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CHARLES CHESNUTT AND THE LEGACY OF *THE CONJURE WOMAN*

As Charles W. Chesnutt was honored in 2008, the 150th anniversary of his birth, with a United States Postal Service commemorative stamp, it is fitting that the academic community should pause to reflect on his life in letters. Chesnutt is recognized as an indelible part of the American literary whole, noted as "a lively, ironic raconteur whose work focused on the comic and tragic web of American race relations" by Werner Sollors (49). Scholarship concerning how and why Chesnutt so adamantly interwove issues of race, class, and identity continues to proliferate the academy with a steady focus on his most popular works. This essay endeavors to celebrate Chesnutt's canonization not by means of grappling with ideas of race and power in his fiction, but rather by offering one perspective on how his "most accomplished effort" laid the foundation for a subgenre of African-American literature to emerge (Duncan 83). Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* has not been more influential than in its status as precursor to the late twentieth century literary innovation of what Ishmael Reed might call "Neo-Hoodoo" texts, but which here will be referred to as *neo-conjure tales*. I employ this particular term, rather than borrowing from Reed's aesthetic, to specifically link fiction published in the latter half of the twentieth century (and into the twenty-first) which makes use of African-based spiritual systems as a trope to the orally transmitted folktales that were disseminated among the enslaved and took as their subject matter conjure and hoodoo. Neo-Hoodoo, on the other hand, refers to a specific multicultural literary aesthetic, based in African Vodún, which seeks to differentiate art and writing from traditional western aesthetic values.[1] As the term suggests, the neo-conjure tale is a reincarnation, an evolution of the conjure tale which has its origins in African oral traditions and the history of slavery. Chesnutt's 1899 publication, which collected seven conjure stories in one edition, serves as the major link in that chain of evolution. Chesnutt is rather modest in his essay "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem" about categorizing his work within the folktale tradition in an attempt to set himself apart from Joel Chandler Harris:

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> The name of the story teller, "Uncle" Julius, and the locale of the stories, as well as the cover design, were suggestive of Mr. Harris's *Uncle Remus,* but the tales are entirely different. They are sometimes referred to as folk tales, but while they employ much of the universal machinery of wonder stories, especially the metamorphosis, with one exception, that of the first story, "The Goophered Grapevine," of which the norm was a folktale, the stories are the fruit of my own imagination, in which respect they differ from the *Uncle Remus* stories which are avowedly folk tales. (103)

Richard Brodhead is also of the opinion that the tales in *The Conjure Woman* are more accurately described as something other than folktales. He argues that Chesnutt's short stories easily fall into the postbellum local color tradition to which Mark Twain and Thomas Nelson Page belong. Situating Chesnutt among other southern regionalist writers, Brodhead supports his position by claiming, Chesnutt "displays no resistance to [local color] conventions, makes no visible effort to revise them or struggle against their sway: all is compliance, so far as the surface appearance of these stories goes" (6). Look beyond the surface, indeed. *The Conjure Woman,* upon closer inspection, reveals that Chesnutt "could cast a literary spell of his own" (12–13). His tales both conform to the local color/southern regional expectations and move beyond western literary conventions altogether. Chesnutt certainly achieves "mastery of [his] form's conventions" as Brodhead suggests, but the more relevant question is: from what tradition of storytelling is he pulling? (6). An investigation into the narrative strategies Chesnutt employs reveals two different stories addressed to two distinct audiences. Like his precocious Uncle Julius, Chesnutt seems to have had "one mind for the white folks to see" and another reserved for African-American cultural specificity.

