society. In Chesnutt's conjure tales, property lines frequently mark the sites haunted by divided lovers and sundered relationships, highlighting the fact that such emotional separations were frequently the byproducts of cold-blooded property distributions. "Po'Sandy" and "Hot-Foot Hanibal" both feature haunted landmarks that are situated on a property line to represent both the artificial separation of the lovers and the liminal status of the possessing spirits, caught somewhere between life and death. The property line featured in "Lonesome Ben" shares all of the metaphorical meanings of the previous two, but this property line is also the color line, and its waters, turned "amber" by the dust of Ben's metamorphosed body, are as murky as the racial and social distinctions in Chesnutt's collection of Northern color line stories.

Chesnutt's decision to locate his conjure tales in a fixed community generally aides readers in maintaining a sense of temporal and geographical orientation as they move from story to story. Even "Lonesome Ben," a story about a character whose directional disorientation thwarts his attempt at escape, provides plenty of orientation for its readers, who are told quite

clearly that the site of Ben's transformation is the property line between two frequently-mentioned landmarks—the plantations of Dugal' McAdoo and Marrabo McSwayne. However, the same expectations of geographical continuity that help keep readers grounded in "Lonesome Ben" can also lead unwary readers to disorientation and false recognition in "Hot-Foot Hannibal" in a way that mirrors the predicament of the story's tricked and divided lovers. The location of the haunted willow tree in "Hot-Foot Hannibal" seems in many ways to resemble the site of Lonesome Ben's clay creek bed. In both stories, the narrator describes a trip from his house to a small creek branch that crosses the road and is situated on or near a property line between Dugal' McAdoo's plantation and the land of one of his neighbors. The similarities appear even more striking when John mentions that Chloe's haunted tree lies on the other side of an "amber-colored stream," (123) recalling the amber tint that Lonesome Ben's dust gives to the waters near his creek bed. Finally, and perhaps most misleadingly, Julius frequently identifies the plantation that lies just beyond the swamp on the other side of the creek branch as the property of "Mars' Marrabo" and only occasionally clarifies that he is referring to Marrabo Utley, not Marrabo McSwayne. While Marrabo McSwayne is a recurring character in many of the conjure tales, Marrabo Utley is a cipher who appears only in "Hot-Foot Hannibal," and the story gives no indication of a relationship between the two characters to explain the extraordinary coincidence of their shared first name. Given that both Marrabos are contemporaries and neighbors of Dugal' McAdoo, though, their properties must lie in different directions, which means that Chloe's willow tree and Lonesome Ben's creek bed cannot be on the same spot.

The interpretive significance of this seemingly trivial geographical distinction is two-fold. First, the "amber-colored stream" near Chloe's willow tree does indeed serve as a reminder of "Lonesome Ben," but because the stories are not set in the same place, the recurrence of

amber-tinted water in a second spot suggests that Lonesome Ben's story of isolation, dissolution, and absorption into the landscape is not a unique case but a ubiquitous one. Second, the confusion and false sense of recognition that Chesnutt's tricky geography imposes on the reader mirrors the confusion that Hannibal creates between Chloe and Jeff when he tells Chloe that Jeff is cheating on her and then sets up an elaborate charade to prove his lie. Dressed in a "frock en a sun-bonnet," (128) Hannibal goes to the spot where he has convinced Chloe to spy on Jeff, and Jeff, mistaking his cross-dressed rival for Chloe, behaves in a way that seems to confirm her worst suspicions. Uncle Julius clearly intends his story to produce a sympathetic connection between Chloe and his white listeners, and the story specifically targets Mabel, who has recently had an argument with her sweetheart, Malcolm Murchison, and has refused to reconcile it. After hearing the story, Mabel does indeed decide to forgive her sweetheart, suggesting that she identifies with Chloe's experience of hurt pride and lost love. Chesnutt's tricky geographical strategy for creating a sympathetic connection between his characters and his readers shows him to be an equally masterful storyteller. Getting lost and mistaken identity are typical features of comedy, so it is appropriate that the frame story of "Hotfoot Hannibal" ends in a marriage, but the story-within-the-story ends tragically, with the forced parting of enslaved lovers.

