

Conjuring as a Critique of Medical Racism in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*

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ABSTRACT

Charles W. Chesnutt has long been regarded as one of the most influential African American writers of the 19th-century, and his works have been lauded for their skillful maneuvering of language, audience, and cultural forms. The *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* has often been considered Chesnutt's most influential work and has attracted great interest from readers and scholars alike. Though Chesnutt scholarship often focuses on new ways of reading the works or the effectiveness of the author's subversive techniques, one focus that has been mostly overlooked is the work's ability to challenge racist medical dialogues prevalent throughout the 19th-century. This project uses a lens of conjuring, one of the most powerful and compelling forces in Chesnutt's work, to examine ways that *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* can be read as a subversion of 19th-century medical doctrine.

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Introduction

Born in 1858, the son of free African Americans from the South, Charles Waddell Chesnutt grew up in Fayetteville, North Carolina and spent his formative years surrounded by the rampant racism that characterized 19th-century America. Despite this prejudiced atmosphere and the disenfranchisement it caused, Chesnutt would become one of the most influential African-American writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and would provide a narrative to counter contemporary racist discourse. Moreover, in all of his short stories, novels, and essays, Chesnutt would become a vocal opponent of racial determinism. In a 1978 journal entry, Chesnutt pledges: “I will live down the prejudice, I will crush it out. I will show to the world that a man may spring from a race of slaves, and yet far excel many of the boasted ruling race” (93). In this drive to disprove whites’ misconceptions, Chesnutt often spoke out against their short-sighted view of African-Americans,¹ but his most effective indictment of racist ideologies came in his first collection of short stories, *The Conjure Woman*.

Published in 1899, *The Conjure Woman* has been pointed to by many scholars as an example of white readers’ prejudice against African-American writers at this time or, perhaps more importantly, against writers willing to pen the truth about slavery.² As a result, even though Chesnutt’s tales were connected by a common storyteller, Julius, and despite sharing a strong link to conjuring, they were not originally published together. Of the original fourteen tales submitted for consideration, only seven were selected for publication in the original 1889

¹ “The Southern white people [...] never cease for a moment to urge with tongue and pen that they are justified in their oppression—their suppression—of the colored race” (Chesnutt “Liberty and Franchise” 107). See also “The Future of the American Negro” (1882), “An Inside View of the Negro Question” (1889), and “Liberty and Franchise” (1889).

² In his introduction to *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, Richard Brodhead comments on the politics behind the publishing of Chesnutt’s stories: “A reading of the excluded miscellany could easily lead to the conclusion that these market/aesthetic norms covertly enforced other agendas. ‘Dave’s Neckliss,’ for instance, was apparently left out of *The Conjure Woman* because it lacked the recourse to conjure. But the rule that enforced uniformity on this point threw out more than a misfitting tale” (17). Brodhead suggests instead that tales such as “Dave’s Neckliss” were excluded as a result of their overt and damning reflection of the cruelties of slavery.

text of *The Conjure Woman* (Brodhead 25), and it was not until 1993 that the latter seven tales were included in the set (Brodhead 2). Still, despite publishers' rejection of tales overtly critical of white society, Chesnutt still managed to levy a pretty damning critique of whites by playing on a popular style of literature at the time, plantation fiction. This tradition, popularized by white writers such as Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris, depicted a sentimentalized version of the South.³ Chesnutt, by writing in the popular style, could gain a broad white readership while still using irony to "render an account of the plantation that stripped away its Arcadian guise and revealed the hellishness of black slavery in the midst of the white man's paradise" (MacKethan 86). In fact, many scholars have discussed his subversive reworking of this tradition.⁴ However, even with this wide interest in Chesnutt and scholars' tendency to discuss his works in terms of contemporary segregationist dialogues,⁵ none have juxtaposed his stories to contemporary theories of racial difference levied by the medical community. Despite the absence of critical inquiry in this area, however, Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* criticizes medically justified racism and uses conjuring to displace the prominence of medicine in 19th-century American culture.

Like many novels in the plantation tradition, Chesnutt's work connects separate narratives with a common focus: the nature of slavery and race relations before the Civil War and by shared storytellers, Julius and John. Julius, a former slave, relates his tales of conjuration

³ In *The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature*, Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan explains that "the prominence of this idea of the South, employing a landscape certainly of Arcadian dimensions, is due largely to the work of southern writers from the Reconstruction era to the present day who have nurtured in their portrayals of their region some aspect of that ancient pastoral district famed for its rural peace and simplicity" (3).

⁴ In *Charles W. Chesnutt: A Study of Short Fiction*, Henry B. Wonham discusses Chesnutt's criticism of plantation fiction, and Charles Duncan argues in *The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt* that by taking on this already familiar tradition and repurposing it, Chesnutt is able to "call attention to the brutal and ongoing consequences of slavery, and to delineate the racial and cultural terms of a national, post-Civil War reconciliation and regeneration" (79).

⁵ For example, in "Charles Chesnutt's 'The Dumb Witness' and the Culture of Segregation," Lori Robinson and Eric Wolfe discuss that though "segregation maintained social hierarchies by anchoring identities that had threatened [...] to become chaotically unknowable," Chesnutt's tale "subverts the notion that identity can be fixed" (62-63).

to John, a wealthy white man from Ohio who often provides the framing for Julius's tales. Throughout the work, John describes his experiences since buying an old plantation in North Carolina and serves as the voice of the outer narrative. Despite his framing of the tales, however, John's chief purpose is to comment upon and lead into Julius's various and colorful stories. These conjure tales, told in Julius's vernacular, represent the bulk of Chesnut's work and often function counter to John's condescending point of view. Many scholars have commented on the relationship between John and Julius,⁶ and most agree that John exists as a stand-in for the prejudiced white community. Though John presents himself positively, he controls the discourse of the tales by contradicting Julius, dismissing his tales, or else reappropriating them for his own purposes. Moreover, John signifies the type of opportunism that so often took advantage of the African-American community; he comes to the South where war has left a poor and broken landscape, where he can buy land "for a mere song" (Chesnut 31), and where he can exploit the local resources and undercut Julius's independence. In the same vein, John can also function as a stand-in for the intellectual discourse concerned with describing the inferiority of black Americans. Charles Duncan argues that "the goopher, or magic, Julius so habitually positions at the center of his stories forms a metaphoric barrier that separates the two narrators for most of the series. Since magic has no place in the empiricism that dominates John's philosophy when we first meet him, he discounts most of what he hears" (81). The tension that Duncan describes is the same tension that marks the relationship between 19th-century medical discourse and the black community's system of conjuration. John represents attempts to delegitimize black

⁶ In "Command Performances: Black Storytellers in Stuart's 'Blink' and Chesnut's 'The Dumb Witness,'" Peter Schmidt characterizes a tendency by white figures to demand, and thrive upon, the performances (typically storytelling) of black individuals. Similarly, Jennifer Riddle Harding, in "A Mind Enslaved?: The Interaction of Metaphor, Cognitive Distance, and Narrative Framing in Chesnut's 'Dave's Neckliss,'" discusses the ways in which John and Annie attempt to control Julius's tales through interpretation and the ways in which Julius's heavy reliance on metaphor functions as a source of resistance against this tendency.

intellectual discourse and to normalize notions of racial difference while Julius shows the capacity of conjure to work counter to these claims.

Chapter 1

As Chesnutt's first conjure tale and the frame for the rest of the stories, "The Goophered Grapevine" helps establish the white community's reliance on medical expertise and begins to foreground the tales in conjure. Though no physicians appear as characters in the tale, John and Annie, wealthy white Northerners, justify their presence in the South as doctors' orders: "Some years ago my wife was in poor health, and our family doctor, in whose skill and honesty I had implicit confidence, advised a change of climate. I shared, from an unprofessional standpoint, his opinion [...] The doctor's advice was that we seek, not a temporary place of sojourn, but a permanent residence, in a warmer and more equable climate" (Chesnutt 31). This opening frames readers' understanding of medicine in several interesting ways. First, John's "implicit confidence" characterizes whites' unquestioning faith in medical practitioners, and his willingness to endorse the doctors' opinion "from an unprofessional standpoint" reflects the way in which medical hypotheses became filtered through the population and regurgitated as truth. The fact that the doctor advises a change of climate makes this credulity even more significant. To Chesnutt's readers, who by this point would have known that bacteria and viruses cause illness, a change of climate would have seemed an absurd treatment. They would have recognized that John's faith in this doctor's expertise was misplaced. Though there is no reason to question John's relationship to his physician, the story suggests that John's motive was more than simply escaping to a healthier climate. As continues to characterize his move South, John remarks that "in conjunction with the soil, ideal for grape-culture; labor was cheap, and land could be bought for a mere song" (Chesnutt 32). John's relocation, under the guise of a medical treatment, suddenly seems exploitative. He is not looking for a more "equable climate" (Chesnutt 32); he is taking advantage of the worn-torn South to make money from the vineyards

there. Medicine, which already seems spurious, now becomes associated with exploitation. Chesnutt has not only framed his tales with medicine; he sets up a system of fallible medical expertise that gets eroded by the stronger force of conjure throughout the text.

