UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

Goophering Jim Crow: Charles Chesnutt's 1890s America

Author(s): Jolene Hubbs

Source: *American Literary Realism* , Vol. 46, No. 1 (Fall 2013), pp. 12-26
Published by: University of Illinois Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/amerlitereal.46.1.0012

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

University of Illinois Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Literary Realism*

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

JOLENE HUBBS

Goophering Jim Crow: Charles Chesnutt's 1890s America

Connecting Charles Chesnutt's fiction to its historical moment presents a real challenge: How can we make sense of the fact that the nadir of U.S. race relations was the apex of Charles Chesnutt's authorial career? In the 1890s, as lynching became an epidemic and Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement became entrenched, Chesnutt became an author—1899 alone saw the publication of a biography of Frederick Douglass, a book of "color line" stories, and the celebrated conjure tale collection. To explain how Chesnutt's conjure stories addressed their 1890s readership, a number of critics have argued that the tales' racial critique was "subtly subversive"—that is, opaque enough to be "indecipherable to most late nineteenth-century readers."[1] Houston Baker contends that in the conjure stories, Chesnutt masks "Afro-American transformative resourcefulness under the guise of an ole 'uncle' speaking *nonsense*."[2] Eric Sundquist likens Chesnutt's method to a cakewalk, a practice at once "subordinated and resistant."[3] Other scholars, less sanguine about the tales' subversive potential, see them as commodifying African Americans' cultural heritage. Richard Brodhead, for example, asserts that "through the transaction of storytelling," Chesnutt's fictional storyteller Uncle Julius "served one group's life up as the stuff of another group's entertainment."[4]

Whether seeing cakewalk or cooptation, these critics understand Chesnutt's work within the era's efforts to define—in hard-and-fast terms—African American identity. In this period, writers were using dialect fiction "to encode an essential blackness in the written representation of speech, making the lines of writing into color lines designed to segregate upon the

American Literary Realism ❧ Fall 2013, Vol. 46, No. 1
© 2013 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

printed page."[5] Politicians and racial scientists were seeking this "essential blackness" in blood and bones—in, that is, one-drop rules of ancestry and eugenic practices like craniometry. These efforts in U.S. literature and life worked in tandem with the decade's division of the social sphere into the separate and unequal black and white worlds of the Jim Crow period. Yet this quest for the essence of blackness also gave rise to a countermove among some African American artists and activists, who endeavored to show that race is unstable—a mutable construct that thwarts definitions and dividing lines. Homer Plessy challenged the designation of separate spaces for the "white and colored races" by showing that prevailing racial logics made him both white and colored. In the language of the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision that bears his name, Plessy was "of mixed descent, in the proportion of seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African blood," but "the mixture of colored blood was not discernible in him."[6] He was, therefore, "colored" according to his state's laws but white according to his skin's color. Charles Chesnutt, too, insists upon the instability of race in his nonfictional and fictional works. In an 1889 article, Chesnutt argues that "the intermingling of the races" in the United States "practically obliterated" "the line which separates the races."[7] Chesnutt demonstrates that there is no easy answer to the question posed by his essay's title "What Is a White Man?" because the response varies by locale. A man like Plessy, deemed black by Louisiana's code noir, could cross the border into Mississippi and thereby cross the color line, because he would be deemed white by that state's code of 1880. In Chesnutt's conjure stories, characters turn from white to black and from black to white.

While race is fluid in the conjure tales, class is fixed. Unlike fellow plantation fiction writer Thomas Nelson Page, whose stories express fears about "po' white trash" dispossessing old-order patricians in the post-Reconstruction South, Chesnutt depicts the antebellum poor, black and white alike, persisting in poverty in the postbellum era.[8] By examining two contemporaneous discourses with which the tales enter into dialogue—social reformers' analyses of the overseer, whose occupation cements his social class, and travel writers' accounts of the clay eater, whose diet changes his skin color—I open up a fresh perspective on Chesnutt's engagement with his 1890s context. My approach suggests that the stories' political engagement is best understood as neither cakewalk nor cooptation but class-conscious rebuttal of the decade's efforts to reify race. Like his fictional conjure woman, Chesnutt goophers his world, transforming ideas about black inferiority and white social mobility that undergirded the era's burgeoning Jim Crow system.

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The Dirty Work of Whiteness

The brutal overseer is something of a stock figure of the antebellum scene. In a number of fictional and nonfictional texts addressing the period of Southern slavery, the overseer is a villain despised by slave and slaveowner alike for his coarseness and cruelty. To be sure, there were overseers who corresponded to the stereotype in every hideous detail: sadistic demagogues whose sense of racial superiority and socioeconomic discontent found vent in abusing slaves and pandering to slaveowners. The persistence of anxious treatments of the figure in the post-Civil-War period, though, suggests that the overseer inspires concerns that transcend his role in the slave system. Chesnutt's fiction depicts the poor white overseer as a scapegoat in the symbolic economy of whiteness. Chesnutt's conjure stories explore how the figure is laden with the abuses of slavery and then flushed out of the body of whiteness, exculpating ruling class whites by transforming an institutional form of exploitation into an individual one. Chesnutt's aim in interrogating the overseer archetype is not to reverse the figure's negative charge, revealing a victim where others found a villain. Instead, he works to situate the overseer in his social context, considering the figure not as a lone gunman but as a cog in a cruel machine. In laying bare the dichotomizing process by which white planter-patricians are made benevolent and poor whites are made brutish, Chesnutt explores the "dirty work" of whiteness.