The partly factual and partly fictional landscape that links Julius's conjure stories to one another also links them to the outside world through landmarks that sometimes embody as many layers of history and meaning as the tales themselves. The stories' blending of the factual with the fictional and the physical with the psychological can often make both distance and direction difficult to judge. The scene of John and Annie asking for directions that Chesnutt depicts at the beginning of his first conjure tale operates as an apt metaphor for the difficulties and rewards of mapping the conjure tales. From the perspective of an interloper, the landscape of Chesnutt's

imagination can seem overwhelming and hopelessly complex. With the aid of some local knowledge, though, readers can reconstruct the landscape of Chesnutt's imagination in a way that highlights the tales' interconnectedness without undermining the productive potential of getting lost.

Charles Chesnutt's "Habitable Spaces"

> It is through the opportunity they offer to store up rich silences and wordless stories, or rather through their capacity to create cellars and garrets everywhere, that local legends (*legenda:* what is *to be read,* but also what *can be read)* permit exits, ways of going out and coming back in, and thus habitable spaces.---Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City"

Michel de Certeau's idea that local legends create "habitable spaces" and "cellars and garrets everywhere" is a wonderful image for the marriage of regionalism and Gothic romance that occurs in Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales. The legends that Uncle Julius tells to his white employer do, on a fairly literal level, create "habitable spaces" for the black storyteller. On several occasions, Julius uses his stories to prevent John and Annie from using or destroying habitable spaces (such as the abandoned building in "Po' Sandy" and the piece of land in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt") that Julius has been using for his own profit. On a more metaphorical level, however, the psychic spaces that Julius's stories create are best imagined as cellars and garrets—the dark, haunted, and claustrophobia-inducing spaces of a Gothic novel. Like the cramped garret in which Harriet Jacobs spent seven long years hiding from her master and waiting for a chance to escape, the psychic spaces created by Julius's stories are habitable—but just barely. Like a secret passage that a heroine in a Gothic novel might use to hide from her pursuers, the local legends in Chesnutt's conjure tales expand the fictional world beyond the control of the existing power structures—beyond the bounds of property laws and mappable spaces—but they are too

dark and too haunted by the memories of slavery to offer true freedom or safety for Uncle Julius, or even for Chesnutt.

Conclusion

An Undiscovered Country: Conjure, Memory, and American Imperialism

> Superstitions, which possess their own interest, and which supply material to the psychologist for studying the problems of mind-history, survive in abundance. –William Wells Newell, "On the Field and Work of a Journal of American Folklore" (1888)

When Frederick Jackson Turner announced his "Frontier Thesis" in 1893, he was not only insisting on the importance of the frontier in American history but also pointing out a problem in America's future. If the American national character was created by the exploration and settlement of the frontier, what would the nation do now that the frontier was officially "closed"? For many Americans, a new wave of U.S. imperialism was the only solution. Thus, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the United States started a new chapter in its history—a chapter in which the focus of U.S. imperialism would shift to overseas expansion and the nation would take on a much more visible role in the international arena. With the Spanish-American War in 1898 and a new focus on transnational affairs, the United States turned its attention away from the domestic problems caused by racial discrimination, Jim Crow segregation, and widespread lynching while African American authors such as Pauline Hopkins grew increasingly frustrated. In her novel *Of One Blood; or, The Hidden Self,* published in 1902 and 1903 in *The Colored American Magazine,* Hopkins expanded the conjure tale into the international arena, taking on both U.S. imperialism and domestic racism.