Chesnutt's use of conjure was no mere coincidence. Conjuring, as a major source of power in African-American communities, was as an apt force to rewrite racist ideologies. A holdover from African culture, conjure represented an escape from the horrific reality of slavery and continued to provide agency for blacks after the Civil War. Under the yoke of slavery, and in many ways during segregation as well, black Americans did not have rights to their own bodies. As slaves, blacks were their owners' property; they were objectified, stripped of any entitlements to their own flesh, and commoditized as valuable labor. They had no rights to marry or to create permanent domestic relationships, and they were battling for identity when so many others regarded them as "hands," manual labor to be bought, traded, and sold. Placed in such a helpless and hopeless situation, blacks looked for ways to gain some measure of control over their lives and their bodies, and conjure was one source of autonomy for many. In "Conjure/Doctors: An Explanation of a Black Discourse in America," David H. Brown argues that "conjure could and did offer moral guidance, cultural growth, and effective instrumental power against oppression during slavery" (5). According to Hume, "conjure may be seen as an idiom, an explicit, culturally specific way of thinking about cause, effect, power, and agency, and as a practical, creative process of mobilizing spiritual and material resources to address problems and effect change" (5). This understanding of conjure, as a center of authority and a tool for resisting oppression, characterizes Chesnutt's use of this force throughout his tales. Like Chesnutt's most prominent conjurer, Aunt Peggy, these practitioners were often free blacks who operated outside of the strict oversight of the slavery system and who garnered respect,

influence, and economic freedom through their craft. Elliot Gorn points out that “magical control of the environment held out the possibility of immediate, direct action, of change consciously willed and deliberately effected” (298). Conjurers had this power to operate outside of the strict purview of the white community, and many blacks, before and after the Civil War, were drawn to these symbols of strength. They put faith in a system that was distinctly their own and defiantly outside of the mainstream white cultural values embodied by professional physicians.

Indeed, conjure occupies a powerful place within the *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* from the very beginning. In “The Goophered Grapevine,” Chesnut places conjuring and medicine on the same plane, and though he depicts them in opposition in this tale, he also demonstrates that they are equivalent forces. This first tale in the series is also the first point at which Aunt Peggy is introduced. The readers’ (and John’s) first impression of Aunt Peggy is significant as a context for the rest of the narrative. Julius notes, “Dey wuz a cunjuh ‘oman livin’ down ‘mong’s de free niggers on de Wim’l’ton Road, en all de darkies fum Rockfish ter Beaver Crick wuz feared er her” (Chesnut 36). Already, the reader knows several important things about this conjurer and perhaps other conjurers generally. First, Aunt Peggy is a free black, which shows her position outside of the yoke of slavery and attests to her independence and the power that she has relative to so many others who are still bound to their masters’ caprices. Not only does she have more legal power than many other blacks in her community, but she also has power as a feared member of this society. Julius also emphasizes the range of this reputation: “fum Rockfish ter Beaver Crick” and suggests that Aunt Peggy is special enough that her influence precedes her (36). Julius supplements this introduction with a description of Peggy’s ability to conjure: “Aunt Peggy could “wuk de mos’ powerfulness’ 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 conjuh ‘oman” (Chesnutt 36). The suggestion here is that the conjure woman has a mastery of the human body, just as a medical doctor would profess similar expertise. In much the same way as a doctor, Aunt Peggy has power over life and death, and in the way she is presented by Julius, her mastery goes beyond simply treatment; she has complete control over the body and can cause ailments as effectively as she can cure them.

In this first tale, Julius relates the story of Master Dugal, who cannot keep his slaves from eating the grapes on his vineyard. Dugal then visits Aunt Peggy, and, just as one would pay a doctor for his medical expertise, gives Aunt Peggy ten dollars to work her magic on the grapevines, so as to keep his slaves from eating his profits. When a new slave, Henry, who knows nothing about the goopher, eats some of the grapes, he falls ill. Afterwards, Master Dugal “sent fer a mighty fine doctor, but de med’cine didn’ ‘pear ter do no good; de goopher hada good holt. Henry tole de doctor ‘bout de goopher, but de doctor des laff at ‘im” (Chesnutt 40). The fact that the doctor scorned the mention of conjure shows his limitations. He is hindered by a lack of practical knowledge when it comes to conjure and unable to find anything in his own medical repertoire to combat the slave’s illness. This doctor’s failure becomes even more pronounced when juxtaposed to Aunt Peggy’s skill as a conjure woman. Henry had already eaten the grapes and been healed by Aunt Peggy before this incident with the doctor. Her response, rather than ineffectual and shortsighted, demonstrates a practical knowledge of how to handle the situation: “She fotch out er bottle wid some conjuh medicine in it, en po’d some out in a go’d fer Henry ter drink [...] She ‘lowed dat ‘ud keep de goopher off’n him tel spring; but w’en de sap begin ter rise in de grapevimes he ha’ ter come en see her ag’in, en she tell him w’at

e's ter do" (Chesnutt 38). Aunt Peggy is able to effectively treat the slave and give him instructions for a follow-up visit. In fact, Aunt Peggy's remedy is so reliable that the plantation master decides to make a profit from selling the slave when he is healthy and buying him back at a discounted rate when he ails. Master Dugal knows that buying Henry back will be worth the expense because Aunt Peggy's conjuration will restore him to perfect health again for the spring. Conjuring is shown to have the curative powers that professional medicine does not, and Chesnutt's choice to refer to Aunt Peggy's solution as "conjure medicine" places conjuring as a legitimate alternative to the medicine of white society.

The doctor's reaction in this story was fairly typical of the reaction many whites had to conjuring. Many individuals tried to dismiss conjuring completely, but conjurers still loomed as a threat to white supremacy. In his chapter "The Conjurer as Folk Hero," John W. Roberts notes that

Whites often viewed the respect that enslaved Africans accorded the conjurer not only as a threat to their authority and physical well-being but also as a clear affront to the enlightened Christian values that they attempted to instill in their chattel. The threat in the latter instance issued primarily from the white view of conjuration as a retention of African value among their slaves—a system of values that whites viewed as dangerous because of associations with "Pagan darkness, idolatry and superstition" emanating from a savage African past. (66)

The white community spurned conjure because it did not conform to their Western ideals of propriety and logic. Any remnants of African culture were seen as a threat and as indicators of a dormant savagery in African Americans. So, one of the most effective ways for the white community to detract from the power of conjuring was to attack its legitimacy. By scoffing at

conjuring or describing it as a superstition of the weak-minded, whites, and the medical community specifically, could deny a system that belonged to the African American community and one that ultimately could prove to be a source of power and therefore a means of resistance and a path to humanity, all of which whites had a vested interest in thwarting. At the end of “The Goophered Grapevine,” Henry, the goophered slave, eventually dies at the same time that the grapevines also die. Death, here, signifies the power of conjure. Aunt Peggy’s goopher ultimately resists the power of medical expertise, and her conjuring lasts until the end; it has become the master of Henry’s health, and Julius’s testament to Aunt Peggy’s power is proven to be accurate. Whites were limited by their understanding of a tradition considered by them to be foolish superstition; by denying the validity of conjuring in “The Goophered Grapevine,” they are left with no frame of reference for Henry’s illness other than inadequate medical speculation. Aunt Peggy, however, by performing a feat that is outside the realm of medical expertise, demonstrates conjuring’s capacity to erode the legitimacy of white medical practice.

Black Americans did, in fact, need some force to counter racist discourse in the 19th century. Throughout this period, medicine was used as a means to scientifically justify white superiority and to impose characteristics on black bodies. White physicians acted to legitimize racist ideologies in mainstream society and even used black patients as test subjects for their medical experiments when they could not find willing participants in the white community. In *Doctoring the South: Southern Physicians and Everyday Medicine in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Steven M. Stowe describes the major assumptions made by doctors about their black patients:

First, the visible structures of slavery as a social institution took precedence over more amorphous speculations about the biological nature of race. Second,

physicians pushed for reforms aimed at benefiting slave health but in ways aimed at strengthening slavery. Third, the vexing question of the nature and extent of “Negro disease” remained interesting but largely unsettled—talked about but yielding no clear course of medical action (208).

Stowe acknowledges the interest that many physicians took in the health of black patients, but notes that despite this interest in their well being, the physicians still wrote and spoke about slavery as a natural system, and their views ultimately reinforced white supremacist ideals rather than elevating their subjects to a place of power. In fact, many physicians’ interest in treating black bodies was for selfish interest rather than the health of their patients.⁷ In *Race and Medicine in Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century America*, Todd L. Savitt discusses the tendency of white physicians to prey on African-American patients to be subjects of their riskier or more painful medical experiments. Though physicians often exploited any disenfranchised member of society, including poor whites, black patients, Savitt notes, “were particularly easy targets, given their positions as voiceless slaves, or ‘free persons of color’ in a society sensitive to and separated by race” (77). Without equal rights in society, African Americans had few means of resistance and had to face “dissecting tables, operating amphitheatres, classroom or bedside demonstrations, and experimental facilities” (Savitt 77). Many of the procedures performed on black patients were untested and often painful, and the physicians who performed these experiments, when successful, were met with great admiration in society. Thus, physicians and mainstream medicine gained immense popularity while the black community endured greater and greater mistreatment. This exploitation and abuse led to blacks’ mistrusting white medicine and opened up more of a niche for conjurers, whose expertise did not rely on painful

⁷ In his speech “Rights and Duties” Chesnut recognizes whites’ attempts to justify their mistreatment of blacks: “Men are swayed by self-interest. A man may enjoy a privilege so long that he believes it to be right” (260).

experimentation. This rampant mistreatment of blacks by the medical community suggests Chesnutt's possible impetus for featuring ineffectual physicians throughout his work. In *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race*, Dean McWilliams asserts that "Chesnutt did not make his assertions naively, nor was he ignorant of contemporary scientific debate. Few laymen of Chesnutt's time were better informed than he on the scientific discussion of race" (52). Chesnutt, aware of attempts to assign inferiority upon African Americans, builds a strong conjure tradition with which to combat these essentializing discourses.