It is not coincidental that the stories Chesnutt scribes are commonly referred to as "conjure tales" or that many of them adhere to the formulaic structure of the oral conjure tales exchanged in African-American communities. Interestingly enough, thirty years prior to publishing the "Post-bellum—Pre-Harlem" essay, Chesnutt admittedly recognized his indebtedness to these very same tales:

> In writing, a few years ago, the volume entitled *The Conjure Woman,* I suspect that I was more influenced by the literary value of the material than by its sociological bearing, and therefore took, or thought I did, considerable liberty with my subject. Imagination,

> however, can only act upon data—one must have somewhere in his consciousness the ideas which he puts together to form a connected whole.... I discovered that the brilliant touches, due, I had thought, to my own imagination, were after all but dormant ideas, lodged in my childish mind by old Aunt This and old Uncle That, and awaiting only the spur of imagination to bring them again to the surface. ("Superstitions" 96)

"By locating elements of his stories in the childhood tales told him by elders of the generation of slavery," Eric Sundquist posits, "Chesnutt placed himself closer to those originating beliefs that had become a pale reflection of their former African selves, and he made the remembrance of slave culture a foundation for modern African American culture" (138). To this I would add African-American literature, especially. Houston Baker clarifies this lineage for those still unconvinced, declaring "there is, to be sure, justification for regarding Chesnutt's work as an expressive instance of the traditional trickster rabbit tales of black folklore, since his main character, Uncle Julius, manages to acquire gains by strategies that are familiar to students of Brer Rabbit" (41). If it is, as it appears, that Chesnutt was inspired by a storytelling tradition that predates or at least developed alongside mainstream American literature, then it stands to reason that *The Conjure Woman,* like the African-American folktale before it, bequeaths a particular genealogy to the literary forms born thereafter. This idea is neither original to my scholarship nor a perspective-altering revelation. The articulation of how one branch of that genealogy has taken shape, however, is. Through participating in the appropriation of the conjure tale form, Chesnutt puts in motion a new vehicle (the written text) for African-American letters to privilege African-based spirituality, to celebrate a cultural icon, and to validate its own aesthetic values.

The oral conjure tale, or narrative, is steeped in the vernacular culture of the slave community and the ancient storytelling traditions of the African continent. Such tales were circulated as a means to enforce belief in and adherence to retained Africanisms such as reliance on magico-religious objects and charms for protection, veneration of the Ancestors, and restoration of balance and other cultural values to the community. In addition, "these brief, often first-person accounts served as an ideal expressive vehicle for transmitting a conception of the conjurers as folk heroes" (Roberts 96). Sifting through first-hand accounts of conjuration found in the historical records of the south,[2] Sharla M. Fett has identified a common narrative structure specific to the conjure tale, which is, as will be discussed, applicable to the more fantastic, fictional stories of Chesnutt's ilk. According to Fett, there are four movements in the traditional conjure tale:

> First, conjure accounts laid out a conflict, identifying a soured relationship with a well-known neighbor or family member as the source of the conjure spell.... Next, the narrator described his or her affliction by mapping out the bodily effects of the hoodoo "dose".... Third, the afflicted person searched for a conjure doctor, a healer with "second sight" into the workings of the spiritual world. Fourth and finally, the narrator recounted the steps taken by the conjurer to bring about a cure. (86)

Fett theorizes that such stories served an instructional and cautionary purpose, stating that conjure stories "reinforced public standards of slave community behavior pertaining to property, sexuality, and relations between young and old" (88). These tales also demonstrated the link between "an individual's well-being to his or her conduct within a community" (88). Surely one can see the implications of this in Chesnutt's "Mars Jeems' Nightmare," where the plantation owner, Mars Jeems McAdoo, is taught a great lesson of humanity at the hands of Aunt Peggy's "monst'us pow'ful kin' er goopher" (60). These tales also have a persuasive function; Roberts notes that the teller usually embellishes the uncanny abilities of the conjurer for skeptics who need reassurance that conjuration is the proper recourse for his or her ailment. Chesnutt does not deviate from this pattern. Uncle Julius says this of Aunt Peggy:

> Dey wuz a cunjuh 'oman livin' down 'mongs' de free niggers on de Wim'lton Road, en all de darkies fum Rockfish ter Beaver Crick wuz feared er her. She could wuk de mos' powerfulles' kin' er goopher,—could make people hab fits, er rheumatiz, er make 'em des dwinel away en die; en dey say she went out ridin' de niggers at night, fer she wuz a witch 'sides bein' a cunjuh 'oman. ("Goophered" 36)

