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Charles W. Chesnutt and Uncle Julius: Black Storytellers at the Crossroads

Lorne Fienberg

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

CHARLES W. CHESNUTT AND UNCLE JULIUS: BLACK STORYTELLERS AT THE CROSSROADS Lorne Fienberg* Charles W. Chesnutt's collection of tales of the Old South, *The Conjure Woman* (1899), begins appropriately at the "crossroads." In search of a rundown, abandoned plantation he hopes to buy, John, the narrator, finds himself lost and bewildered at the junction of two country roads (p. 7).¹ A shy negro child directs him down a sandy lane, surrounded by decay, rot, and overgrown briars, to the open space where only the ruined chimneys remain of the once splendid mansion. This is explicitly a setting on the margin, where the distinguishing feature is an "open space," the absence of the symbol of the ante-bellum slave society. John has come to North Carolina from Ohio, ostensibly out of solicitude for his wife's frail health but also to see if

he can capitalize on the unsettled economic conditions and cheap labor of the Reconstruction South to make a profit in the cultivation of grapes. But if John determines to profit from a period of flux and uncertainty, he can just as easily become a victim of the marketplace, as in his relationship with Chesnut's black storyteller, Uncle Julius. Much more than John the Yankee, Uncle Julius, the freed man, finds himself at a crossroads, at a stage of his life when he is "betwixt and between."² More than John, Uncle Julius must confront the significance of absence: He had been accustomed, until long after middle life, to look upon himself as the property of another. When this relation was no longer possible, owing to the war, and to his master's death... he had been unable to break off entirely the mental habits of a lifetime, but had attached himself to the old plantation, of which he seemed to consider himself an appurtenance (p. 128). The condition of "liminality" can, however, be "pure potency,"³ as Victor Turner explains, a state which necessarily confronts Uncle Julius with new relationships, social, economic, and racial, and "the power to transcend the limits of his previous status."⁴ As such, *The Conjure Woman* depicts a kind of rite of passage, made all the more striking because it is undertaken by an old man rather than a young. The narrative act and the *Lorne Fienberg teaches in the English Department at Millsaps College. His articles on frontier humor and Mark Twain have appeared in *American Literature*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Studies in American Humor*, and elsewhere. He is currently at work on a study of American short fiction.

¹⁶²Lorne Fienberg economic contract that frames the tales provide Uncle Julius with opportunities to annul or invalidate some of the brutal conditions of his slave past. His plantation tales seem constantly to hold out to his listeners, John and Annie, the invitation to transcend the purely material standard of valuation. In the process, Uncle Julius can test his identity as a freed man, entering into a range of new social and economic relationships. But the framework of the tales also enforces the recognition that, if slavery is dead, Uncle Julius' survival as a black man, and in particular as a black performer, will involve a constant re-enactment of the "economics of slavery."⁵ It can further be determined that Uncle Julius' efforts to balance the artistic and economic imperatives of his situation mirror Chesnut's own dilemma as a black writer seeking a white audience at the turn of the twentieth century. Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s stimulating study *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984) places students of black expressive culture at the critical crossroads where they can view the juncture of creativity and commerce. His exploration of the "blues matrix" of AfroAmerican literature depicts the commodification of black expressiveness as "a crucial move in a repertoire of black survival motions in the United States... Exchanging words for safety and profit is scarcely an alienating act. It is, instead, a defining act in expressive culture."⁶ But the minstrel's mask of accommodation is also the mask of subversion. Although the black artist sings the song his white audience expects, he can maintain his integrity by singing in a...

CHARLES W. CHESNUTT AND UNCLE JULIUS: BLACK STORYTELLERS AT THE CROSSROADS

Lorne Finberg*

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Much more than John the Yankee, Uncle Julius, the freed man, finds himself at a crossroads, at a stage of his life when he is "betwixt and between."² More than John, Uncle Julius must confront the significance of absence:

He had been accustomed, and long after middle life, to look upon himself as the possessor of a lot. When this relation was a large possibility, owing to his age and to his master's death. . . he had been unable to break off entirely from the habit of a lifetime. He had attached himself to the old doctrine of what he termed "outside himself" a "quantity" (p. 138).

The condition of "femininity" can, however, be "part potency,"³ as Victor Turner explains, a state which necessarily confronts Uncle Julius with new relationships, social, economic, and racial, and "the power to transcend the limits of his previous status."⁴ As such, *The Conjure Woman* depicts a kind of rite of passage, made all the more striking because it is undertaken by an old man rather than a young. The narrative act and the

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