Although her novel opens in Boston, Hopkins begins to hint at the transnational perspective of *Of One Blood* as soon as she introduces her mixed-race protagonist, Reuel Briggs, a Harvard medical student whose "olive" skin and "aristocratic" features inspire speculation among his classmates that he may be of Italian or Japanese extraction. Strikingly, in the first

chapter, Hopkins depicts her protagonist as both a modern-day Hamlet and a Gothic hero. Like the melancholy Danish prince of Shakespeare's play, Reuel is an intellectual and morose character, first seen sitting "among his books," being "haunted" by suicidal thoughts (1). Moreover, Hopkins describes Reuel's suicidal thoughts with language that evokes Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy: "'Well,' he soliloquized, as he reseated himself in his chair, 'Fate had done her worst, but she mockingly beckons me on and I accept her challenge. I shall not yet attempt the bourne'" (4). The archaic language of Reuel's soliloquized resolution to "not yet attempt the bourne" links him to the famous metaphor in Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy in which the prince admits his "dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns" (III, i, 80-82). Hopkins returns to this same Shakespearean passage even more explicitly near the end of her first chapter, when Reuel tells his friend, an aristocratic Southerner named Aubrey Livingston, that "the wonders of a material world cannot approach those of the undiscovered country within ourselves—the hidden self lying quiescent in every human soul" (7). As the story progresses, the metaphor of the "undiscovered country" acquires more and more layers of meaning, and conjure becomes the force that links the psychological and geo-political meanings of the phrase together.

The metaphor of the "undiscovered country" in *Of One Blood* serves as a link between the geographical discovery of Telassar, a "hidden city" of ancient Ethiopian intellectual and artistic achievement, and the psychological and biographical discovery of a "hidden self" within each of the novel's main characters. Several critics have identified *Of One Blood* as the first African American novel featuring "both an African setting and African characters" and have praised Hopkins for attempting "to counter turn-of-the-century racism by looking toward Africa and its past with pride" (Gruesser, qtd. in Japtok, 403). Yet the "back-to-Africa" plot that leads to

Reuel's discovery of his connection with Telassar has also led Eric Sundquist to call the novel a "patently escapist fiction" (569). According to Sundquist, "To go 'back to Africa' in Hopkins's patently escapist fiction meant to flee the brutality and racism of American history in favor of a lost history of great wealth, material achievement, and intellectual superiority" (569). On the contrary, I would argue that the novel provides neither its characters nor its readers with an escape from American history, and that even the recovery of a "lost history" of African achievement is less important to Hopkins's novel than the exploration of America's national amnesia at the start of the twentieth century, when Northerners and Southerners were trying to recreate a national identity with a combination of overseas imperialism and domestic racial oppression.

In the first half of the novel, Reuel, who is passing as white while attending Harvard medical school, becomes increasingly immersed in parapsychology, combining the science of psychology with the magic of telepathy and precognition. As Reuel's scholarly pursuits lead him closer and closer to Du Bois's idea of double consciousness as a form of second-sight, he meets a mixed-race woman named Dianthe who is suffering from severe amnesia due to a violent accident. Dianthe's amnesia, which causes her to forget her mixed racial identity and believe that she is white, serves as a metaphor for America's lingering political amnesia about the rights and abuses of African Americans. However, Dianthe's own magical powers of telepathy and precognition continue to remind her that something is wrong even after she has married Reuel, who immediately leaves on an archaeological expedition to Africa.

Once he has arrived in the "lost" city of Telassar during his expedition to Africa, Reuel's journey to the "inner city," which lies in "a direction Reuel had not yet explored," underscores the double meaning of Telassar as both a geographical and a psychological state—as both an

"undiscovered country" of Africa and, as Reuel puts it, "the undiscovered country within ourselves—the hidden self lying quiescent in every human soul" (7). In a passage that vividly evokes this double meaning, Reuel's journey to "the interior" dispels Western myths of both African and African-American inferiority:

> The character of the country improved as they neared the interior. Reuel noticed that this was at variance with the European idea respecting Central Africa, which brands these regions as howling wildernesses or an uninhabitable country. He found the landscape most beautiful, the imaginary desert "blossomed like the rose," and the "waste sandy valleys" and "thirsty wilds," which had been assigned to this location became, on close inspection, a gorgeous scene, decorated with Nature's most cheering garniture, teeming with choice specimens of vegetable and animal life, and refreshed by innumerable streams, branches of the rivers, not a few of which were of sufficient magnitude for navigation and commerce. But Reuel remembered the loathsome desert that stood in grim determination guarding the entrance to this paradise against all intrusion, and with an American's practical common sense, bewailed this waste of material. (133-4)

