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Inventing Queer: Portals, Hauntings, and Other Fantastic Tricks in the Collected Folklore of Joel Chandler Harris and Charles Chesnutt

Abstract Through an analysis of *Little Mr. Thimblefinger and His Queer Country* (1894) by Joel Chandler Harris and *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* (1899) by Charles Chesnutt, this essay attempts to account for a late nineteenth-century genre termed the *queer fantastic*. In so doing, it suggests that in the late nineteenth century, the term *queer*, as a signifier of distorted time, became central to debates over race and the nature of folkloric belonging.
Keywords black, queer, folklore, portal, historiography

> If queer could be reclaimed to the point that it is fully absorbed and assimilated, then what would a neutral queer look, feel, sound, or taste like? Or—to indulge a bit further—a *neutered* queer?
> —Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012)

Black queer theory has long retained, as one of its defining features, a certain hesitation to recognize the term *queer* as a useful category of analysis. In the early years of its ascendancy as a mode of resistance in scholarship, *queer* was contested as a potential euphemism for a new brand of white elitism. Perhaps the most influential essay to articulate this concern was Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," published in *GLQ* in 1997. Here Cohen (1997, 450) argued that queer was quickly becoming a banner under which white academics felt free to "disregard historically or culturally recognized categories

American Literature, Volume 89, Number 1, March 2017
DOI 10.1215/00029831-3788693

and communities or at the very least to move fluidly among them without ever establishing permanent relationships or identities within them." "Like other lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered activists of color," Cohen explains, "I find the label 'queer' fraught with unspoken assumptions" about whom the term is intended to benefit and how (451). Building on this skepticism a few years later, E. Patrick Johnson went on to propose a divergent field called *quare studies*, using the phonetics of Southern African American dialect to situate the term in a lived, localized phenomenology. Attributing his familiarity with the variant to his grandmother, Johnson (2001, 2) explains, "On the one hand, my grandmother uses the word 'quare' to denote something or someone who is odd, irregular, or slightly off-kilter—definitions in keeping with traditional understandings and uses of 'queer.' On the other hand, she also deploys 'quare' to connote something excessive—something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience." Highlighting this distinction in order to imagine an alternative quare politics, Johnson suggests that quare's commitment to social, historical, and cultural "positionality" highlights exactly what queer's "reappropriation in the academy" too often elides.[1] In both Cohen and Johnson, emphasis is placed on recognizing that queer, no matter its alleged slipperiness, is fundamentally a site of invention: a category interwoven with historical particularities, which should not be mistaken as somehow post- or extraracial.

This essay argues that queer's status as a site of contestation, and as a term indexing implicit racial affiliations and tensions, can be traced through a deeper history than scholars have acknowledged thus far—to a period, moreover, in which its sexual connotations had not yet solidified. In 1894, shortly after publishing his third Uncle Remus volume, collector of African American folklore Joel Chandler Harris published a new work titled *Little Mr. Thimblefinger and His Queer Country*. In terms of form, *His Queer Country* represents a hybrid genre very much of its time, in which Harris united his earlier interest in collecting African American folklore with a formal convention this essay refers to as *the queer fantastic*. A tradition beginning with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865, the queer fantastic denotes a method of framing fantasy in which a character's encounter with incredible events is highlighted by the "queer" feeling those events

inspire. Alice thus remarks, following her fall down the rabbit hole, "How queer everything is to-day!" (Carroll 1869, 19). Eighty-five years later, as C. S. Lewis's Lucy feels her way beyond the "hard, smooth wood" of her wardrobe to "something soft and powdery and extremely cold," she observes, "This is very queer" (Lewis 1950, 113). In *His Queer Country*, Harris borrows the same device, requiring that child characters pass through a portal, a magic spring on a slave plantation, in order to access a queer realm in which folk narratives happen in real time. In framing African American folklore as fantasy—a genre, according to Tzvetan Todorov (1975, 25, 31), where realism meets with conditions of impossibility, thus leaving one in a state of "hesitation" as to whether those conditions are illusory[2]—Harris insisted simultaneously, for the first time in his career, on the queerness of his project.

In 1899, fiction writer Charles Chesnutt gave the term queer special prominence in his own collection of African American folklore, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*. A collection scholars have long interpreted as a corrective to the exploitation of African American folklore found in Harris, *The Conjure Woman* likewise juxtaposes the queer with the fantastic. Rather than distinguishing the real from an alternate world of fantasy, however, *The Conjure Woman* depicts a Southern landscape haunted by the casualties of slavery, the history of which readers learn to recognize through tales recollected by a former slave named Uncle Julius. While Harris and Chesnutt fuse together comparable forms and conventions, I thus propose that they did so with different consequences. In *His Queer Country*, Harris sequesters a fantastic universe from the real world the children inhabit by restricting its point of access to a singular, circumscribed portal. By contrast, the fantastic world depicted in Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* moves back and forth between a "real" present and tales of a conjured past within the same landscape, with the consequence that this historical toggling, far from keeping a conjured past at bay, enfolds the present abruptly within the past, effecting intimate historical compressions. At key moments throughout the collection, Chesnutt uses the same variant of queer we find in Johnson, spelled "quare," to name the relationship to the past these compressions foster. I argue that this difference in Chesnutt's adaptation of the queer fantastic, as a mode of framing folkloric consumption, amounts to a historiography, which Chesnutt fashioned to distinguish the significance

of his post-Reconstruction-era folkloric project from the approach to history offered by Harris.