David Brown also outlines how the stories of conjure incidents follow a prescribed literary formula, adding one caveat relating to the denouement:

> Some accounts "begin" in the context of domestic harmony, proceed to problems and other social asymmetries, move through a struggle with conjure ("middle"), and climax with conjure victims' deaths;

> their domestic situations in disarray ("end"). Others begin in the context of tensions and end in harmony. And not all the stories are "complete" in terms of tying all the ends neatly together. (28)

Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* offers one of many examples of the model of narrative action that Fett and Brown propose. Recalling the conjure tales she collected while researching Voodoo in New Orleans, Hurston first reveals the conflict of social nature that is the crux of the matter: Mrs. Grant and another neighborhood woman "had had some words a few days past" (232). The unnamed woman administers her magic in the late of night. Mrs. Grant, privy to the conjure trade, recognizes the "hoodoo dose" before it takes effect on her. She does, however, seek the guidance of a conjure doctor for revenge: "Early the next morning she was at the door of Dr. Strong," of whom Mrs. Grant is also a disciple (233). Rather than offering a cure for her ailment, the good doctor provides Mrs. Grant with a remedy to tame her enemy, telling her "that to be sure she had counteracted all the bad work, she must draw the enemy's 'wine'" (233). "That is," Hurston explains, "she must injure her enemy enough to draw blood" (233). Hurston's tale is not of the sort where all the ends are tied neatly; in fact, when Mrs. Grant inadvertently allows her adversary to draw *her* blood, other steps become necessary "to neutralize this loss of blood" (233). It is implied that Mrs. Grant emerges the victor when Hurston segues into the next tale following the description of Mrs. Grant with the heart and entrails of a black chicken clutched in her hands. Likewise, Jeffrey Anderson relates the deeds of Aunt Zippy Tull of Maryland, a historical conjure woman called to service by George who was "tricked" by a woman who "hated [his] parents and had already killed his dog" (103). Aunt Zippy "used magic to compel the secret enemy to approach George's mother and reveal her deeds" and then proceeded to return the trick to its originator and begin the healing process for George (103). She gave George specific directions to "fill a bottle with new pins and needles, his own urine, and several other unnamed materials and then to bury the bottle upside down in his fireplace and cover it with a brick" (103). Both tales, told to folklorists, are recounted in a variation of the organizational structure Fett and Brown offer, but they remain faithful to the four major elements.

It takes neither leaps nor bounds to conjecture how the oral conjure tale came to appear, hardly altered, in print form. These "tales, or 'lies,' as the pre-World War II generation of black folk called them, have been used in various ways with varying degrees of sophistication by African American novelists" and non-fiction writers pre-dating the antebellum period[3] (Bell 82). Chesnutt is one of the earliest and most recognized African-American authors to so artfully transfer the conjure tale from the mouths of black raconteurs to the pages of the African-American literary audience. *The Conjure Woman* sticks closely to the traditional structure of the conjure tale while still employing some creative license on the part of the author. The social conflicts that give rise to the conjure action range from slave hands overzealously helping themselves to the master's scuppernongs in "The Goophered Grapevine" to wrongful death and the separation of mother and child in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" and "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," respectively. Primus being turned into a mule, Mars Jeems being turned into a "noo nigger," and Henry's vitality being linked to the change of seasons are all manifestations of affliction caused by the sprinkling of this or the ingestion of that ("Mars Jeems'" 61).