In addition to the abuse suffered at the hands of medical practitioners' experiments, African Americans were also threatened by white medical practice through physicians' pathologizing of the black body and through medicine's constant reinforcement of racist ideals. Blacks not only had to worry about the threat of physical trauma from calloused researchers, but they also had to face constant attacks on their humanity and an increasingly accepted, mindless sense of superiority on the part of the white community. In *Race in North America*, Audrey Smedley explains that during the 19th century, "scientists constructed definitions and characterizations of each racial population, focusing especially on the identification of 'the Negro' in the context of what had come to be defined as white civilization" (235). These hypotheses separated African Americans from the white population and claimed that blacks were far inferior to whites. Moreover, since these notions were espoused by some of the foremost physicians, whites typically accepted them without question. Two of the leading hypotheses of the 19th century regarding the origin of races, though necessarily in opposition to one another, proposed that people of African descent were biologically inferior to those of European descent. Monogenesis, the hypothesis that dominated before Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), posited that individuals were produced by a single act of creation and then diverged

through time from their common ancestor (Smedley 238). In this hypothesis, according to Smedley, intellectuals had “long accepted the fall from grace and subsequent ‘degeneration’ as sufficient explication for the dehumanized status of the Negro” (240). This notion suggests that Africans were less highly evolved than Europeans intellectually, culturally, and socially. The other hypothesis of creation, known as polygenesis, was conceived in 1799 by Dr. Charles White, an English physician. Basing the hypothesis on his studies of comparative anatomy, White suggested that blacks were “an intermediate form between true human beings (white Europeans) and apes” (Smedley 236). Despite the contrary nature of the two hypotheses, however, each reinforced racial stereotyping that asserted even more firmly the belief in black inferiority.

The tension between conjurers and doctors in “The Goophered Grapevine” is no mere coincidence. As a result of their simultaneously similar, yet flagrantly oppositional positions, to white physicians, conjurers were appropriate figures to challenge white medical orthodoxy in 19th-century America. In fact, several scholars have commented on the ability of conjure to stand up as a legitimate alternative to traditional white medicine. In his essay “Black Magic: Folk Beliefs of the Slave Community,” Elliot Gorn points out the overlap between magic and medicine in 19th century America:

We must resist the tendency to dichotomize “primitive” superstition and “modern” science, for magical and scientific thinking are not as different as they first appear. Both are singularly empirical in that they match cause and effect through observation; both find pattern, regularity, and order where the untrained eye sees only random events; and both prescribe means of controlling the environment. (295-296)

Indeed, these are the types of similarities that place conjuring in an analogous position to mainstream medical orthodoxy and ultimately allow conjurers to find authority in the community. Conjurers were, in fact, counterparts to white physicians in many ways: each treated illness with specialized knowledge, often with particular remedies, both received payment for their services, and each occupied a respected and influential place in their respective cultures. Throughout *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, Charles Chesnutt relies on the similarities between conjuring and professional medicine to revise mainstream medical discourse and replace racist ideologies with the powerful African-American cultural icon, the conjurer.

In addition to setting up a contrast between Aunt Peggy and a fictional doctor, “The Goophered Grapevine” can also be read as a satire of real-world medical practice when juxtaposed to actual practitioners of the 19th century. Chesnutt satirizes the medicinal ingredients used in medicine by describing the elements of Aunt Peggy’s concoction. In “The Goophered Grapevine,” Julius describes the process by which Aunt Peggy works her conjure magic. Julius states that “she sa’ntered ‘roun’ ‘mong’s de vimes, en tuk a leaf fum dis one, en a grape-hull fum dat one, en a grape-seed fum anudder one; en den a little twig fum here, en a little pinch er dirt fum dere,—en put it all in a big black bottle, wid a snake’s toof en a speckle’ hen’s gall en some ha’rs fum a black cat’s tail, en den fill’ de bottle wid suppernon’ wine” (Chesnutt 36-37). This image, in addition to the mention of “roots en yarbs,” satirizes the ingredients used by doctors to cure patients’ ailments (Chesnutt 98). The parallel becomes more evident when judged alongside the description of a physician’s prescription, such as the remedy described by Dr. Cartwright, a prominent physician and race theorist, for a fever he regards as common to African Americans. Cartwright recommends:

A combination of ipecacuanha, rhubarb and cream of tartar, each half a drachm, and a tea-spoonful of paregoric, in ginger or pepper tea, is a very safe and effectual medicine. It will vomit, if there be bile or much mucosity, and will afterwards act on the bowels, promote secretion of urine, and determine to the surface; after which, a dose or two of quinine will generally effect a cure.

(Hammonds and Herzig 74)

This prescription is extremely similar to Aunt Peggy's directions in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," in which she advises Solomon, "'You take dis home, en gin it ter de cook, ef you kin trus' her, en tell her fer ter put it in yoo' marster's soup de fus' cloudy day he hab okra soup fer dinnah. Min' you follers de d'rections'" (Chesnutt 60). These directions, the okra soup, and the ingredients in "The Goophered Grapevine" function as a satire of the prescription and instructions of a doctor to his patient. In each instance, the practitioner, conjurer or physician, uses peculiar ingredients—snake's tooth and speckled hen's gall or ipecacuanha and drachm—that, no matter which brew they are going into, seem outlandish or at least uncommon to the average person, and administers them in very specific way. Aunt Peggy "pound[s] up some roots en yarbs wid a pestle in a mo'tar," implements just as often featured in the medical community as in conjuring, and she and Cartwright give explicit instructions to the patient. They are to ingest the tonics, certainly, but only by the practitioner's instructions. By drawing the parallel between medicine and conjuring, Chesnutt demonstrates that the white population's faith in medicine can be no more legitimate than the superstitions of conjuring.

If white medicine's authenticity is no more natural than that of conjuring, Cartwright's disparagement of conjurers can be equally applied to white medical practitioners. Cartwright remarks that:

On almost every large plantation, there are one or more negroes, who are ambitious of being considered in the character of conjurers—in order to gain influence, and to make the others fear and obey them. The influence that these pretended conjurers exercise over their fellow servants, would not be credited by persons unacquainted with the superstitious mind of the negro. (Hammonds and Herzig 78)

Cartwright claims that conjurers only have influence as a result of blacks' illogical belief in their powers. However, conjurers played a very practical role in 19th century society and were widely recognized even among the white population.⁸ If whites believed in conjuring and if there were no objective markers placing medicine in a more legitimate plane than conjuring, Cartwright's criticisms of conjure women become just as suggestive about the white community, white physicians, and mainstream medical practices. Again talking about conjurers, Cartwright comments that "these imposters, like all other impostors, take advantage of circumstances to swell their importance, and to inculcate a belief in their miraculous powers to bring good or evil upon those they like or dislike" (Hammonds and Herzig 78). While this disparagement was meant to describe those who practiced conjure, the passage holds the same significance for 19th-century medical practitioners who are taking similar advantage of the white population and its overwhelming desire to prove the worth of whites over blacks. These physicians build their reputations by satisfying the need of the public to have scientific rationalizations for their long-standing beliefs. In effect, they are "tak[ing] advantage of circumstances to swell their importance" (Hammonds and Herzig 78). In *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*,

⁸ In *Conjure in African American Society*, Jeffrey E. Anderson disrupts the suggestion that conjure was merely a charade for the superstitious. He explains that though much of their power did come from the community's buy-in, conjurers still affected real change within in their communities, as spiritualists, yes, but also with practical medicines and poisons. Anderson also points to various accounts that suggested that as much as 50% of the white population believed in conjure (78).

conjuring is conflated with white medical practice and race theorists cannot disparage conjuring without critiquing their own community.

Still, despite the similarities of conjuring to medicine in Chesnutt's work and in 19th-century America, conjuring still usurps medical legitimacy by professing an influence not seen in white medical orthodoxy. Chesnutt demonstrates the significance of conjurers beyond healing and extends their influence past the realm of curatives that confine the doctor's authority. Chesnutt's conjurers perform all manner of improbable feats, from practical applications to the fantastical and supernatural. In "The Goophered Grapevine," when Master Dugal consults Aunt Peggy for a solution to keep his slaves from eating the grapes on his plantation, the typical power dynamic of white over black shifts: "One day in de spring er de year, ole miss pack' up a basket er chick'n en poun'-cake, en a bottle of scuppernon' wine, en Mars Dugal' tuk it in his buggy en driv ober ter Aun' Peggy's cabin. He tuk de basket in, en had a long talk wid Aun' Peggy" (36). In this scene, the master of a plantation is acknowledging the power of this free black woman. He brings her payment for her services and carries on a lengthy conversation with her. This moment demonstrates a closing of the gap between the two races and even an inversion of the traditional power structure. Chesnutt has set up a conjurer as a natural solution to a problem that would be well outside the realm of a professional doctor. Though Aunt Peggy "goophers" only the grapevine in this scenario, many other instances depict conjurers with even more fantastical abilities. In "Po' Sandy," a conjure woman, Tenie, turns her lover into a tree to keep him from being lent out to distant plantations, and in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," Aunt Peggy turns a child, Mose, first into a hummingbird and then into a mocking bird so that he can fly to the distant plantation to which his mother has been sold. Aunt Peggy also shows in this episode that she can communicate with nature; she speaks to a hornet and commands it to sting the knees of the horse

that had been traded for Mose's mother so that the boy's master will cancel the trade and bring the baby's mother home again. These moments are just a couple of examples of the types of powers afforded to conjurers in Chesnutt's stories. The clear command of nature and the supernatural far extends the force of conjurers beyond that of professional physicians and is almost always used as a means of justice through which the conjurer can right some wrong often perpetrated by the white community. The comparative supremacy of conjuring in these instances lessens the force of physicians' arguments of African American inferiority and points out their own limitations while setting up conjuring to be a method of redress for the victims of society's racism.