In turning to *His Queer Country* and *The Conjure Woman* as provocative ventures in queer fantasy, this essay asks what we might glean from subjecting queer, a term known today for designating robust disciplinary boundaries and activist affiliations, to historicist investigation. It is important to note from the outset that while I argue for recognizing the history of queer to extend well beyond its association with sexuality, this does not mean liberating queer from its familiar connotations entirely. Rather, I hope to reinvigorate and open up explorations of a now-familiar historical dialectic between the word queer and variously defined deviancies. To put it another way, while scholars have demonstrated that the etymology of queer saw from the late nineteenth century onward a semantic shift toward the particularity of the homosexual (see, for instance, Chauncey 1994), the height of which arrived in its popular usage as a derogatory epithet, doing the history of queer means exploring also forces resistant to that shift, by which obscure others, unwieldy variants, and troubling nonparticularities have functioned to stall or complicate the word's semantic contraction. With this dialectic foregrounded, we find ourselves better prepared to discover when and where histories of queer signification lead to worlds irreducible to sex. In the context of *His Queer Country* and *The Conjure Woman*, we find Harris and Chesnutt using queer to denote distinct and competing models of historiography, which deploy fantasy as an optic for theorizing race in the context of their folkloric archives.[3]

In embarking on a study of competing queer historiographies, this essay also challenges the tendency of the "queer" designated by queer theory to operate outside of time, unanswerable to its etymology. We should consider it a peculiar omission, in a field largely inaugurated by Michel Foucault's rejection of the repressive hypothesis in exchange for sustained interrogations of sexuality's invention, that the word queer has rarely received a similar treatment at length. Perhaps the greatest exception is Mel Chen's masterful analysis of the term's political trajectories and lexical complexities in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012), yet Chen too focuses mostly on more recent questions pertaining to queer's reclamation, from its function as epithet to its now firmly established academic and otherwise institutional footholds. While etymologies of

queer have been conducted elsewhere in scholarship, these invocations tend most often to be fleeting or tangential.[4] In short, queer has only intermittently been interrogated as a historical category carrying a deeper discursive timeline. Given its dialectical relation with the typologies, identities, and orientations it works to problematize, queer has functioned instead as a site of transhistorical investigation, from which hegemonies produced by psychoclassificatory labor are undone at a distance. With Chesnutt's intervention as context, this essay asks what it would mean to challenge or complicate queer's availability as a transhistorical analytic. What might the repercussions be, that is, if we required queer historiographies, which have generally occupied a conceptual plane, to engage the lexical hauntings of queers past?

Queer as Folk; or, Joel Chandler Harris's Fantastic Unhistoricisms

Queer's aptitude for loosening itself from the past is hardly limited to its appropriation in critical theory. Indeed, the lexical backstory of queer has long involved its capacity for carving escape routes in time. Still, this function has not always served radical social ends. In turning to Harris, as an example, what is perhaps most notable about his use of a queer portal to frame plantation life in *His Queer Country* is that it requires readers to escape, quite literally, the material history of slavery prior to their contact with African American folklore. For Harris, a certain queer disinterestedness in history served as a helpful isolating mechanism, through which a market for African American folklore could be cultivated, while remaining relatively neutral on the histories by which that folklore circulated.

Long before *His Queer Country*, this separateness was crucial for Harris. In writing the Uncle Remus volumes, Harris spent much of his early career asserting that the tales he collected, far from registering the impact of slavery, provided access to a deep Africanness that had made it across the Atlantic and endured in the Americas, in an almost pristine state. Frantz Fanon (2008, 134) alludes to this idea briefly in his analysis of Harris in *Black Skin, White Masks* as the "theory" "advanced . . . with straight faces" that such tales "are not reactions to the conditions imposed on the Negro in the United States but are simply *survivals of Africa*.'" From the beginning, Harris was committed to establishing this theory, that the value of the folklore he collected

from former slaves resided not in immediate or traceable pasts but in an origin so far removed it could be of minimal value to interpreting narrative content.

To understand how this argument served Harris's ambitions, it is important to give an introduction to key debates of his day. The theory that African folklore had resisted New World contamination belonged to one side of a dispute over the origins and nature of folklore, which divided ethnographers at the time Harris was writing. As Brad Evans has shown, the debate originated in controversies over an early assumption, popularized by Johann Gottfried Herder in the late eighteenth century and by the Brothers Grimm in the early nineteenth century, that folklore was the inherent property of nations. The reduction of folklore to this national essentialism lost credibility later in the 1800s once ethnographers began to discover similar tales among geographically separate groups—once, as Evans (2005, 52, 53) explains, the spaces a folktale could occupy proved to be "radically discontinuous" with "race and language." Solutions tended to lean in one of two directions: (1) toward a theory of shared, unidirectional human evolution, which argued that, given the right circumstances, all people would, by nature of their shared evolutionary trajectory, eventually develop the same folk narratives, or (2) toward a theory of diffusion, which suggested that folklore traveled, by virtue of its oral transmission, and was therefore always being adapted across disparate locales.

The stakes of determining such a historical vantage point were especially high in studies of African American folklore, where doing so required that ethnographers account for, or obscure, the effects of the transatlantic slave trade on narratives circulated before, during, and after its existence. In maintaining that African American folklore was essentially African in its identity, Harris favored a theory of preservation in spite of context, indicating that plantations (including the Turnwold Plantation where he worked, lived, and first encountered the stories that would go into the Uncle Remus collections) somehow kept ancestral narratives intact. Nowhere was this position made more explicit than in his introduction to *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*. Arguing against a theory, advanced by anthropologist John Wesley Powell, that African American lore consisted largely of tales borrowed from Native American traditions, Harris (1881, xxviii) states, "The truth seems to be that, while

both the Indians and the negroes have stories peculiar to their widely different races and temperaments, and to their widely different ideas of humor, the Indians have not hesitated to borrow from the negroes." Along these racial lines, Harris tried to fortify the value of his ethnographic contributions. Not only had a set of narratives, African in origin, been preserved in the Americas; they had retained a self-evident African character across diffusion and adaptation. In collecting and organizing such narratives for a literate public, Harris understood himself to be facilitating something like racial time travel.

An interesting feature of *His Queer Country*, published eleven years after *Nights with Uncle Remus*, is that its form, its fusion of folk with fantasy, appears to wreck the designs of his earlier project—the crisis being the stark incompatibility of folklore's realist, representational value and what we might describe as fantasy's supra-representational excess. For Harris, it appears that the distinction between folk and fantasy started to erode once folklore became (largely through his efforts) an increasingly popular consumer object, no longer dependent on its relevance to ethnographic inquiry. As the translation of folklore to print grew increasingly fashionable in the late 1800s, he experimented with new ways of framing the allegorical universe African American fables imagined. By the time of writing *His Queer Country*, he began to recognize in his work a narrative obstacle akin to one Carroll had solved in 1865: how to transport a protagonist-voyeur, from an allegedly real world, to the unfettered realm of the fantastic.