Aunt Peggy, the head conjurer, is sought by the likes of Aunt Nancy, Solomon, Dan, and even Mars Dugal' in accordance with the prescriptive conjure tale formula. And Chesnutt spares no creative expense to give his readers insight into the makings of conjure spells, curatives, and other manipulations of nature: Aunt Peggy "gun 'im some stuff w'at look' lack it be'n made by poundin' up some roots en yarbs wid a pestle in a mo'tar" ("Mars Jeems'" 60). "Dis yer stuff is monst'us pow'ful kin' er goopher. You take dis home, en gin it ter de cook, ef you kin trus' her, en tell her er ter put it in yo' marster's soup de fus' cloudy day he hab okra soup fer dinnah. Min' you follers de d'rections," says Aunt Peggy to Solomon who has come in search of a remedy for Mars Jeems' heavy slave-driving hands (60). The reader learns that Aunt Peggy is also adept at making protective charms. In order for Chesnutt's written tales to be successful, they must hold fast not only to the sequence of events of the oral tales, but also to the ritual elements and paraphernalia associated with conjure and hoodoo practices. He proves himself well-versed in the subject through the actions of Aunt Peggy. She makes a "life cha'm" for Dan who is skillfully trying to negate the revenge of Unk' Jube in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" (98). She combines hairs from Dan's head with "a piece er red flannin, en some roots en yerbs, en had put 'em in a little bag made out'n 'coon-skin" (98). It is well documented that a hoodoo spell or charm is made much more potent when one's body parts or by-products such as hair or fingernail parings are included.[4] This information was not lost on Chesnutt.

Chesnutt's collection accomplishes several things in the transference of the conjure tale from oral to written format which the author may not have necessarily recognized. Sundquist says it plainly: "The literary category of the imagination, which at first appears to separate Chesnutt's work from the 'folktales' of Harris and the conjure beliefs collected by professional ethnographers, circles back, by the path of personal and historical memory, to merge his narrative art with the stories of the black ancestors" (138). *The Conjure Woman* reifies the power and place of the conjure tale within African-American narrative forms—a validation that perhaps is lacking in Harris's publication. Unlike Harris, Chesnutt's "literary appropriation of folk forms" moves beyond entertainment and nostalgic fallacy to express specific artistic and cultural values (136). Chesnutt makes visible (or rather *readable*) the complexity of narrative voice which effects, directly, the negotiation of politics between the powerful, the oppressed, and the reality of conjure magic.

In the form of Aunt Peggy, Uncle Jube, Tenie, Phillis, and Julius—the metaphorical conjurer—Chesnutt repositions the conjurer as folk hero rather than deviant, ignorant other. The conjure figure represents a viable threat to the white establishment and has long been hailed as a hero among the folk:

> Enslaved Africans enshrined conjurers as folk heroes not because they viewed their actions as a direct threat to the masters' physical power but because their spiritual attributes and behaviors reflected values that they accepted as the most advantageous to their survival and well-being in a rigid hierarchical social structure in which communal welfare had precedence over individual need. (Roberts 95)

Chesnutt's tales reconstitute that heroism and put it on display for all of America to see, which is not to suggest that Chesnutt is innovative in his use of the conjurer as folk hero or literary character. Martin Delaney's Gamby Gholar and Maudy Ghamus[5] as well as William Wells Brown's Cato[6] deserve mention in this context; however, neither of these characters are depicted with any seriousness or the respect accorded to the conjure figure. Cato blunders his first task as a healer: "Oh! well, well, ef I ain't put de pill stuff an' de intment stuff togedder. By golly, dat ole cuss will be mad when he finds it out, won't he? Nebber mind, I'll make it up in pills, and when de flour is on dem, he won't know what's in em" (Brown 7–8). Gamby and Maudy must rely more on Blake's heroic courage to get them out of a fix than on their fledgling conjure abilities. *The Conjure Woman* should be credited for shifting the black conjurer as folk hero from bumbling idiot to a place of fearful reverence within the context of literary depictions. To be sure, conjurers were cherished commodities within the slave milieu. African Americans, more often than not, relied on the neighborhood hoodoo lady or obeah man because "the work" offered them a "culturally recognizable, if not socially accepted mechanism for venting frustrations occasioned by the actions of others that they recognized as injustices, indignities, or violations of their rights as human beings" (Roberts 102).