The supernatural authority of conjuring seen in this contrasts comes from its strong ties to religion,⁹ namely the spirituality of tribal Africa. For many blacks and whites, the supernatural was part of everyday life, and many physical ailments were bound as much to ill luck or the work of spirits as they were to natural causes. David H. Brown asserts, "Conjurers apparently acted in lieu of adequate medical treatment and/or engaged in a pluralistic system of medical care in which both physical and spiritual needs were met" (9). Traditional white physicians were either unwilling or else unable to tend to the spiritual needs of their patients, and conjurers offered themselves as capable solutions to all manner of maladies, physical, psychological, or spiritual, no matter the cause. With its simultaneously parallel yet oppositional relationship to medicine, conjure became an appropriate force to stand in for traditional white medicine and rewrote prescriptive racist depictions of African Americans by offering them valid sources of authority in their own communities.

⁹ In *Conjure in African American Society*, Jeffrey E. Anderson explains that many African Americans subscribed to Christianity without sacrificing their beliefs in conjure. Conjure, a method of control and understanding that was not always available in Christian orthodoxy, became "a form of utilitarian, pragmatic spirituality" (79).

Chapter 2

Chesnutt's direct satire of medical discourse in his tales chips away any attempts to legitimize medicine's racist ideals. One medically-rationalized belief prominent in 19th-century American society, "*Dysaesthesia Aethiopsis*," can find no place in Chesnutt's world of conjure. Dr. Samuel Cartwright, chosen by the Medical Association of Louisiana to describe "the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race," (86) imposes several physical and mental characteristics upon blacks and feeds commonly held perceptions with what was then seen as legitimate medicine:

When left to himself, the negro indulges in his natural disposition to idleness and sloth, and does not take exercise enough to expand his lungs and to vitalize his blood but dozes out a miserable existence...being too indolent and having too little energy of mind to provide for himself proper food and comfortable lodging and clothing. The consequence is, that the blood becomes so highly carbonized and deprived of oxygen, that it not only becomes unfit to stimulate the brain to energy, but unfit to stimulate the nerves of sensation distributed to the body. (82)

According to Cartwright, the naturally lazy black person is prone to a condition in which inactivity leads to a buildup of one gas and a shortage of another, causing what he calls "*Dysaesthesia Aethiopsis*," a condition that leads to "so great a hebetude of the intellectual faculties as to be like a person half asleep, that is with difficulty aroused and kept awake" (Hammonds and Herzig 81). Cartwright then suggests that this condition can only be remedied by the exercise that "is expended in cultivating those burning fields in cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco" (Hammonds and Herzig 84). This physician, speaking as a representative of the government, reinforces racist stereotypes, pathologizes blackness, and sets up slavery as the ideal

preventative to these medical conditions. According to Dean McWilliams, “before Chesnutt could tell the new story of the Negro as a human, he had to untell the dominant narrative of the Negro as subhuman,” something he does in his satire of racial theories (59).

”A Deep Sleeper,” another of Chesnutt’s tales originally rejected from publication, overtly satirizes both *Dysaesthesia Aethiopsis* the theory of blacks’ propensity for sloth. In this tale, one of Master Dugal’s slaves, Skundus, goes missing from the plantation for a month and then eventually comes back to the field to work, explaining that he had been asleep in the barn. Master Dugal’s reaction to Skundus’s return provides a telling look at the white point of view. Master Dugal rages at Skundus: “‘Whar yer be’n run erway ter, yer good-fer-nuthin’, lazy, black nigger...I’m gwine ter gib yer fo’ hundred lashes...I’m gwine ter hang yer up by yer thumbs en’ take ev’y bit er yer black hide off’n yer, en’ den I’m gwine ter sell yer ter de fus’ specilater w’at comes’ long buyin’ niggers fer ter take down ter Alabam’” (Chesnutt 143). This tirade by Master Dugal suggests that the commonly-held belief was that blacks were naturally lazy and were always trying to get out of doing their work. At the end of this tale, however, Chesnutt satirizes the science of this view and the notion of *Dysaesthesia Aethiopsis*. After making the public spectacle of questioning and threatening Skundus, Master Dugal sends for his slave to come to the big house. Julius reports that:

Skundus went up ‘spect’n’ fer ter ketch forty. But w’en he got dere, Marse Dugal’ had fetched up old Doctor Leach fum down on Rockfish, ‘en another young doctor fum town, en’ dey looked at Skundus’s eyes en’ felt of his wris’ en’ pulled out his tong, en’ hit ‘im in de chis’, en’ put dey yeahs ter his side fer ter heah ‘is heart beat; en’ den dey up ‘n made Skundus tell how he felt w’en ‘e went

ter sleep en' how he felt w'en 'e woke up...dey tole Marse Dugal' Skundus had had a catacornered fit, en' had be'n in a trance fer fo' weeks. (Chesnutt 144)

The fact that Master Dugal sent for two doctors and the spectacle of these two giving Skundus a check-up and drawing a medical conclusion based upon Skundus's story suggests that the white community did think that black people were, in fact, susceptible to this type of illness. The conclusion of this tale, however, suggests the folly of such a point-of-view. The doctors tell Master Dugal that since Skundus's fit had occurred around the same time that his girlfriend, Cindy, had been sent away from the plantation and the fact that Skundus had returned right after she did, it was likely that this event was what had triggered the episode and that Master Dugal should allow the two to get married if he wants to keep it from happening again. So, as the story ends, the reader observes a married Skundus and Cindy, and Julius adds that Skundus never had one of those episodes again after that. This entire tale satirizes the medicine of the white community by showing how a slave could act subversively by taking advantage of his white master's belief in and reliance upon the science of the day to reap an advantage he had previously been denied.

In addition to slaves' ability to manipulate their master's belief in medicine, conjure also demonstrates a very real power to heal within the text, an action that is frequently denied the white doctors of Chesnutt's tales. The healing power of Julius's conjure tales¹⁰ becomes clear in the outer narrative of "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny." In this story, John remarks that Annie's health has again begun to wane. John consults a physician, who tells him, "You must keep up her spirits [...] This melancholy lowers her tone too much, tends to lessen her strength, and, if it continue too long, may be fraught with grave consequences" (Chesnutt 82). Again, a white

¹⁰ In his introduction to *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, Richard Brodhead comments on this force: "Julius has his own system of medical expertise, administered not by professional men but by conjure women" (7).

physician recommends treatment for the ailing Annie. However, try as he might, John cannot produce a suitable cure. Not until Julius spins his tale of conjure does Annie begin to get better. When Julius first arrives on the scene, Annie does not have the strength enough to speak. Julius asks her about her health, and John answers, “She is not very cheerful, Julius [...] My wife was apparently without energy enough to speak for herself” (Chesnutt 83). By the conclusion of Julius’s tale, though, Annie is hotly reprimanding her husband for his lack of faith in Julius’s story. John remarks on the change that had come over Annie during the Julius’s oration: “My wife had listened to this story with greater interest than she had manifested in any subject for several days. I had watched her furtively from time to time during the recital, and had observed the play of her countenance. It had expressed in turn sympathy, indignation, pity, and at the end lively satisfaction” (Chesnutt 92). The marked improvement that John describes here contrasts with Annie’s state at the beginning of the narrative: “She became the victim of a settled melancholy, attended with vague forebodings of impending misfortune [...] I tried various expedients to cheer her up [...] But nothing seemed to rouse her from the depression into which she had fallen” (Chesnutt 82). Thus, Julius’s tale has proven a more effective remedy than anything John could otherwise procure. John admits, “My wife’s condition took a turn for the better from this very day, and she was soon on the way to ultimate recovery” (Chesnutt 92). After this confession, Julius’s tale is linked with Annie’s improved health, and it seems that conjure has once again worked its magic. Heather Tirado Gilligan discusses the curative power of Julius’s tales in “Reading, Race, and Charles Chesnutt’s ‘Uncle Julius’ Tales:”

For both Annie and John, then, reading is weighted; it is not just an act of pleasure but an act of necessity: for Annie reading is an act of survival; for John reading is a way in which to keep Annie alive. However, more often than not, the texts

available to John fail to alleviate Annie's depression, and Annie is in constant peril in the frames to Julius's dialect tales. Annie's depression is alleviated consistently only by Julius's recitations and her reaction to his tales. Annie's gratification, in the form of emotional engagement, comes, however, at a price. Julius is not a mere dispenser of folktales; he demands that Annie shift into a different way of thinking before she can engage with his stories. (205)

Gilligan confirms Julius's tales as a restorative and uses this notion to suggest that these tales of conjure are ultimately enacting an even more pronounced benefit. By having power over Annie's health (much akin to the power possessed by conjurers), Julius can demand a price for his services, in this case, acceptance of his paradigm. John has no place else to turn when Annie's illness goes beyond his and the doctor's ability to heal. John and Annie must acknowledge the authenticity of conjuring, and thereby relinquish some of their privileged disdain for African American "superstition." By setting up conjuring, something many whites openly disdained, as a more effective remedy than white medical cures, Chesnutt begins to erode readers' faith in mainstream medicine.