The advantage of such a protagonist is perhaps best exemplified in the history of travel literature. Gazing through the eyes of an outsider, authors model for readers how to encounter, with appropriate affect, the alien persons and traditions depicted. Carroll famously adapted this narrative convention by way of the rabbit hole, designating a portal through which Wonderland could be accessed and exited. In the first collection of Uncle Remus stories, Harris achieved a similar function with Uncle Remus himself: white children finding in the form of his recollections a means of transport to an imaginative space populated by the creatures of African American folklore. In *His Queer Country*, Harris went further, inventing a portal to mediate between reality and an alternative space in which fables might actually come to pass. Indeed, *His Queer Country* sheds light on the narrative function Uncle Remus had earlier fulfilled. If read alongside Fanon's analysis of Uncle Remus, where the storyteller's happy disposition is understood to

operate much like an implausible portal, *His Queer Country* appears to literalize, by way of fantasy, a rhetorical device on which Harris had relied from the beginning.[5]

It is not difficult to see how this mode of juxtaposition, largely precluding possibilities of overlap between folklore and the real world, served Harris's reading of African American folklore as essentially separate from the contexts in which it was vocalized. What is perhaps surprising is that while Harris's politics thus extend smoothly into the altered form of *His Queer Country*, his writings from the 1890s indicate that his commitment to the project described in *Nights with Uncle Remus* had since waned. In an 1892 collection titled *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, Harris (1892, vi–vii) notes that while the stories may be of "some interest to students of folk-lore," he hopes to leave "the folk-lore branch of the subject . . . to those who think they know something about it." He continues,

> My own utter ignorance I confess without a pang. To know that you are ignorant is a valuable form of knowledge, the enterprising inconsequence of the Introduction to 'Nights with Uncle Remus' is worth noting on account of its unconscious and harmless humor. . . . I have gone far enough into the subject (by the aid of those who are Fellows of This and Professors of That, to say nothing of Doctors of the Other) to discover that at the end of investigation and discussion Speculation stands grinning. (1892, vii)

A radical change of vision, the introduction expresses total disinterest in folklore as a subject of study.

A brief introduction to *His Queer Country*, published just two years later, shows equal disregard for questions of authenticity. The collected stories, he explains, "belong to three categories," some "gathered from the negroes," some discovered in "Middle Georgia" which likely "belong to England," and some "merely invention" (Harris 1894, iii). As the collection proceeds, one finds all three categories existing together in the world under the spring, no clear markers given to distinguish one from another. *His Queer Country* thus shifts away from earlier emphases on the verifiability of folkloric belonging toward an embrace of "invention," the fantastic quality of *His Queer Country* clearly trumping its ethnographic import. Harris had prepared readers for this switch to some extent with *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, and not only through his disavowal of all earlier folkloric "enterprising."

For the purpose of adding sketches to the volume, Harris had hired illustrator Arthur Burdett Frost, a Philadelphian whose résumé included Carroll's *Rhyme? and Reason?* (1883) and *A Tangled Tale* (1885).[6]

The question this shift leaves open is what value Harris found in collecting African American folklore once all his ethnographic ambitions were jettisoned. It is worth noting that even the indiscriminate combination of tales in *His Queer Country* remains heavily influenced by the Uncle Remus tradition. Instead of finding stories in Uncle Remus, the children find narrators in the underworld of the spring, in Br'er Rabbit himself and the friends who live there with him (see fig. 1). Readers find not that the ideological content or even the narrative structure of Harris's work has changed significantly, then, but that he no longer claims for that work any intellectual or cultural value. Disentangled from his earlier framings, the collection revels all the more conspicuously in the exploitative nostalgia for plantation life for which Harris has since become well known.

The new addition, of course, is that all of this takes place under the banner of an ambiguously defined fantastic queerness. Queer becomes so broadly applicable to the world lying under the spring that it appears to be perfectly synonymous with that alternative dimension, a signifier of unreality rather than a divisible element of it. This tautological function of queer makes it difficult to account for any specifiable feature of its signification, leaving Harris's use of the word almost invulnerable to methods of close reading. This invulnerability is emphasized from the outset. Set before the abolition of slavery, the story begins by following three children as they first encounter the queer country named in the title: two white children, John and Susan, whose family owns the plantation on which the spring is found, and a black girl named Drusilla, a slave referred to by the narrator as John and Susan's "playmate" (Harris 1894, 6). When the three stumble onto Mr. Thimblefinger, a man four inches in stature who first takes them to the world under the spring, the narrator describes him as "the queerest little man they had ever seen or even heard of except in make-believe story-books" (19). Queer continues to be deployed this way throughout the collection, as vaguely equivalent to "make-believe." When the children ask Mr. Thimblefinger to help them picture his country, he replies cryptically, "It is a different country—oh, entirely different" (23). Pressed to elaborate further, he says, "I can show it to you . . . but I can't describe it." Thus begins their journey to

Figure 1. "Mr. Rabbit Fell Kerthump." Frontispiece by Oliver Herford from *Little Mr. Thimblefinger and His Queer Country: What the Children Saw and Heard There* (Harris 1894).

the queer country's interior, a journey designed from the outset to sidestep description—even, we might say, to forestall semantic contraction.

In the book's most telling passage, Harris dramatizes the incommensurability of real historical time and his alternative universe by describing a shadow that suddenly falls over the queer country's sky, a sky readers have learned is made of the spring through which the children entered. The shadow is made to appear at first as an inscrutable supernatural phenomenon. "Ripples of light and shadow played about and ran down to the horizon on all sides," the narrator says. "An astronomer seeing these fantastic wobblings and waverings . . . would straightway send a letter or a cable dispatch to the newspapers, declaring that an unheard-of convulsion was shaking the depths of celestial space" (Harris 1894, 87). With these descriptions, Harris transforms the spring, beyond its status as threshold, into an enigmatic aesthetic signifier. As the spectacle persists, the characters try to make sense of it, but the young slave, Drusilla, is the one who finally realizes what has transpired: "'Tain't nothin' 't all! . . . Dey done got froo wid dinner at home, an' ol' Aunt 'Cindy done put de buttermilk-jug back in de spring" (87). The curious shadow is thus exposed as an obscured portrait of slave labor, spread out panoramically on the horizon—an event recognizable to Drusilla, who begins to perceive something about the significance of the queer portal to which everyone's eyes have been directed. In excess of its status as a device of fantasy, the portal betrays its positioning as a site of slavery.