Chesnutt's conjure figures reflect the communal interactions of clients and practitioners as they occurred, with respect for African spiritual epistemologies and veneration of those who administered them. The portrayals in Chesnutt's text offer a culturally specific perspective of the conjurer as folk hero that moves beyond the surface level characterizations of buffoonish, inept charlatans and superstitious quacks. Chesnutt's Aunt Peggy is a source of power for the Patesville community; she offers a path toward agency and mobility and, simply put, a reduction in work load when there is usually no reprieve otherwise. Sis Becky is reunited with little Mose by way of Aunt Peggy's intervention, and Aunt Nancy benefits just the same. With Sis Becky's return to the plantation, she could resume helping "Aun' Nancy wid de yound uns ebenin's en Sundays" ("Sis' Becky's" 89). Phillis, the scorned mother, conjures "de Spencer tree" as vindication for the social injustices and violation of human rights she suffered in Chesnutt's final foray into the conjure tale tradition, "The Marked Tree"[7] (206).

Not only does Chesnutt revamp the notion of the conjurer as folk hero, he goes a step further by positioning a female as the dominant hero in his collection. The conjuring *female* thus becomes the literary archetype from which future generations of novelists will draw upon heavily in their own renditions of the conjurer as folk hero. One of the earliest portrayals of a fictional conjure woman, Chesnutt's title character is at once foundational and subversive. Chesnutt omits any physical descriptors for Aunt Peggy, allowing the reader to imagine her in any number of ways. She is neither relegated to the controlling images of which Patricia Hill Collins writes nor is she cast as a hag: old, wrinkled, silver-haired, and toothless. She does not cackle, ride a broom, or eat children for dinner; yet, should a reader envision Aunt Peggy as such there is no conflict as she takes shape "depending upon which of us takes a mind to her" (Naylor 3). The physically elusive Aunt Peggy defies common ideas and stereotypes surrounding conjurers and African-American women, leaving room for future literary conjure mothers to reflect the likeness of their historical and/or contemporary counterparts. Aunt Peggy's literary descendants include Gloria Naylor's African-born Sapphira Wade and Miranda Day, the living matriarch of Willow Springs; Arthur Flowers's "foxy" Melvira Dupree and

Toni Cade Bambara's fashionable Minnie Ransom; Toni Morrison's Pilate and Marie-Thèrése; and Ntozake Shange and Tina McElroy Ansa's respective child healers, Indigo and Lena McPherson.

Viewed through this particular lens, *The Conjure Woman* emerges as the prototypical collection of neo-conjure tales. As such, it has direct influence on how other fiction in this category has developed. To clarify this new category, the neo-conjure tale is largely found in African-American literature published post-1960. There are a few exceptions to be made in the case of Zora Neale Hurston, another large influence on the genre: "Uncle Monday," "Black Death," and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* were written or published well before 1960.[8] The Black Arts Movement and the resurrection of Hurston elevated the visibility of African spiritual retentions and other vernacular expressions long suppressed by Eurocentric ideologies. Reed established his school of literary neo-hoodoo and Alice Walker published "Strong Horse Tea" and "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," both of which pay tribute to America's conjuring past and fit into the neo-conjure tale grouping. Voodoo, hoodoo, and conjure were no longer being depicted as "Negro superstition" or as "quaintly exotic" (Duncan 79). The black literati had emerged in full force by midcentury ready to reclaim, rewrite, and re-envision their African past. Charles Duncan only hits the tip of the iceberg when he says, "In the complexity of Chesnutt's treatment of magic and other folktale elements, the conjure stories address themes and issues found much later in the works of contemporary black authors such as Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson, whose novels display an American version of magic realism" (85).

The term Duncan invokes, however, does not fully encompass what is taking place in recent black fiction. Magical realism has so often been "used to negate the ability of art to reflect other ontologies," other ways of knowing naturally infused in the day-to-day living of othered communities (Taylor-Guthrie xii). African-American writers have shifted toward reflecting how black folklore is the rule rather than the exception when constructing an African-American worldview. Prior to Chesnutt's conjure tales, there was no "literary precedent for what [African-American writers were] trying to do with the magic" (Caldwell 243). Carol B. Gartner observes that *The Conjure Woman's* major task was to "gently bring out the horrors of slavery and the injustice of treating Negroes as if they have no feelings" or humanity (160). While that is surely one side of the coin, the other is immersed in the work of cultural preservation. What Chesnutt *does* with the magic is to reflect black American reality and privilege African-based spiritual cosmologies that exist and operate *in spite of* rather than *in opposition to* western hegemonic culture. He also challenges popular notions of the hoodoo expert and calls attention to the outsider's skepticism and disbelief. These ideas, in addition to affirming "the debt [owed] to the conventions of the folktale," are the cornerstones of the neo-conjure tale that builds upon and complicates Chesnutt's foundational collection of stories (Duncan 84).