In fact, Chesnutt takes this moment a step further at the end of this story. After having framed the discussion around superstition, and following John's condemnation of Julius's belief in a lucky rabbit's foot, Chesnutt ends the tale with a humorous return of the object. After John's testament to the new-found health of his wife, he finds the rabbit's foot in her coat. This last detail of the story can be read as a privileging of conjure over traditional medicine. Professional medicine relies on the natural world and physical cures, but neither heals Annie. Instead, her belief in the supernatural power of an occult object, the rabbit's foot, prompts a self-healing response. This type of remedy was typical of conjuring; a conjurer would bestow importance on

an otherwise impotent object, and the faith of the community in the conjurer's power would more often than not enact the desired response. So, in this moment with Annie, Julius's tale has kindled her belief in the supernatural, and she has gotten healthy as a result. Conjuring has, in effect, triumphed over medicine in a very practical way.

In addition to being inadequate healers in Chesnut's tales, doctors are also restricted by their need to be a positive force in the community. Doctors pledge to do good acts, tend to the sick, and heal the wounded, and they are held accountable through their reputations. So, even if they are not inclined to do good works, their need to make a living depends on this. Chesnut demonstrates that this is not the case for conjurers. Conjurers have as much power to enact evil as they do to promote good, and unlike the professional physician, conjurers become only more feared and more respected when they use their powers to harm others; they are not restricted by the need to do only good works. In "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," for instance, Chesnut demonstrates the conjurer's professional freedom. In this tale, Dan, a slave, kills the son of a conjure man in order to be with Molly, the woman he loves. To escape the wrath of the conjurer, Dan consults Aunt Peggy. Aunt Peggy gives Dan a charm to ward off the conjure man's attempts to hurt Dan, and this works for a while until the conjure man discovers the charm and destroys it. When Dan becomes vulnerable, the conjure man turns him into a wolf. Dan kills his beloved Molly and is forced to live on as a wolf and without his beloved. This story shows the many sides and abilities of a conjurer. The conjure man in the story was vengeful and powerful, while the conjure woman offered protection and knowledge. This range of power and variability of motives demonstrates the wide influence garnered by conjurers. They are not confined by the same rules of society that white doctors are bound to, and the resulting freedom gives them more power in their community.

These scenes highlighting the strength of conjurers, especially in relation to professional physicians, have deep implications for the relationship among races in 19th century America. With each demonstration of conjurers' authority, Chesnutt suggests the ability of conjuring to invert the paradigm created by professional medicine. As leading intellectuals and vocal describers of black inferiority, white doctors were among the most influential proponents of white supremacy and helped to subjugate blacks by describing, in medical terms, their perceived inferiority. Chesnutt's depiction of conjuring, however, helps to erode the dominant power structure as conjurers supplant white physicians. This inversion, and its relationship to conjure, becomes especially clear in Chesnutt's tale "Mars Jeems's Nightmare." In this story, Master James is a cruel plantation owner, and his overseer, Nick Johnson, is malicious. The slaves are not allowed to have lovers, marry, or have any fun or identity outside of their work. In fact, the conditions are so harsh that a slave seeks the help of the conjure woman. Aunt Peggy, at her own peril, works her conjure magic in order to turn Master James into a slave; Nick is only too happy to add another worker to the ranks. Master James, however, has always had slaves to do his work. As a result of his white, upper-class sense of entitlement, Master James makes a poor slave and is punished severely by the overseer. In the punishment scene, forty lashes is contextualized as a medical treatment, and the story conflates white brutality with medicine: "De nigger went on at a tarrable rate, des lack a wil' man, but co'se he wuz bleedzd ter take his med'cine, fer he wuz tied up en couldn' he'p hisse'f" (Chesnutt 62). Afterwards, when Master James is turned back into himself, Nick is fired and the slaves are allowed a measure of fun on the plantation. In this scenario, Chesnutt uses conjure to erase the gap between slave and slave owner and shows the power of conjure to enact social change. Also, by casting punishment as medicine, the author suggests that one source of negativity against African Americans lies in the

professional practice of medicine. As evidenced by the multitude of physicians describing black inferiority and assigning negative characteristics to the African American population, medicine acted in 19th-century American society in much the same way that it is contextualized in “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare.” Medicine became a tool for controlling the black population in much the same way that lashes were used to keep slaves under the control of their masters. Medicine threatened the same physical and psychological trauma that the lash represented, and by making this connection between punishment and medicine, Chesnutt critiques the benevolence of professional medical practice and exposes it as yet another device of the white population to oppress African Americans. By the end of the story, though the system has not been eroded completely, the slaves have won a small victory. Conjure has provided a path from subjugation to a place of power. Aunt Peggy has, in some small way, humanized Master James by using her conjure to open his eyes to the slaves’ plight and so has made their lives more livable, and in turning him into a slave, has demonstrated the power of conjuring to invert the paradigm of white privilege written by medical orthodoxy.

Chapter 3

According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in “Writing Race and the Difference It Makes,” race is a literary device through which different characteristics are imposed through language (1579). One of the most threatening characteristics imposed upon African Americans was their supposed mental inferiority. In addition to Cartwright’s disparagement of blacks, Dr. Samuel Morton used his study of the cranial sizes of different races to support the belief that African Americans had a diminished mental capacity (Smedley 240). Morton, who found African skulls to be the smallest, argued that this correlated to smaller brains among Africans and thereby claimed that they did not have the mental faculty of whites (Smedley 241). However, despite attempts in mainstream medicine to label blacks as inferior, Chesnutt depicts a cast of African-Americans who are highly intelligent, sophisticated thinkers.¹¹ The most able testament to forethought and imagination among African Americans within Chesnutt’s work is Julius, whose many tales show a vivid and astute understanding of the world. Not only can Julius craft colorful, entertaining tales for John and Annie, but this wily storyteller also uses his tales benefit himself. For example, in “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” John is considering buying a mule prior to Julius’s tale and changes his mind, to the benefit of Julius, as a result of the story. When John tells Julius about his intention to purchase a mule, Julius says, “I doan lack ter dribe a mule. I’s alluz afeared I mought be imposin’ on some human creetur; eve’y time I cuts a mule wid a hick’ry, ‘pears ter me mos’ lackly I’s cuttin’ some er my own relations, er somebody e’s e w’at can’t he’p deyse’ves” (Chesnutt 71). This passage laments the mistreatment of a living, feeling entity, and shows Julius’s forethought and ability to command the direction of his discourse with John. In

¹¹ In fact, Chesnutt knew and discredited Morton’s work. In his essay “The Future American,” Chesnutt shows his familiarity with popular claims against African Americans, including Morton’s: “It has been demonstrated that the shape or size of the head has little or nothing to do with the civilization or average intelligence of a race; that language, so recently lauded as an infallible test of racial origin is of absolutely no value in this connection, its distribution being dependent upon other conditions than race” (47-48).

this instance, as with several other moments in the text, Julius is acting as a trickster figure and using his cunning to take advantage of John. In “Goophering Around: Authority and the Trick of Storytelling in Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*,” Julia B. Farwell describes the ways in which Chesnutt and Julius become tricksters to reap a benefit from their audiences. Farwell argues that Chesnutt “asserts racial pride and trickster energy in the twin powers of conjure and ‘signifying,’ self-authorizing rituals that challenge the surviving blackwhite [sic] relationships inherited from slavery” (79). Chesnutt uses his narrative to get white readers to see a realistic portrayal of race relations in 19th-century America and allows his characters, most notably Julius, to become complex thinkers and manipulators. Farwell asserts that with Julius, Chesnutt does one better than the stock trickster character, who is often working for his or her own selfish gains (though survival hardly seems selfish); Julius often dupes John for the good of others as much as he does for his own benefit:

Chesnutt’s conjure tales also expand the traditional African American trickster from the appetites of Br’er Rabbit’s (and Julius’s) food-getting to the communal interests of both Uncle Julius and Chesnutt himself. Whenever Julius profits from his cunning, it is usually for someone other than himself. He seeks a job for his nephew, a meeting place for his church group, or renewed health for Annie.

Through his tales, Julius is forming a community within which the conjure work of story is both a creative agent and an invitation to the listener to join. (79-80)

In this case, Julius’s actions as trickster also translate to a benefit for the community—family, friends, and readers alike, and his savvy manipulation of John can hardly be seen as unintelligent.

In “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” though Julius’s motives are more self-serving, his actions as trickster are no less potent. He uses his commentary about the mule to bait John into asking his meaning and spins a tale in which he describes a slave, Primus, who is transformed into a mule after stealing a baby pig from a conjure man. Then, after he concludes this tale, Julius remarks, “ef you makes up yo’ min’ not ter buy dat mule, suh...I knows a man w’at’s got a good hoss he wants ter sell” (Chesnutt 80). This moment of connection demonstrates Julius’s intentions all along. The reader understands, though John may not yet, that Julius has been working this angle from the moment he started speaking with John. Julius’s purposeful telling of “The Conjurors Revenge” is designed to elicit a specific action from the listener. When Julius ends his tale, John decides to buy the horse as Julius suggests. Soon afterward, however, John reports that the creature is lame and that it has died soon after he purchased it. Only after this has happened does John contemplate Julius’s complicity in the deal:

Circumstances that afterwards came to my knowledge created in my mind a strong suspicion that Julius may have played a more than unconscious part in this transaction. Among other significant facts was his appearance, the Sunday following the purchase of the horse, in a new suit of store clothes...As I had not recently paid Julius any money, and as he had no property to mortgage, I was driven to conjecture to account for his possession of the means to buy the clothes. (Chesnutt 80-81)

Thus, Julius manipulates John with the story that he tells and profits from John’s purchase of the horse. This maneuvering demonstrates the sophistication Julius’s imagination and attests to his capacity to plan ahead. Julius was ready with a story and knew exactly how to manipulate John into soliciting the tale but also into buying the horse instead of purchasing a mule as he had

originally planned. For this reason, Julius exists within Chesnutt's work as a definite contradiction to the assertion that African Americans have a diminished capacity for forethought and imagination. Julius, though no conjurer himself, uses the discourse of conjure to gain an advantage and to erode the veracity of the intellectual discourse.