The moment is peculiar—an instance, it would seem, of the text imploding on itself, giving sudden voice to a critique of its own form. Voiced by a character Harris consistently demeans and dehumanizes, this critique appears to expose the realities of slavery he elsewhere glosses over. I would argue, however, that the text remains largely oblivious to the glitch it has introduced. What Harris attempts here is to recuperate slavery by translating it, in aesthetic terms, as both sublime spectacle and quotidian occurrence. As the characters look upward at Aunt Cindy dipping the jug into the spring, the imagery intensifies: "Presently a volume of white vapor shot out from the shadow. It was larger than the largest comet, and almost as brilliant" (Harris 1894, 88). Mr. Thimblefinger describes it afterward as "an emanation—an exhalation, you might say—that we frequently witness in our atmosphere." The text keeps insisting on this awe-inspiring

quality of the event, as something almost transcendent in its "brillian[ce]." Drusilla protests, "'Tain't no kind er nation. It's des de milk leakin' out'n dat jug" (89), but she does so mostly in vain. As the buttermilk streams across the sky, visible from but never dripping into the world below, the narrative exposes Harris's attraction to the queer portal, as a mechanism of isolation. In foreclosing identification between the world under the spring and the real world lying parallel, the portal effects not so much an erasure of history as it does an adjacency that disavows relatedness. Indeed, the portal lets Harris have his queer and eat it too, the fantastic universe lying inside his narrative like an object that refuses to be digested. Experimenting with this emergent tradition of queer fantasy, Harris finds it possible to romanticize slavery—to saturate what Hannah Arendt has called the "banality of evil" with the glow of the picturesque—all without having to allow the material conditions of slavery inside, its violences always seated parallel, never intersecting. In the case of Aunt Cindy's buttermilk, history is kept to a literally superfluous plane: a world flowing above, visible only as some distant, untouchable firmament.

"But Dis Is a Quare Worl', Anyway Yer Kin Fix It"; or, Twisted Conjurings in Charles Chesnutt

In her essay "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2008, 193) observes how "Eurocentric queer theorists and heterocentric race theorists" often invoke black queer theory, as practiced by scholars like Roderick Ferguson and E. Patrick Johnson, as though they represent a kind of "new fashion," or "glitzy postmodern invention borrowed and adapted from Euro-American queer theory." To combat these readings, Tinsley argues for locating formative moments of blackness and queerness together, as belonging to legacies at least as old as the Middle Passage. "What Paul Gilroy never told us," Tinsley (2008, 191–92) writes, "is how queer relationships were forged on merchant and pirate ships, where Europeans and Africans slept with fellow—and I mean same-sex—sailors. And, more powerfully and silently, how queer relationships emerged in the holds of slave ships that crossed between West Africa and the Caribbean archipelago." To meditate on these relationships, Tinsley turns to etymology too, focusing on the word *mati*, a word "Creole women use for their female lovers" (*mi mati* meaning "my girl"), but which "literally means

mate, as in *shipmate*—she who survived the Middle Passage with me" (192). In bringing this backstory to bear on queer sociality, Tinsley clarifies that she is less interested in origins, which the "ocean" promises always to "obscure," than in reading queer sociality as always interwoven with and inextricable from blackness. "What would it mean," she writes, "for both queer and African diaspora studies to take seriously the possibility that, as forcefully as the Atlantic and Caribbean flow together, so too do the turbulent fluidities of blackness and queerness?" (193).

We might extend Tinsley's premise by turning to the work of Charles Chesnutt, another nineteenth-century collector of African American folklore who experimented with queer fantasy. As with Harris, the stakes of queer representation in Chesnutt become clearest once we have an idea of his position on folklore and ethnographic inquiry. In his essay "Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South," Chesnutt elaborates on the nature and purpose of the conjure lore that went into writing *The Conjure Woman*. In contrast to Harris's insistence on racial purity, Chesnutt emphasizes that conjure lore must be understood as a set of narratives and beliefs largely produced by the circuits of transmission enacted through the slave trade. Chesnutt thus depicts conjuration as a piecemeal form: "African fetichism" and the "Voodooism" of "tropical America" interwoven in the vicinity and under the brutality of European colonization. "These beliefs," he explains, "which in the place of their origin had all the sanctions of religion and social custom, became, in the shadow of the white man's civilization, a pale reflection of their former selves" (Chesnutt 1901, 231). The word *pale* is double-edged here, indicating both a sense of loss endured under a repressive civilizing shadow as well as a whitening effect brought about through contact with European traditions. At the same time, Chesnutt shows no interest in romanticizing what might have come before, finding in the lore that emerged a discourse that actively spoke to the conditions of its formation. "In the old plantation days," he emphasizes, "[conjure beliefs] flourished vigorously, though discouraged by the 'great house'" (232). Chesnutt clarifies that this lore persisted against the designs of slavery—was indeed invented, uttered, and repeated as an assemblage of rebellious speech acts in opposition to white supremacy.

To put the distinction between Harris and Chesnutt plainly, while Harris insisted on the resilience of folklore as a racial signifier,

Chesnutt saw in the pliable contingencies of folklore the evidence of its historical import and potency. At least twice in the essay Chesnutt invokes Harris in ways that call attention to this difference. The first remark appears, at a glance, to be fairly neutral, if not approving, in its tone. "Mr. Harris," he writes, "in his Uncle Remus stories, has, with fine literary discrimination, collected and put into pleasing form, the plantation stories which dealt with animal lore" (Chesnutt 1901, 232). He says nothing more of Harris as the paragraph proceeds. He begins to imply, however, that his contemporary's work suffers from a critical disadvantage: Harris could never overcome his status as outsider to the tales he recorded. To make this point, Chesnutt notes his early assumption that he began his own project with a kind of intellectual distance not unlike Harris's. "In writing, a few years ago, the volume entitled 'The Conjure Woman,' I . . . took, or thought I did, considerable liberty with my subject," he writes. Such was his solution to the scarce amount of ethnographic material available to him, material he assumed to be hidden away in what he describes as "the remote chimney corners of old black aunties" (232). But, he continues,

> Imagination, however, can only act upon data—one must have somewhere in his consciousness the ideas which he puts together to form a connected whole. . . . I was the more firmly impressed with this thought after I had interviewed half a dozen old women, and a genuine "conjure doctor;" for I discovered that the brilliant touches, due, I had thought, to my own imagination, were after all but dormant ideas, lodged in my childish mind by old Aunt This and old Uncle That, and awaiting only the spur of imagination to bring them again to the surface. (232)