There are a number of texts, neo-conjure tales, that take off from Chesnutt's point of departure. This is not to suggest that the authors have consciously appointed Chesnutt as a literary forbearer. Rather, my analysis works toward establishing a pattern of development within the African-American literary tradition which extends from the oral folktale to Chesnutt to the contemporary novel. One way in which this is evident is in the interspersing of the traditional conjure tale throughout a given text. Such writers as Arthur Flowers and Gloria Naylor inscribe the action, conflict, and other configurations of the conjure narrative several times in their respective novels as if the reader were sitting fireside, listening intently as the tellers spin their tales. In *Another Good Loving Blues* the reader hears the story of Queen Ester who, impregnated by a wandering man, seeks the service of Melvira Dupree for "something to kill his seed" (Flowers 29). Melvira takes the time to consult Spirit, as more ethical conjurers are wont to do, only to realize that Queen Ester's conflict is not with bearing life, but with the infidelity of her mate. Melvira gives Queen Ester specific instructions to mend that relationship just as Aunt Peggy does for her clients: "Take flowers and honey to the creek. Leave them for the spirits. You take this here candle, you burn it a half hour fore sunrise everyday till Sunday next" (30). The reader also bears witness to Melvira healing a young child who "took to her bed without being told, hot and fevered and spitting black mucus" (31). Flowers's narrator shares the story of St. Louis Slick, the "slickhaired fancy man" that falls prey to the conjure woman at the behest of the Larsens, parents of a fifteen year old whom Slick has seduced (148). In keeping with the stylized boasting of a conjurer's power that is part of the telling of the conjure tale, the narrator paints Melvira as conjurer extraordinaire:

> Melvira Dupree was considered by folk in these parts of Arkansas to be a somewhat unconventional conjuror … she was partial to her right hand over her left—folks that wanted to put a trick on somebody went to Hoodoo Maggie. They come to Miz Melvira to have the trick took off. Could find your lost items, lost mates, lost health. Told old man Cratchet where to find that lost deed of his and saved

> him from losing his farm. Told that fool Rooster Clay where his cows was that time. The sheriff over at Clarksville ask her her opinion on a case in a minute, felony or misdemeanor it don't matter. Why just last year she restored the feeling in Janet Gibson's legs after the doctor told her she would never walk again. You name it, Melvira Dupree could fix it. (28)

Naylor similarly invokes the oral conjure tale tradition in *Mama Day* when introducing her listening readers to Sapphira Wade: "Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She would walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand to start the kindling going under her medicine pot" (3). The reader is also informed of the wonders Sapphira's descendant, Miranda, can perform. When Bernice ingests an excess of fertility drugs, Miranda is sought to help undo the damage to her reproductive system. After the physical ailment is revealed, the multivocal narration brags on Miranda's gifted hands, saying "them wrinkled fingers had gone that way so many times for so many different reasons. [It was] a path she knew so well that the slightest change of moisture, the amount of give along the walls, or the scent left on her hands could fix a woman's cycle within less than a day of what was happening with the moon" (75). As the narrative surrounding the Day family continues, Miranda performs her craft to help Bernice conceive a child, to save the life of her grandniece Cocoa, and to punish Ruby by returning negative energy from whence it came. Each incident unfolds as a micro-tale—a conjure tale within the larger framework of the novel.