Though Julius relies on conjuring in his tales and is ostensibly superstitious, he also uses this device to subvert his white listeners and gain some type of advantage. That is, he plays on the white community's disdain for superstition to again act as a trickster and reap an advantage. For example, in "The Goophered Grapevine," Julius attempts to rely on the superstition of the goopher to dissuade John from purchasing the vineyard. Though this device is not particularly effective in this instance, the use of this trope suggests that Julius may be employing this technique elsewhere within Chesnutt's tales. The efficacy of this design is seen in "Po' Sandy," in which Julius shares a tale of Sandy, a slave who, in an effort to keep his master from lending him out so frequently to distant farms, allows his wife, Tenie to transform him into a tree. Tragically, Tenie is sent away to care for her master's ill daughter-in-law, and Sandy, still a tree, is chopped down, cut up at the saw mill, and used to build a kitchen for the master's house. Sandy then begins to haunt the kitchen until the mistress of the house cannot take it anymore and has the new kitchen taken apart. The lumber is then used to construct a schoolhouse, and prior to Julius's tale, John and Annie had been considering using the wood from the schoolhouse to build a new kitchen for their home. After hearing the tale, however, Annie decides that she does not want to use the lumber after all, owing, no doubt, to her belief in Julius's narrative, and allows Julius to use the schoolhouse as a meeting place for his church. John realizes that Julius has tricked them and asks what they were going to do about the ghost of Sandy, to which Annie replies, "Oh...Uncle Julius says that ghosts never disturb religious worship, but that if Sandy's

spirit *should* happen to stray into meeting by mistake, no doubt the preaching would do it good” (Chesnutt 54). In the case of this tale, Julius relies on the belief in conjuring and the supernatural to obtain something that he wanted, a meeting place for him and his fellow churchgoers. Interestingly, Julius wins this prize by playing on the superstitious nature of a white person, Annie, who exhibits at least a partial belief in his story. Here, Chesnutt undermines the correlation between black individuals and superstitions and implicates the white population instead. In portraying these white individuals as gullible and by showing that they are inclined to believe in something fantastical with no more proof than persuasive rhetoric, Chesnutt’s work could be viewed as an indictment of the medicine of the day, which was accepted with as much blind faith and as little proof as these superstitions. After reading Chesnutt’s work, how could whites follow any logic that boasted no real proof? Chesnutt’s tales rely on whites’ unquestioning belief in both medicine and superstition to suggest that conjuring and white medicine were on equal levels in the 19th century. Medicine was used by the white population in much the same way that Julius employed superstitions in “Po’ Sandy,” to promote a belief in something that will deliver a thing of value to the rhetorician, in the case of white society, the peace of mind that their superiority can be “scientifically” justified, even “scientifically” proven. Chesnutt suggests that “proof” is in believability rather than “fact.”

The clear reliance of Julius on conjuring as a trope and the many examples of superstitious white characters within the collection further suggest that there is no true merit to the views held by white society about blacks and superstitions. John articulates this position when he tells Julius, “Your people will never rise in the world until they throw off these childish superstitions and learn to live by the light of reason and common sense” (Chesnutt 83). John’s suggestion is that superstitions are evidence of black intellectual inferiority, which is the reason

this group cannot hold a more significant place within society. Julius, however, points out the flaw in John's logic in "The Goophered Grapevine, when he says, "Well, I dunno whe'r you b'lieves in cunj'in' er not,—some er de w'ite folks don't, er says dey don't,—but de truf er de matter is dat dis yer old vimya'd is goophered" (Chesnutt 35). Julius's remark that the white folks "says dey don't" believe in conjuring suggests that they really do believe in this superstition, but do not want to be judged on a racial characteristic that was believed to indicate a weak mind. However, Chesnutt also suggests that these theories were imposed on the black population and did not reflect inherent characteristics of blacks. The insinuation that whites are just as superstitious as blacks is confirmed through several superstitious white characters. For example, in "The Goophered Grapevine," Master Dugal pays Aunt Peggy to goopher his grapevines so that his slaves do not continue to eat the grapes from which he makes his living. Similarly, when Julius describes Master Dugal's relationship with the conjure woman in "Hot-Footed Hannibal," Julius says, "Mars' Dugal' has warned de han's befo' 'bout foolin' wid cunju'ation; fac', he had los' one er two niggers hisse'f fum long ago, on'y Aun' Peggy wuz a free 'oman, en he wuz 'feard she'd cunjuh him. En w'iles Mars' Dugal' say he didn' b'liebe in cunj'in' en sich, he 'peared ter 'low it wuz bes' ter be on de safe side, en let Aun' Peggy alone" (Chesnutt 116). Here, though Master Dugal denies that he believes in conjuring, he is concerned that Aunt Peggy might put a spell on him if he does something to offend her. This belief in conjuring suggests that the white members of society are just as prone to belief in the fantastic as are those of African descent.

Superstition among the white folks in Chesnutt's narrative extends beyond conjuring. One of the most superstitious figures in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* is Annie, who demonstrates her belief in conjuring and superstition throughout the narrative. At the end of

“The Goophered Grapevine,” this propensity is made clear: “‘Is that story true?’ asked Annie doubtfully, but seriously, as the old man concluded his narrative” (Chesnutt 43). Annie’s earnestness in asking this question suggests her susceptibility to the superstitions implicit in Julius’s tale, a vulnerability confirmed later in the work. In “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny,” Julius shows off his rabbit’s foot and tells John and Annie that this item brings good luck. Julius then relates the tale of a slave named Becky who was sold to another plantation and separated from her child. At the end of the tale, John is incredulous and does not grant any significance to the story whatsoever. His wife, however, immediately understands the correlation with the rabbit’s foot and “promptly” says “I rather suspect...that Sis’ Becky had no rabbit’s foot,” a notion that Julius quickly confirms and suggests that Becky’s crisis never would have come about if she had owned a rabbit’s foot (Chesnutt 92). Some days afterward, as John retrieves his wife’s handkerchief, Julius’s rabbit’s foot falls out of the pocket of Annie’s dress. At this point, the reader understands that Annie was not only receptive to the ethical point of Julius’s tale, but also she believed in the power that this lucky item supposedly contained. Chesnutt’s depiction of Annie, therefore, works to debunk the notion of black inferiority based on beliefs in superstitions and conjuring.

John’s description of Julius during their first encounter also suggests the former slave’s ability. John comments that “there was a shrewdness in his eyes, too, which was not altogether African, and which, as we afterwards learned from experience, was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character” (Chesnutt 34). John’s suggestion here is that Julius must be of mixed parentage, since such mental sharpness could not be born of only African blood. The fact that John automatically accounts for Julius’s mental capacity as “not all together African” (Chesnutt 34) indicates the nature of racism after the war. Yet, despite John’s qualifications of

Julius's attributes, he is still aware that Julius is intelligent, and the reader realizes that this is not contrary to nature, as John suggests. The passage also indicates that, as Martin points out, "Julius's former status as a slave, inherited from his mother because 'female slaves passed their status on to their children,' certainly implies that the 'other' blood is paternal and came from a white source," which implies the sexual exploitation of Julius's mother (82). In his reliance (albeit unwittingly) upon racist ideologies, John becomes a stand-in for the average American during this time and is thus ill-equipped to handle the implications of Julius's conjure tales. In viewing Julius as a spectacle, John does not realize that Julius has a better understanding of the world as a result of his second-hand knowledge of conjure than he (John) does from his deference to medicine.