The essay that emerges from this moment takes shape as a series of "sociological" endeavors informed by autobiography, the latter not only bolstering the credibility of the former but adding to the material at the former's disposal. Consciousness, figured spatially, acts not merely as a reservoir of data parallel to the "chimney corners of old black aunties," but as social terrain continuous with those "corners."[7]

The second allusion to Harris occurs in a remarkable passage that concludes the essay, offering a dense meditation on the relation between folklore and its origins. Referring to a conjure tale narrated in the body of the essay, Chesnutt (1901, 235) writes, "How far a story like this is original and how far a mere reflection of familiar wonder

stories, is purely a matter of speculation." To assert authenticity, in other words, would require some measure of invention—a projected continuity that exceeds verifiability. He then returns to the topic of Harris's subject matter: "When the old mammies would tell the tales of Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox to the master's children, these in turn would no doubt repeat the fairy tales which they had read in books or heard from their parents' lips. The magic mirror is as old as literature." The target here is hardly veiled. Chesnutt invokes Harris in the form of a child listening to "old mammies," asserting that if one who came of age on a plantation imagines to have had, by way of slavery, privileged access to a deep African past, he is mistaken. On the contrary, he was witness only to a reflection of previous reflections—was, indeed, produced in moments of folkloric transmission as a reflector himself. The irony of representing an auditory event with the metaphor of the mirror (an object borrowed from a conjure story he has just finished narrating) is deliberate; as a targeted corrective to Harris's approach, the metaphor indicates by its inadequacy the distortions inherent in translating oral narrative to print. What Harris may be understood to record, in other words, is a repetition linked to the past only by a string of untraceable adaptations.

To end the essay, Chesnutt shifts from this corrective moment to referencing once more his own material. He alludes to a tale involving a woman who becomes angry with a second woman who has "enticed away" her love interest (Chesnutt 1901, 235). To get even, the first woman finds an opportunity to steal the second woman's voice by clasping it in her hand. When a local doctor reprimands her and orders her to return the voice, the first woman reveals that she has no power to reverse the act, and the conjured woman remains voiceless. In returning to the tale, Chesnutt speaks further to the difficulty of determining originality. "The inability to restore the stolen voice," he finally decides, "is foreshadowed in the Arabian Nights, when the 'Open Sesame' is forgotten. The act of catching the voice has a simplicity which stamps it as original, the only analogy of which I can at present think being the story of later date, of the words which were frozen silent during the extreme cold of an Arctic winter, and became audible again the following summer when they had thawed out" (235).

Chesnutt concludes, in other words, that the story is partly derivative and partly original, the theme of the stolen voice being an old motif, the image of it being grasped by the hand something new.

Within this reading, however, lies a metadialogue. Chesnutt uses the imagery of the tale to theorize a broader perspective regarding the relationship between folkloric objects and the voices to which they may be tied. Adding to his reappraisal of Harris, the "stolen voice" functions in another register to invoke the difficulty of attributing folklore to a geographical referent when those who speak it, the bodies that give it voice, have been seized and torn from the world in which its antecedents were first narrated. When Chesnutt writes that the "act of catching the voice" "stamps it as original," he is referencing the conjure legend he has just summarized, but he is speaking, moreover, to originality as an ideal. Originality, he suggests, is a phenomenon that arrives in the speech act itself—an act of catching the voice—wherein the compromised traceability of origins turns out to be a product less of their obscurity than of their ubiquity. Chesnutt's intention is not to oversaturate history with reinvention to the point of erasing oral traditions, as though consecutive adaptations always function discretely, each a novelty in its own right. Rather, he redefines tradition as a kind of reencountering, only one in which origin, as a manner of establishing the value of an encounter, has no meaningful place. Like frozen words that thaw after months of disappearing, what remains of oral narratives speaks historically as a diachronic eruption back into the social: an act not of restoration, nor of rechanneling, but of discontinuous return.

Houston Baker (1989, 41) has observed that "The real force of *The Conjure Woman* . . . does not reside in a febrile replay of an old Harris tune," but rather in a "deep and intensive recoding of form that marks its stories." In reviews of *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt's contemporaries also understood him to be doing something radically different from Harris. Some critics used the word queer to get at what this difference was. For one reviewer, the crucial distinction lay in Uncle Julius's tendency to slip fluidly in and out of his stories, not only for the sake of reverie but also for personal benefit (Earle 1899, 401). Most of the stories assist Julius in manipulating a white couple, John and Annie, who have moved to the South (in carpetbagger fashion) to purchase a plantation in disrepair, on which Julius had been a slave and continues to reside.[8] Connecting this aspect of his character to the form of Chesnutt's collection, the reviewer writes, "It gives an unexpected and human twist to stories which, without him, would be

queer, grewsome [*sic*] fairy tales" (401). What one gets, in other words, is something "human" in contrast to another spin on the queer fantastic.

A subsequent critic, however, may have come closer to pinpointing what *The Conjure Tales* achieves, beyond standard representations of folklore and fantasy. For this writer, a certain queer aesthetic is key to its success: "The tales of *The Conjure Woman* are the stock in trade of an old Negro Machiavelli, Uncle Julius, who tells them with ulterior motives. . . . Julius is a lovable old liar with a fine imagination; and . . . every story he passes on adds a stroke to his self-portrait—something that cannot be said for Joel Chandler Harris's entertaining Uncle Remus. We accept queer twists from Uncle Julius" (John Chamberlain, "The Negro as Writer," *Bookman*, February 1930, 604). Again, emphasis is placed on Chesnutt's careful portraiture of Julius, here contrasted with Harris's Remus. In labeling this departure queer, however, the reviewer ties Julius not to any "human twist," but to a kind of formal twistedness, characteristic of Julius's approach to storytelling. This twist lends itself, on the one hand, to the ulterior motives frequently underlying his stories, but it speaks also to the way Julius's tales tighten across abrupt turns. The idea that queer might belong to a formal twistedness, or narrative constriction, makes for an alternative to the tautological queerness we find in Harris. Far from inhabiting the freedom of a landscape opened by thresholds of evasion, queer, as utilized by Chesnutt, lands us in spaces of historical compression.[9]