By summoning discursive formats like the oral tradition, Flowers and Naylor invest a level of authenticity in their respective neo-conjure tales, much like Chesnutt. The conjure tale vignettes told from the narrators' perspectives represent another type of framing device where a story is told within a story. The debt to Chesnutt's collection is apparent in this regard. Flowers and Naylor, however, take longer strides toward privileging other ways of knowing than Chesnutt in the way that their fiction remains within the communities from which conjure and hoodoo abound. Chesnutt's framed narrative allows the reader to identify with John, the white, northern, outsider who has little faith in the "absurdly impossible yarn which Julius was spinning" or with Julius and those for whom hoodoo is a way of life ("Po' Sandy" 53). Flowers, Naylor, and others situate their stories in the mouths of the in-group; there is little room to question belief, as Naylor's George learns posthumously.

Many of the neo-conjure tale texts do, however, critique the northerner/outsider/stranger positionality and confront middle-class bias against African-based folk tradition. Flowers interweaves such a discussion throughout his novel. In a scene where hoodoo advocate Zora Neale Hurston makes an appearance, the narrator reveals that much of the Memphis community of colored folk "could not for the life of them see what value magic and magicworkers had for the Negro struggle. If anything, it was agreed, hoodoo was embarrassing, outdated behavior that weakened the colored race and should be allowed to die off at first opportunity" (114). These New Negroes in *Another Good Loving Blues* are chastised in the mind of Hootowl, the Beale Street Hoodoo Elder, for fleeing the south—their ancestral and cultural home place—and for "taking their bodies to the doctor and their souls to the preacher" (125). Tina McElroy Ansa offers her criticism by way of failed ancestral guidance in *Baby of the Family*. When Lena McPherson is born with a caul, her southern, middle-class, Catholic family is of no help to the haunted child. Both Nellie, her mother, and Ms. Lizzie, her paternal grandmother, reject the way of the folk, leaving Lena to navigate the invisible world without any cultural capital.

Nellie refers to Nurse Bloom's caul tea and preserved birth veil as "gris gris," which suggests that she has some knowledge of African-retained folkways: "Lord, I got more gris-gris, as mama's mama used to call it, in this room than Madame Hand out on Highway 17" (Ansa 32). Her decision to ignore Nurse Bloom's very careful instructions to protect Lena from ill-spirited "haints" and distancing herself generationally from her mama's mama's belief, however, implies a disavowal of those very same folkways:

> "Nurse Bloom is a sweet woman, going to all this trouble for my baby, yes, she is, for my sweet little Lena." Nellie looked down at the baby at her breast, who seemed to stop sucking and listen. "But if she thinks I'm gonna give my baby girl any of this old-fashioned potion shit—God only knows what in it—she better think again. Just imagine, Lena, a grown intelligent woman like that believing in ghosts." (33)

Ms. Lizzie, on the other hand, is constantly involved in the dissemination or administration of distinctly African-American folklore. She tells ghost stories, believes that "whenever a person born in [November] dies, another birth takes place in the family the following November," and "hits [Edward] square in the mouth with a fat greasy piece of raw meat with stiff black hairs sticking out all over it" in hopes of curing his stutter (103,109). She even convinces her grandsons that they could benefit from Lena's gift: "Grandma had assured them ever since little Lena's birth that this was a certain legacy of her being born with a veil over her face—that others could see ghosts when looking over her shoulder" (56). Her ties to conjure and hoodoo belief run deep, but she still fails to offer Lena any guidance in the visible world. She confesses her failure when Lena calls on Ms. Lizzie the night of her funeral: "I shoulda known better. If I'da been any kind of grandmamma, I would of known something was wrong. I've seen plenty of country folks who never been off the farm who had enough sense to know about a child like you and to make sure everything was done that should be done" (260).

Both Ms. Lizzie and Nellie enjoy the comforts of property-owning Jonah McPherson—a private hospital room, shopping at Woolworth's, and taking family vacations to the Georgia coast in the 1950s. They are no longer tied to the "country folks" and the life lessons that are passed on with more reverence and understanding in such communities. Their newly minted middle-class identity places these women at a crossroads in which a decision to preserve African-American cultural signs or to allow them to perish are the options. Their decisions have real consequences which Lena will bear well into adulthood. Ansa is challenging the notion of upward mobility and middle-class status; her novel offers a tangible answer to the rhetorical question about what one leaves behind in order to be progressive. This crossroads where modernity and ancient ways intersect is a recurrent theme in the neo-conjure tale and in other texts that incorporate such tales into the larger narrative. Soan and Connie negotiate this divide in Morrison's *Paradise*, and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* highlights Avey Johnson's journey of discovery as she is forced to choose a path.