This passage brilliantly subverts and challenges the central metaphors of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* which was first published serially in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899, just a few years before the serial publication of *Of One Blood.* Like Marlow's journey into the dark "heart" of Africa, Reuel's journey to "the interior" of Africa's ancient civilization serves as a metaphor for a psychological exploration of the hidden depths of the human soul. But whereas Conrad associates Africa with the barbarism, depravity, and moral "darkness" of the human heart, Hopkins explicitly rejects the "European idea" of central Africa as a "howling wilderness or an uninhabitable country" and instead characterizes the African interior as a "gorgeous" and fertile "paradise." In doing so, Hopkins anticipates the critique by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe that the central metaphor of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* dehumanizes Africans by denying them language and culture. In *Of One Blood,* Africa again serves as a metaphor for the hidden self, but this time the hidden self that it represents is not the hidden savagery of the European colonial

enterprise but the hidden, unrealized intellectual potential of African Americans. Hopkins's "inner city" is a "paradise" of language science, art, and culture, and the "loathsome desert" that guards its entrance is the "imaginary desert" of the white racist imagination.

Significantly, this passage about the enlightening influences of Reuel's transnational travel concludes with a figurative return back across the Atlantic to the psychology of the American mind. If Reuel's cultural and intellectual fertility are African and his prejudices and preconceptions are European, Hopkins insists that his "practical common sense" is quintessentially American, and it is precisely because of his American practicality that Reuel bewails the "waste" of Africa's "material." In this brilliant sentence, Hopkins suggests the brutal, dehumanizing side of American practicality that can justify the use of slavery and imperialism to reduce people and foreign lands and cultures to mere "material" for America's economic consumption. At the same time, she also suggests that this same quintessentially American value of "practical common sense" should condemn the "waste of material" that results from racism's denial of African Americans' intellectual resources. In other words, racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws are "un-American" insofar as they "wastefully" deprive the American economy of precious intellectual and human resources. With this final sentence of the paragraph, Hopkins reminds her readers that the virtues of Reuel's "interior" are not wholly African; they are also American. The linguistic "return" at the end of this paragraph from a description of Reuel's unexplored African interior to his American values anticipates the character's literal return voyage to America after his discovery that Dianthe is still alive.

This second voyage, Reuel's "back-to-America" journey, if you like, is just as much a voyage of self-discovery, of exploring the "undiscovered country" of the "hidden self," as his journey "back to Africa." While Reuel is exploring the "undiscovered country" of his African

cultural heritage, his Gothic double is back in America, exploring the "heart of darkness" of his own country, which, it turns out, is the true "undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns." Aubrey Livingston, whose name evokes the African travels of the Victorian Scottish explorer David Livingstone, is, like his namesake, on a search for origins, though he does not yet know it. Instead of seeking the origins of the Nile River, Aubrey Livingston ends up unearthing the repressed truths about his own origins when he brings Dianthe back to his childhood home in the South to be his wife. By the end of the novel, we discover that Aubrey and Reuel are brothers, Aubrey having been switched at birth with his master's legitimate white baby by his enslaved grandmother, Aunt Hannah, "the most noted 'voodoo' doctor or witch in the country" (174). Indeed, Hopkins reveals that Aubrey, Reuel, and Dianthe are all siblings, and the novel's Gothic plot of double incest leads to tragic results for the racially mixed characters who cannot come to terms with their identity.

Hopkins's return to America at the end of *Of One Blood* suggests that the author is very aware of the limitations of imperialism as a solution for America's problems at the turn of the 20th century. Instead of escaping from American history, Hopkins uses conjure to explore the haunting influences that American history continues to have on the identities of black and white Americans, whether they choose to acknowledge that history or bury it in cultural amnesia. Like the other authors of America's post-Reconstruction conjure tales, Hopkins uses the seeming escapism and exoticism of conjure to comment on the important social and political problems of her day and the importance of a healthy cultural memory.

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