An interesting feature of Chesnutt's appropriation of queer is that he uses only a dialect variant, spelling the word "quare"—the same spelling, as noted above, used by Johnson in his advocacy of quare studies. As Richard Brodhead (1993, 6) notes, to scholars "familiar with the black dialect tale of the 1880s," Chesnutt's work stands out for its "cool mastery" of the local color convention, yet on closer inspection something new becomes apparent. In each instance of Chesnutt's application, the word quare, in particular, serves to link the conjure lore Julius narrates to an affect of hesitation, integral to producing the narrative's conditions for fantastic uncertainty. In the "Conjurer's Revenge," for example, Julius uses the word to reflect on the strangeness of a story he has just concluded: a story in which the "club-foot" of a former slave named Primus is attributed to his earlier transformation by a conjure man into a mule, followed by his retransformation, one foot excepted, back into human form. Rumors spread,

the reader soon learns, that Primus had never really been turned into a mule, but had tried to escape the plantation and incurred a foot injury in the process, prompting his return. Julius nevertheless insists on the reliability of the conjure account: "En ernudder thing w'at proves de tale 'bout dis ole Primus is de way he goes on ef anybody ax' him how he come by dat club-foot. I axed 'im one day, perty perlite en civil, en he call me a' ole fool, en got so mad he ain' spoke ter me sence. Hit's monst'us quare. But dis is a quare worl', anyway yer kin fix it" (Chesnutt 1899, 129). Following the revelation that Primus may have disappeared during an effort to escape his plantation, the passage immediately refuses such an explanation, Julius reminding his audience that they are in a "quare worl'" where "monst'us quare" things happen. That Julius provides a logical explanation of the disappearance is no less vital to his account. It indicates that if Primus did indeed run away, he likely told the story to escape punishment upon his return—it being known by the slaves that the "marster . . . had his s'picions 'bout dat cunjuh man" (that is, did not entirely doubt his professed capabilities) and would therefore be likely to take the tale seriously (127). Julius keeps the fantastic intact not to preclude other interpretations but to emphasize something about the value of uncertainty as a formal condition of the stories he tells—the value, as he says elsewhere in the story, of "tales dat mought des ez well be so ez not" (128).

In other stories, we get a better sense of how queer uncertainty works in tandem with Chesnutt's theorization of folklore, as an object capable of bringing the past into defiant proximity with the present. By conveying the history of the former plantation, Julius presents himself, in Elizabeth West's (2010, 31) words, "as the storehouse of [his] community's collective history and memory" as well as "interceder between the world of the living and the dead." Julius thus uses the tale of "Po' Sandy" to persuade John and Annie not to tear down an old building he and his Baptist congregation intend to use for church services by telling the couple a tale of how its lumber came to be haunted by a slave named Sandy. In the story, Sandy's wife Tenie, a conjure woman, turns him into a tree in order to keep him from being sent to another plantation forty miles away. The trick succeeds in keeping them together until one day the tree into which Sandy has been transformed is cut down, made into lumber, and used to build a new kitchen, separate from the house, for the master's wife.

Julius summons the tale of "Po' Sandy" firstly in order to dramatize, within a fantastic frame, the horrors of slavery, an effect he achieves throughout the collection by infusing John and Annie's property with haunted histories. Upon seeing that the tree has been cut down, Tenie races to the sawmill. Julius narrates the moment as follows:

> She come right inter de mill en th'owed herse'f on de log, right in front er de saw, a-hollerin' en cryin' ter her Sandy ter fergib her . . . w'en de mill-hands kotch holt er her en tied her arms wid a rope, en fasten' her to one er de posts in de sawmill; en den dey started de saw up ag'in, en cut de log up inter bo'ds en scantlin's right befo' her eyes. But it wuz mighty hard wuk; fer of all de sweekin', en moanin', en groanin', dat log done it w'iles de saw wuz a-cuttin' thoo it. . . . Dey greased de saw, but dat did n' stop de fuss; hit kep' right on, tel fin'ly dey got de log all sawed up. (Chesnutt 1899, 55)

Conveying what amounts to a gothic dismemberment of Tenie's husband before her eyes—her body tied to the sawmill itself so that she can neither intervene nor shield herself—Julius layers onto the murderous history of slavery an equally murderous but alternative fantastic history, one that exceeds the possibilities of the first, yet interacts with it to such a material extent it cannot be dismissed as false. At the story's end, Annie exclaims, "What a system it was . . . under which such things were possible!" (60). John retorts, "Are you seriously considering the possibility of a man's being turned into a tree?" Annie responds, "Oh, no . . . not that," then cries almost in spite of herself, "Poor Tenie!" (61). What sticks is the story's incitement to affect—its apparent impossibility being tangential to a resonance it achieves at the level of feeling.

By delivering the story within the setting of the former plantation, Julius effects, moreover, a material relation between "Po' Sandy" and the landscape in which its events are supposed to have transpired. In this relation lies Julius's secondary objective: the narrative's uncanny inhabitation, in the present, of the world it describes. Here again, the word quare proves significant. Julius explains that when rumors spread of Sandy's fate, it was not long before people passing beside or within the kitchen claimed to hear what he describes as "quare soun's" coming from its walls (Chesnutt 1899, 59). "De noo kithen Mars Marrabo buil' wuzn' much use," Julius adds, "fer it hadn' be'n put up long

befo' de niggers 'mence' ter notice quare things erbout it. Dey could hear sump'n moanin' en groanin' 'bout de kitchen in de nigh-time, en w'en de win' would blow dey could hear sump'n a-hollerin' en sweekin' lack it wuz in great pain en sufferin'" (57). Here "quare" describes the haunting orality that quickly overwhelms the building. Riddled with "quare soun's," the kitchen may, in fact, be read as participating in the repetition of the story Julius understands himself to be recounting. This haunting speaks, moreover, to the way Chesnutt theorizes folklore's function: in catching Sandy's voice, in trapping it within its walls and holding it in tension with history, the wooden structure enacts time and time again the diachronic resurgence of Sandy's voice, yet in mutated form, so that its original content remains perpetually out of reach. In reappropriating Sandy's narrative, Julius brings folklore to inhabit his surroundings in the same way. The word quare, used to describe the significance the kitchen is made to hold in excess of its intended function (to the extent that it becomes practically useless as such) denotes not only the fantastic quality of the narrative, but also the distortions proliferated and disseminated through successive repetitions of Sandy's fate.