The neo-conjure tale does not interrogate whiteness and racism in the same way that Chesnutt does. Instead it explores how class and assimilation, which are not devoid of racialized ideologies, have an impact on the value of cultural currency and are as relevant in the twenty-first century as confronting race through writing was at the opening of the twentieth. A resolution to the problems of modernity and preservation can be found in the neo-conjure tale itself. As Hootowl tells his listeners/readers, "Strategies now, they change with time and circumstance. Each makes its contribution in its proper time and place. But if you want to have fundamental influence on the colored race's destiny, you shape its soul and the soul shapes everything else" (Flowers 120). Authors such as Flowers, Ansa, Morrison, Naylor, and a host of others invest spirit work in their texts as a way to bear witness, record, and share with the modern reader the experiential knowledge and wisdom inherent in an African-based way of knowing. Indeed, "literature and hoodoo … *are* tools for shaping the soul," a lesson initiated by Chesnutt and made manifest by contemporary African-American writers (119, emphasis added). While Chesnutt may have intended to re-shape the souls and attitudes of the white majority, his use of conjure as a sign has been read by those in conjuring communities as an affirmation of their belief, their African heritage, and the power of such crafts to mold one's destiny. Perhaps he was unaware of how far-reaching the language of conjure could be, but this was certainly not lost on future generations of writers who saw *The Conjure Woman* as breaking new ground and creating a safe space in literature for the conjure tale and conjure tradition to survive.

What Chesnutt achieves in *The Conjure Woman* is unmatched, and his collection of wonder tales leaves behind a legacy in American letters that will not soon be forgotten. As we celebrate his literary career and remarkable contributions to local color, dialect writing, folklore, narrative structure, and racial politics through his first book-length publication, I challenge Chesnutt readers and critics to consider his importance to the contemporary trend of positioning African spirituality as a central or recurring trope by African-American authors. *The Conjure Woman* shifted the possibilities of representing in print African-American folk tradition in a culturally specific way. Chesnutt inadvertently created the space for Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed, Steve Canon, J. J. Phillips, and a plethora of others to write according to the lived experiences of black people and to reflect on the pervasiveness of conjure culture in the United States specifically. The publication of Chesnutt's stories is of monumental importance in this regard. The significance of *The Conjure Woman* to African-American and American literary canons is multidimensional; if it is truly Chesnutt's crowning achievement, let us continue to explore it and add yet another facet to its legacy.

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NOTES

[1] For a full discussion of "New Literary Neo-Hoodooism," see the Henry interview with Reed.

[2] Fett conducted her research using first-person conjure narratives found in oral histories, family papers, journals, and folklore collections recorded between the 1870s–1940s. See Fett 85.

[3] Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and William Wells Brown all make mention of the conjure tradition in their narratives, interestingly enough, in the form of a "tale" about their experiences.

[4] For a description of sacramental and non-sacramental objects used for harming and healing see Long 10.

[5] Gamby Gholar and Maudy Ghamus are two hoodoo men that appear in the serial novel *Blake; or The Huts of America* (see Delaney 112–27).

[6] Cato is the plantation doctor of little skill that appears in the first African-American play, Brown's *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom*.

[7] "The Marked Tree" was printed some twenty-five years after *The Conjure Woman* in 1924–25. The Duke UP edition of *The Conjure Woman* includes "The Marked Tree" and other conjure tales that Chesnutt published elsewhere but not in the 1899 collection, although they deal with conjuring. For this reason I include it in my discussion.

[8] Both "Uncle Monday" and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* were published in 1934. "Black Death," though written prior to 1960, was not published until Harper Perennial released *The Complete Stories* in 1996.

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