In addition to being critical of logic that asserted African Americans' lack of imagination and foresight, Chesnutt also undermines the notion of a child-like mentality that is put forth by Cartwright and others. In "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," Julius recounts a tale of Mars Jeems, a slave owner who is transformed into a slave at the hands of a conjure woman. After the tale, Julius provides John and Annie with the moral of the tale that "w'ite folks w'at is so ha'd en stric', en doan make no 'lowance fer po' ign'ant niggers w'at ain' had no chanst ter l'arn, is li'ble ter hab bad dreams, ter say de leas', en dat dem w'at is kin' en good ter po' people is sho' ter prosper en git 'ong in de worl'" (Chesnutt 68). Then, when John remarks to Julius, "did you make that up all by yourself?" the statement seems condescending, especially following John's patronizing statement, "yes, Julius...that was powerful goopher," in which his choice of words and the blatant indulgence of Julius's assertions are reminiscent of an adult speaking to a child, an injustice that becomes even more flagrant considering the fact that Julius is John's elder by many years (Chesnutt 69). Chesnutt's portrayal of John suggests that this white character

believes Julius to have a more child-like frame of mind and suggests John's sense of advantage as a white man, a notion that was wholeheartedly endorsed and naturalized by the medical community. Also, when John says, "[the moral] might have escaped us otherwise," he is either displaying a continued condescension by implying that the moral was obvious or suggesting that such a conclusion was baseless and beneath his notice, either of which is enough to implicate John as a proponent of white superiority. Heather Tirado Gilligan expounds on John's investment in racist ideologies. She points to John's unwillingness (or inability) to see Julius's point in this episode and his failure to empathize with Julius's tales in the way that Annie can as moments of misreading. Gilligan argues that:

These failures of John's reading practices are implicitly attributed to the ways in which his thinking is informed by genres like plantation fiction. Plantation fiction suggests that blacks are unknowable in terms of lived interaction but imminently knowable when examined and reconstituted by an able translator. John buys into this logic and sees everything that Julius does through the lens of such a translation; John thinks that he already knows both Julius and slavery. (209)

John has been so indoctrinated by the slanted view of the world put forth in the plantation tradition and in the medical literature that he cannot place value on Julius as person or on Julius's tales in any real way. John's mislearning has poisoned his ability to see Julius in any other way than as a base commodity. To John, Julius is a coachman and a performer, and he exists for John's enjoyment. Gilligan further emphasizes this point by noting that "John's views on the primitiveness and childishness of African Americans do not undergo a significant change in the course of the stories" (16). John is stuck as an unsympathetic, flat character, and though he

figures prominently throughout *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, he exists only as a foil to Julius and as a lifeless representative of white supremacist ideals.

In the tale, John's conceit, though aimed at deflating Julius's worth, is undermined by the fact that no matter what the opinions of this white couple, Julius's story still works upon Annie, to give the former's slave what he wants in the end. Annie gives Julius's grandson Tom, whom John had already fired for not doing his job properly, another chance. Therefore, even though Julius seems to have a childlike mentality in the eyes of John and Annie, his ability to reckon with this white couple to provide for his family demonstrates that he is instead taking advantage of their prejudices. Julius's character alone is enough to suggest that he does not need to depend upon the white population for his own survival. Before John and Annie arrived at the vineyard, Julius had, in the words of John, "occupied a cabin on the place for many years, and derived a respectable revenue from the product of the neglected grapevines" (Chesnutt 43). Julius's ability to be self-sufficient suggests that, far from needing the care of the white community, these interlopers actually interfere with Julius's previously happy, carefree, and more importantly, *independent* lifestyle.

Far from being paragons of morality, the white characters in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* reflect poorly on the white population. Cartwright asserts that "the cause, in most cases, that induces the negro to run away from service, is as much a disease of the mind as any other species of mental alienation" and calls this condition "Drapetomania" (Hammonds and Herzig 79). Cartwright goes on to suggest that there are easy preventatives and solutions to this problem; this can be avoided or remedied by masters simply being kind to slaves, and if this does not work sufficiently, masters should turn to more physical tactics to maintain discipline (Hammonds and Herzig 80-81). Despite Cartwright's attempts to justify the institution of

slavery and describe it as a natural arrangement, Chesnutt shows just how terrifying and abusive whites could be in their place of power. “The Dumb Witness” exhibits multiple examples of negative white characters, from John, who is telling the tale, to the white characters who feature most prominently. Before John ever begins relating the tale, he describes his interests in “the old Murchinson place,” which also features prominently in the tale. John remarks, “I had noticed many resources of the country that the easy-going Southerners had not thought of developing; and I took advantage of them when I found it convenient and profitable to do so” (Chesnutt 158). John again proves himself to be the worst kind of opportunist. He reads profit into all of the natural elements that surround him and feels entitled to them all. He also remarks on the “easy-going Southerners” without mentioning the desolate state that the South would have been in during this time (158). Not only had a large chunk of their population been killed in the Civil War, but Southerners also had to worry about the broken infrastructure and extreme poverty left as a result. They were not “easy-going;” they were devastated by the War and just trying to rebuild. The fact that John has no trouble profiting from their ruin suggests a more sinister aspect to his character than he, as narrator, would confess.

After John’s commentary on the purpose of his visit, he recounts the tale he heard from Julius about the tenants of an old plantation house on the road. This tale proves to be one of the most horrific, if not with a moment of grotesque justice at the end. The story tells of Malcolm Murchinson, a young white man of privilege, and the family’s domestic slave, Viney. Malcolm courts a young widow, Mrs. Todd, and has been promised her hand in marriage. When Viney is told of the engagement, she is devastated: “The housekeeper had been in power too long to yield gracefully, or perhaps she foresaw the dreaded future. Some passionate strain of the mixed blood in her veins—a very human blood—broke out in a scene of hysterical violence. She

pleaded, remonstrated, raged” (Chesnutt 164). However, despite Viney’s intense feelings, the reader is immediately shown through Malcolm’s that she has no power in this relationship: “You had better be quiet and obedient. I have heard what you have to say—this once—and it will be useless for you to repeat it, for I shall not listen again. If you are reasonable, I will send you to the other plantation. If not, I will leave you here, with your new mistress” (Chesnutt 165).

Though Malcolm’s reaction may seem tame compared to the brutality seen in some of the other tales, he is no less of a monster than the other slave owners. First, he commands Viney’s obedience, an act that, given the strong will that she demonstrate, is devastating in its calm power to dominate. Her options too are falsely hopeful. She can either be a slave on some unknown plantation, maybe “down the river,” likely as a field hand rather than her less physically demanding job in the Murchinson household, or she can serve a new mistress. The ease with which another human being can gain total control over her is bad enough, but Viney’s already complicated situation becomes hopeless with the suggestion of a sexual relationship between her and Malcolm. Viney could have been feeling a mixture of different emotions as a result of this, none of which would have been even remotely positive. She could be jealous of having to serve a woman who is sleeping with her former sexual partner. Though a slave never could have had the ability to truly consent to sex with a white man, Viney still could have developed feelings for her master. Even if this were not the case, Viney would still be in constant danger. There would have been nothing to prevent Malcolm from continuing to have sex with her, and with a new mistress, Viney would have to fear her retribution if she found out about the relationship. It would automatically be viewed as Viney’s fault, though the power never really lay with her. So, as calm as Malcolm oration’s was, so too was it charged with ominous meaning.

Though this moment would have been enough to paint Malcolm as a negative image of whiteness in Chesnut's tale, the plantation owner more overtly displays his malice before the end of the tale. After Viney hears that she will have a new mistress, the text suggests, and Malcolm assumes, that she goes to speak with Mrs. Todd to reveal her sexual relationship with Malcolm. As a result, Mrs. Todd breaks off the engagement, and Malcolm, guessing at what Viney has done, brutally attacks her:

“I will teach you,” he said to his housekeeper, who quailed before him, “to tell tales about your master. I will put it out of your power to dip your tongue in where you are not concerned.”

There was no one to say him nay. The law made her his. It was a lonely house, and no angel of mercy stayed his hand. (Chesnut 165)

Malcolm demonstrates the utter power that masters had over their slaves, and the great tragedies that they could inflict without consequences. The rest of the tale is dominated by Viney's muteness, and Malcolm's raging at her because she will not reveal the location of a will granting him his inheritance. So, though Viney ultimately gets a measure of justice (she never reveals the location of the will, though the reader finds out after Malcolm's death that she could speak all along), the overwhelming heartlessness of Malcolm still dominates the tale. John, an unfeeling opportunist, and Malcolm, a cruel and exploitative master, both represent negative depictions of white characters that completely invert the racist stereotypes heaped on black individuals by white medical discourse.

These illustrations of white depravity become even more telling considering that one of the prominent stereotypes of African Americans was their moral inferiority. This notion is implicit in what George Stocking characterizes as “the gap between civilized white and savage

black men” (Smedley 245), and what Audrey Smedley pronounces as the view that African Americans had “an inherent inclination toward crime, debauchery, and sloth” (Smedley 247). Thus, the view that black individuals are savage, uncivilized, and prone to debauchery and crime suggests a deficient morality among blacks, especially opposed to the concept of the educated, more highly evolved white society. Chesnut’s work, however, heavily critiques this notion and suggests an opposing truth that criticizes this notion of white superiority, especially from a moral standpoint. The tale in which this critique becomes most evident is in “Dave’s Neckliss,” one of the stories originally rejected for publication. Dave, an upstanding slave who taught the others on the plantation about religion, falls in love with another slave, Dilsey. The two are about to be married, but Wiley, another slave who wants to have Dilsey for himself, steals hams from the smokehouse and places them under the floor of Dave’s cabin in order to frame him. When Master Dugal finds the hams, he becomes angry at Dave and hands him to the overseer, Master Walker, to punish him as he sees fit. Julius describes Dave’s punishment: “Mars Walker tuk ‘n tied Dave up en gin ‘im forty; en den he got some er dis yer wire clof w’at dey uses fer ter make sifters out’n, en tuk’n wrap’ it roun’ de ham en fasten it tergedder at de little een’. Den he tuk Dave down ter de blacksmif-shop, en had Unker Silas...fasten a chain ter de ham, en fasten de yuther een’ er de chain roun’ Dave’s neck” (Chesnut 128). Master Walker then makes Dave wear the ham around his neck for months, until Dave starts to go crazy. Julius explains that “Dave had kep’ on gittin’ wusser en wusser in his mine, ‘tel he des got ter b’lievin’ he wuz all done turnt ter a ham; en den he had gone en built a fier, en tied a rope roun’ his neck, des lack de hams wuz tied, en had hung hiss’f up in de smoke-‘ouse fer ter kyo” (Chesnut 134). Dave hangs himself as a result of the cruelty of Master Walker’s punishment. Despite Wiley’s unsavory morals, however, the reader sees that the white overseer of the plantation is the real monster in

this episode. Even when contrasted with the most immoral of the slaves on the plantation, the white community still represents a more glaring depravity. Julius's play on words here, "fer to kyo," suggests a link between Dave's macabre death and medicine, which sought to describe and *cure* contemporary ills (Chesnutt 134). Dave's death discredits widely accepted medical beliefs and suggests the inhuman barbarism of contemporary racist ideologies.