In formal terms, we might describe this quality of the conjured lumber—its vocalization of the tale in which it appears—as relying on a structure of synecdoche. The lumber's ability to speak captures how Chesnutt understands and theorizes folklore, while acting also as a structural component of the tale Julius tells. At a further remove, we might argue that both the lumber and the tale function, moreover, as synecdochal objects in the history Julius evokes. This relation becomes particularly evident once Julius's motive for telling the tale is revealed. In supplementing the kitchen, as a material object, with the hesitation its history elicits, Julius succeeds in securing the building—which Annie had originally hoped to transform into a kitchen of her own—instead as a new meeting place for his congregation. "I know the story is absurd," Annie explains to John, "and I am not so silly as to believe it. But I don't think I should ever be able to take any pleasure in that kitchen if it were built out of that lumber" (Chesnutt 1899, 61). John asks why they should, in that case, allow Julius to use the structure for religious purposes, but Julius has already covered his tracks. "Oh," says Annie, "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" (63).[10]

Julius thus returns the tragedy of "Po' Sandy" to the terrain of the former slave plantation neither as an allegorical world apart nor as bare realism but in a form we might describe as synecdochal queer fantasy. This "quare" intervention, a manner of twisting the relation between a narrative object and its history, bends the past toward the present by dissolving conditions for originality and continuity, while keeping knots of materiality in the balance.

Epistemology of the Portal

Harris and Chesnutt's divergent appropriations of the queer fantastic introduce but ultimately leave unanswered a critical question: To what extent do past instantiations of queer remain with us? This question is one all fields of inquiry face in one form or another: to what extent can we claim that *x* "then" feeds into, or departs from, *x* as we conceive of it "now"? But queer promises always to complicate this dilemma, as its lexical function has long been precisely to invert, warp, and obscure *x*. The etymological crisis queer inflicts is thus better described as follows: if queer consistently demands, in proximity to *x*, that *x* reject its normative status as such, yet has done so across so many contradictory temporal and spatial schemes that the relation fails, finally, to follow a reliable function, can *x* as a warped site in the history of queer ever tell us anything about queer itself, as an ongoing locus of representation?

Black queer critique, as demonstrated in the work of Cohen, Johnson, Tinsley, and other scholars, shows us that this tension in queer signification between a cavalier disregard for historical context and alternative queer temporalities that enact antiracist politics by fashioning new intimacies with a material past, is still very much with us, even as the landscape of contestation has shifted. Yet perhaps one of the greatest resonances between queer's contestations in late nineteenth-century aesthetic trends and in twenty-first century scholarship happens at the level of form. In *Animacies*, Mel Chen (2012, 82, 83) uses the term *de-animated* to describe how queer, in the context of queer theory, has over time "coalesced, gotten sticky, inertial, lost its animation and its drive," in part because its vague diffusions have emptied it of an earlier "cognitive dynamism." At this juncture, the politics and futurity of queer become "imaginable" only in the context of "its modification by something else" (83). This something else is

crucial to queer's ongoing efficacy. Even as queer has been deanimated in certain circles, Chen reminds us that the term also "continually reanimates in new formations," especially through "queer of color, transnational, disability, and trans scholarship" (82). Nevertheless, Chen contends that in its most ungrounded and uncritical citations, queer has often also taken the form of a "white morbidity"—suffused with a "deadening identity politics" whose endgame might only be an alienating neoliberal insularity (83).

But how should we articulate this resemblance between Chesnutt's moment and our own? A fleeting allusion to Br'er Rabbit in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* may help us encounter this riddle from still another perspective. Arguing that the hetero/homo binary with which *Epistemology* concerns itself has produced its own conditions of deconstruction, Sedgwick clarifies that this should not necessarily cast an optimistic light on the matter. She writes,

> There is reason to believe that the oppressive sexual system of the past hundred years was if anything born and bred (if I may rely on the pith of a fable whose value doesn't, I must hope, stand or fall with its history of racist uses) in the briar patch of the most notorious and repeated decenterings and exposures. (Sedgwick 1990, 11)

In the next paragraph she explains further:

> These deconstructive contestations can occur, moreover, only in the context of an entire cultural network of normative definitions, definitions themselves equally unstable but responding to different sets of contiguities and often at a different rate. The master terms of a particular historical moment will be those that are so situated as to entangle most inextricably and at the same time most differentially the filaments of other definitional nexuses. (11)

From here, Sedgwick launches into the famous catalog of binary categories she uses to outline the "chronic modern crisis of homo/heterosexual definition" (11). What we might consider provocative about Sedgwick's invocation of the "briar patch," however, is that its value as a site of entanglement seems to portend the "open mesh" she would envision a few years later as constitutive of queer relationality, in her inaugural embrace of queer as a theoretical locus in the early pages of *Tendencies* (1993). In short, the briar patch becomes an anticipatory metaphor for queer at a formative moment in the field's

definition. The crucial difference, perhaps, is that most would infinitely prefer being thrown into open mesh than a briar patch, whatever its prior uses. For my purposes here, however, I find even more provocative Sedgwick's professed anxieties, conveyed in a parenthetical aside, in borrowing the metaphor at all—anxieties that speak precisely to the debates in which Chesnutt and Harris were engaged. What does it mean, Sedgwick asks implicitly, to reappropriate this particular African American oral tradition for queer ends, after it has been so exhaustively capitalized on by Harris and those who borrowed the figure of Uncle Remus after him? When one summons the representational value of the briar patch, which folkloric lineages can be said to find reclamation?

These resonances may be mere coincidence. One may assume Sedgwick had no intention of alluding to the tradition of queer fantasy I have briefly outlined here. Yet, as Chesnutt's stories show us, happenstance should not indicate a deficit in historicity. In subjecting queer to a historicism intent on tracing its collusion with regimes of power and transgression alike, we should ask how attention to diachronic juxtaposition (a concept queer theorists have long taken up) might help us better discern the political weight of semantic shifts and resonances that inform queer as an organizing site of intellectual inquiry. Historicizing queer this way might approach something like Foucault's famous call to "genealogy." As expressed in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault's (1984) argument for a genealogical historiography that avoids the chimerical appeal of "origins" (77), that "does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity" with present forms (81), was not only about disillusioning us to the logical fallacies of what we now ubiquitously flag as teleology. The genealogy Foucault prescribes does something equally radical to coincidence, as an object of history. In shattering the hegemony of causational history, genealogy sets out "to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents" (81). Rather than liberate us from history, in other words, genealogy requires that we reckon with the gravity of our accidental heritage, what he goes on to describe as "an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath" (82). Indeed, Foucault reminds by insisting on the strikingly heterocentric specter

of genealogical descent that the accident, as a mechanism of history, is the structure to which we all finally belong.

To put it another way, it may be desirable to presume that Harris's queer fantasies can never be our own, that queer has finally become self-conscious enough to have properly shed the baggage of earlier inventions—to have attained the critical purity to which it aspires. Yet this dream itself parallels the world in which Harris played, one where queer had at last gotten outside of time and opened new, impossible worlds. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* offers, through narrative form, a theorization of oral-to-print folkloric transmission in different terms: the act of catching the voice made to signify not an equally impossible continuity with an original utterance, but rather a diachronic return that constitutes its own historicity. In this, Chesnutt demonstrates simultaneously that attempts to invoke queer as a locus of transhistorical or decidedly unhistorical liberation are hardly new to queer representation. Indeed, the politics of queering history and temporality appear to belong to a lexical register of queer much older than queer's relation to either gender or sexuality. When we situate Chesnutt within a longer tradition of black queer historiography, we discover, moreover, that the critique of a queer world apart begins as a critique of whiteness, as it has been safeguarded by intricately coordinated portals. As an alternative to these untimely breaks, Chesnutt offers us queer temporality as sudden compression, a formal twistedness spun by the phenomenon of discontinuous return. Wherever queer fantastic time solicits our theorization, we find ourselves equally in paths of descent, the subjects of repetition, where the bending of history is an effect of situatedness, of thawing etymologies—but then also of concerted belonging.

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Notes

Thanks to Heather Love and the Gender and Sexuality Studies Reading Group at Penn for their thorough feedback on this essay.

1 As Wenshu Lee (2003, 161) has observed, Johnson's quare theory answers queer's elisions by "dream[ing] of the forgotten localities inhabited by shadowy figures—black, poor, male and female—multiply erased in the incubating but hegemonic queer hierarchies." In an excellent essay titled "Kuaering Queer Theory," Lee extends and adapts Johnson's concept further, using the neologism "Kuaer" (a hybrid transliteration of two Chinese characters) to imagine what she calls a "transnational womanist quare" (161).

2 Todorov famously offers this definition in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. For him, the fantastic occupies, in more precise formal terms, a tension between the "uncanny" and the "marvelous," the former generally resolving itself in a reality governed by known laws, the latter affirming a set of relations regarded, outside the narrative, as impossible (Todorov 1975, 25). While the device of the portal sometimes mediates heavy-handedly between real and unreal phenomena, it may be considered a form of fantasy in that it creates conditions of hesitation or uncertainty at the site of the binary threshold it erects.

3 In an essay titled "On Failing to Make the Past Present," Stephen Best (2012, 453) has called for a reconceptualization of contemporary black historiography in light of queer theory's resistance to backward glances premised on continuity. Arguing against the conventional logic that "the slave past provides a ready prism for apprehending the black political present," Best suggests that a black queer historiography might hinge, rather, on a "queer acknowledgment of nonrelationality between the past and present" (455). It is difficult to say how well Chesnutt fits within Best's vision, since *The Conjure Woman* asserts not so much a queer nonrelationality to the past as it does a queer relationality premised on proximity and discontinuity in tandem. Nevertheless, we discover in *The Conjure Woman* an early moment in which the questions Best raises are actively addressed, with queer as a mediating modifier. Even so, the present essay invokes queer with greater suspicion than Best. In studying the fiction of Harris and Chesnutt together, queer proves to be a chimerical signifier, lending itself to, and providing a stage for, competing visions of historiographical practice.

4 It is worth noting that popular media venues have sometimes shown a greater interest in the etymology of queer than academics. For a cleverly written synopsis of queer's etymology from its medieval variants onward, see "More than Words: Queer, Part 1 (The Early Years)," published

by Cara (2013) on *Autostraddle*, as one of their Herstory segments. For a more scholarly investigation of queer's Indo-European origins, see Sayers 2005.

5 In analyzing Uncle Remus, Fanon quotes extensively from a provocative essay published in 1949 called "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit," which likewise explores Harris's denial that African American folklore allegorized or commented on race relations in a US context. With emphasis on Uncle Remus's infinitely cheerful demeanor, Bernard Wolfe (1949, 31) argues that the storyteller's grin represents an affect "extracted by force." He continues, "For almost seventy years, Uncle Remus has been the prototype of the Negro grinner-giver. Nothing ever clouds the 'beaming countenance' of the 'venerable old darky'… as, decade after decade, he presents his Br'er Rabbit stories to the nation."

6 For more on Frost's illustrative work for Harris, see David 1976.

7 Eric Sundquist notes that in first suggesting a volume of conjure tales to Houghton Mifflin in 1891, Chesnutt referenced his African heritage, contending that the people to whom such lore belonged had "never been treated from a closely sympathetic standpoint" by "a writer with any of their own blood" (quoted in Sundquist 1993, 359). Sundquist contends that Chesnutt played on his publishers' desire for authenticity strategically, "insert[ing]" a "tricksterism," not unlike the scheming of Br'er Rabbit, "into the calculated game of the American literary market" (360).

8 As Richard Brodhead (1993, 8) notes, "Chesnutt's stories take place where John's and Julius's conflicting outlooks collide, at the point where one set of inhabitants meets the incursion of another group's way of owning and managing the world."

9 For another perspective on these moments of formal compression, see Glenda Carpio's book *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, in which she argues that throughout *The Conjure Woman*, "one is caught between a desire to laugh and the suspicion that, in doing so, one could be cruelly laughing at a tragedy that is about to unfold" (Carpio 2008, 36). Carpio notes that "while the levels of irony and comedy in the tales refer to the power dynamics that inform interpretations of slavery and black culture, the laughter itself suggests that which is arguably beyond representation: the torture of bodies and psyches that the enslaved either endured or by which they perished" (37).

10 As Robert Stepto (2012, 269) notes, we thus find that "meaningful lessons about John and Annie's new home" have been successfully "imparted": "The legend of Sandy and Tenie" has become "in some sense" John and Annie's "story—as well as their responsibility."

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