Despite the tragedy of Dave's tale, Chesnutt also provides instances in which white attempts at exploitation backfire. "A Victim of Heredity; or, Why the Darkey Loves Chicken" serves as a parody of contemporary racial ideologies and works to undermine this discourse through humor. Beginning with its title, the tale hearkens contemporary racial theories. The word "heredity" is reminiscent of the tendency of whites, specifically origin theorists, to describe African-American inferiority as a product of their birth, and "victim" suggests the suffering of blacks who were the targets of these spurious notions. Throughout the tale, however, Chesnutt uses these connotations for humorous effect, while still levying a critique of exploitative white culture. With the framing of the tale, John's introduction to the story seems shortsighted, at best. John begins the tale ruminating on the nature of blacks after the Civil War: "I went to North Carolina a few years after the war with some hopeful views in regard to the colored people. It was my idea that with the larger opportunities of freedom they would improve gradually and learn in due time to appreciate the responsibilities of citizenship" (Chesnutt 172). John's sense of things here is either extremely naïve or deliberately mocking when considered where his commentary is heading. He next comments: "There were a few of my dusky neighbors, however, who did not shake off readily the habits formed under the old system, and I suffered more or less, from time to time, from petty thievery" (Chesnutt 172). Despite the strong attempts of whites to oppress, demean, and thwart blacks after the Civil War, John suggests that any

failure by an African American is the result of his or her own failing and not connected to the white community. The fact that John paints himself as the sufferer makes this ironic speech even more galling. John's purchase of the vineyard likely terminated the livelihood of many other free blacks who, like Julius, had been using the unoccupied land as a source of food or income. Even if John had not personally threatened their ability to procure food, many blacks still would have struggled to find employment; part of asserting the inferiority of African Americans was to diminish their worth as breadwinners and make room for whites to occupy open jobs. In light of these circumstances, John's complaint at the beginning of the tale clearly comes from a position of wealth and privilege.

In order trap the thief and "determined to protect [his] property," John lays in wait and eventually captures someone trying to steal one of his chickens (Chesnutt 172). John locks this individual in his smokehouse and considers how to punish him for his theft. When John learns of the captive's wife and family, his reaction reasserts his selfishness: "But while these personal matters might be proper subjects of consideration for the humanitarian, I realized that any false sentiment on my part would be dangerous to social order; and that property must be protected, or soon there would be no incentive to industry and thrift" (Chesnutt 173). Even given the benefit of the doubt, John still clearly buys into the "social order" privileging whites. The fact that he considers his actions to be the appropriate way to uphold the nation's ideals suggests that he too is a product of racist ideologies. Like many average citizens, John has come to consider whites' dominant place in society as justified. When Julius enters the scene, he makes an excuse for the prisoner by claiming that all blacks have an inborn love of chicken. The suggestion that blacks are born with this characteristic "in their blood" once more connects the tale to medicine and this time parodies the supposedly "natural" characteristics imposed on blacks (Chesnutt 174). Julius

goes on to say that “a w’ite man’s ter blame fer dat” (Chesnutt 174). That is, whites are responsible for these so-called in-born qualities; they are social, not natural.

As this discussion prompts a tale from Julius, white exploitation becomes even more apparent. The story tells of Master Donald McDonald, a rich and exceptionally greedy white landowner and his nephew, Master Tom. McDonald steals from his nephew’s inheritance and leaves him broke and unable to marry the woman he loves. Shortly after, Tom rescues Aunt Peggy from the river, and she vows to repay the favor. At the same time, McDonald has come to the conclusion that feed his slaves is costing too much money. So, he visits Aunt Peggy to see if she can fix his problem. In this tale, Aunt Peggy’s fee is one silver dollar during McDonald’s first visit and another when he returns to hear her solution. McDonald, however, attempts twice to take advantage of Aunt Peggy. The first time, he tries to take back his silver dollar when Aunt Peggy’s back is turned, but the dollar becomes hot and burns McDonald’s hand. The second time, though McDonald has a pocket full of silver and gold coins, he gives Aunt Peggy a lead coin. She works her conjure on the coin to make McDonald think that it is a gold piece and asks for change. He obliges, and Aunt Peggy takes a much larger payment than her original fee. In these two interactions with Peggy, McDonald’s sense of entitlement is clear. He attempts to exploit Aunt Peggy, even though she is helping him save money on his plantation, but each time, conjuring resists white privilege. McDonald makes a third attempt at exploiting Aunt Peggy and his slaves. Despite Peggy’s instructions to sprinkle her goopher mixture on the slaves’ rations and cut them in half once, McDonald attempts to take advantage of the mixture by continuing to serve it to his slaves and by continuing to half their rations. Eventually, however, McDonald’s slaves refuse to eat and are nearly dead as a result, so he consults Peggy again to heal them. Peggy advises McDonald that he should try feeding his slaves roast pork, so McDonald

slaughters all of his pigs to feed his slaves. When this does not work, Peggy tells him to try roast beef, and McDonald slaughters his cows. When there is still no change, Peggy advises McDonald that he should feed the slaves chicken. McDonald slaughters all of his chickens to feed his slaves and must go through all of his money and credit to buy more. Eventually, McDonald is broke and his slaves are restored to health, though they must be fed chicken weekly in order to stay healthy. Tom, who, upon Aunt Peggy's advice, had secretly been selling his uncle the chickens, ends the story rich and on good terms with Peggy, whom he rewards with chicken and bread whenever she desires them. The circumstances of this tale prove especially illuminating in light of its association, through the frame and the title, with racist medical discourse. McDonald's efforts to exploit Aunt Peggy aligns with whites' attempts to get ahead in society by disenfranchising blacks. The fact that he is unable to make the conjure work for him properly, other than in the way Peggy prescribes, marks conjuring as a uniquely African-American source of power that lies outside of whites' exploitative reach. Instead of benefitting McDonald, the conjuring ultimately confers an advantage instead upon his slaves instead, who are guaranteed regular meals of chicken. Peggy functions as an example of African-American cunning, and Tom models the type of behavior that should characterize race relations; he values Peggy's life in the beginning when he saves her, and he treats her as an equal at the end of the text. Ultimately, "A Victim of Heredity; or, Why the Darkey Loves Chicken" highlights the foolish belief of whites' in racial determinism and demonstrates African Americans' powerful recourse to conjure.

Conclusion

Thus, given the weight of racist medical writings during the antebellum and post-bellum periods, one may easily see how deeply entrenched the white community's view of black inferiority had become and how medicine had been feeding into these racist ideologies. Though origin theorists sometimes disagreed over specifics, they still reinforced the prevalence of racism. According to John Haller, "Almost the whole of scientific thought in both America and Europe in the decades before Darwin accepted race inferiority, irrespective of whether the races sprang from a single original pair or were created separately" (Smedley 246). Following the Civil War, individuals were using Darwin's theories on evolution to comment on the newly freed African American population and questioned this group's fitness, suggesting that "the Negro' had not evolved to the same degree as whites" (Smedley 247). Scientists such as Samuel Cartwright, who described features and diseases relegated to African Americans, Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, who wrote about the differences of different types of human beings (Smedley 243), and Louis Agassiz, who separated whites and blacks into different species (Smedley 244), confirmed and characterized intellectual classifications founded on racism. Whites' belief in these claims fueled desires to persecute blacks, and 19th-century American society became a hotbed of racial tension. Growing up as an African American in these tempestuous times, Charles Chesnutt was not only aware of this racism; he actively criticized it. During this period, Chesnutt wrote *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, which undermined, satirized, and offered alternatives to the medically-justified racism of the day. Chesnutt used white and black characters, as well as the notion of conjuring and superstition to show that, though the inferiority of blacks was taken for granted and medically qualified and quantified, these characteristics were baseless and superficial and could often describe the white community. These intellectuals were,

as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes in “Writing, ‘Race,’ and the Difference It Makes” using the arbitrary designation of race to impose certain characteristics upon the black population (Gates 1579). Despite these attempts to demonize African Americans, however, Chesnut’s work demonstrates that arbitrary designations of racial difference are far more damning than they are instructive and that they have little basis in the real human experience. Chesnut’s tales should be considered with the force and the intention that he described as characteristic of all good literature:

Literature may be viewed in two aspects—as an expression of life, past and present, and as a force directly affecting the conduct of life, present and future. I might call these the subjective and objective sides of literature—or, more lucidly, the historical; and the dynamic, the forceful, the impelling. History is instructive, and may warn or admonish; but to this quality literature adds the faculty of persuasion, by which men’s hearts are reached, the springs of action touched, and the currents of life directed (114).

The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales does justice to all of these responsibilities; it shows life as it was in 19th-century America and gives it human, social, and historical context, and beyond that, Chesnut’s tales persuade the reader to action, and if not to action, to change. His tales have the force to resist the drive to normalize black inferiority and the ability to inspire skepticism and promote self-identity; and, as an alternative to traditional white medicine, Chesnut’s conjure medicine “can cure the disease of racism and being to heal the wounds of slavery” (Guzzio 75).

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