Overseers' cruelty is the ostensible linchpin in two of Chesnutt's conjure stories. In "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," plantation owner Mars Jeems McLean experiences the abuse doled out by his overseer Nick Johnson after the conjure woman turns McLean into a slave. As a result of this education, Mars Jeems (after being turned back to white) dismisses the overseer and runs the plantation himself under a much less rigorous regime. Nick Johnson seems the villain of the story in part because Julius characterizes him in resolutely negative terms, emphasizing his diabolical appearance and the slaves' hatred of him. However, Chesnutt structures the tale in a way that enacts in fictional form the social process by which poor whites are made the scapegoats of whiteness, because the narrative of Johnson's culpability is situated within a larger story that identifies Mars Jeems as the mastermind behind—and beneficiary of—Johnson's actions.

Julius opens the story he tells to John and Annie with a lengthy account of Mars Jeems' draconian plantation management practices, which were even more abusive and exploitative than those of other slaveholders. The text devotes six paragraphs to chronicling the long workdays, coarse rations, frequent beatings, and punishments meted out for courting that were de rigueur on Jeems' plantation. By presenting this information before

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

introducing the character of Johnson to the story, Chesnutt makes clear that Jeems is the architect of the cruel system. Furthermore, although Julius freely disparages Johnson, his censure is undercut at every turn. For instance, though Julius states that Johnson "wuz wusser 'n Mars Jeems ever da'ed ter be," his subsequent statement contradicts this claim:

> Co'se de darkies didn' lack de way Mars Jeems used 'em, but he wuz de marster, en had a right ter do ez he please'; but dis yer Ole Nick wa'n't nuffin but a po' buckrah, en all de niggers 'spised 'im ez much ez dey hated 'im, fer he didn' own nobody, en wa'n't no bettah 'n a nigger, fer in dem days any 'spectable pusson would ruther be a nigger dan a po' w'ite man.[9]

This explanation hinges on social location. Jeems, as slave master, had the right to abuse slaves, while Johnson, "no bettah 'n a nigger," was putting on airs by acting with authority. But this claim for the valid authority of the slaveholder seems disingenuous coming from either Chesnutt or his fictional narrator Julius. Moreover, the phrase with which Julius concludes the passage—"ruther be a nigger dan a po' w'ite man"—comes from not Julius' own sociological ruminations but rather an African American children's ditty in circulation since the antebellum era. This song enacts a kind of strategic substitution. In place of launching a wholesale assault on white supremacy, the lyrical extract levels its forces against the Achilles' heel of whiteness: the poor white. Ralph Ellison says of the jingle from which Chesnutt quotes that "while such boasting brags . . . provided a release of steam, they were not only childish but ultimately frustrating."[10] In "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," this kind of release is frustrating because it represents the process by which Johnson is punished for Jeems' offenses—a representation in miniature of the way in which the poor white can serve as the scapegoat of whiteness.

Jeems' reformation, symbolically enacted through Johnson's dismissal, functions as a ritual cleansing: repenting of his former actions, Jeems attributes those transgressions to Johnson and banishes the overseer to free himself from racist guilt. Johnson is, of course, responsible as an individual for his cruelty toward the slaves. The tale makes clear, though, that Jeems practices his own brand of conjure in transforming an institutional mode of oppression—the plantation, of which Jeems is the owner and head while Johnson is one of Jeems' workers—into an individual problem. The description of Johnson's firing establishes Jeems' role in and culpability for the abuses carried out by his employee. Prodded by Jeems, Johnson recounts his experiences with one slave he could not break—black Jeems—in great detail because, although he did not understand why his boss was eager to hear the story, "he want' ter please de gent'eman w'at hi'ed 'im" (66). This explanation

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

describes not simply his recounting of the tale but all of his actions as overseer. As historical accounts of the plantation system demonstrate, the overseer's job was to maintain a level of discipline and productivity calibrated to the master's expectations. The overseer position was therefore, in the words of one writer, "a difficult position to fill satisfactorily," because some overseers "were too severe on the Negroes; others allowed them to idle away the time, the crop suffering in consequence."[11] Johnson's abusive management style was suited to Jeems' old order, but after his "nightmare," Jeems inaugurates a new regime by symbolically exorcizing his old self in the person of Johnson. Jeems fires Johnson, refuses his request for a letter of recommendation, threatens him with bodily harm, and charges Johnson with cheating in his accounting: an accusation that allows Jeems to rid himself of Johnson without paying his final month's wages. When Jeems' slaves respond to news of the dismissal with the declaration, "it wuz a good riddance er bad rubbage" (67), their phrase embodies the social logic of Johnson's expulsion: the individual exemplum of an institutional disease is eliminated in order to cleanse the white ruling class of its sins. The trash, in other words, is taken out. This act cements the social order, purging the white ruling class of slavery's social and spiritual pollutants by miring poor whites in them.

"Dave's Neckliss" likewise complicates a story of overseer brutality to reveal the fixedness of class divisions within whiteness. In this tale, the overseer Mars Walker has a grudge against the slave Dave born of jealousy over the latter's literacy. Walker works to cause trouble for Dave, first by revealing to the master that Dave has learned to read and second by concocting a heinous punishment—wearing a ham chained around his neck—for thefts of which Dave was falsely accused. The physical and psychological torture of the ham "neckliss" drives Dave mad, and he commits suicide. Walker has a hand in every aspect of Dave's persecution, but he is not solely responsible for it, because Dave is under attack from all directions. Fellow slave Wiley, envious of Dave's successful courting of Dilsey, framed his rival for theft by planting a stolen ham in Dave's cabin and directing Walker to it. As Robert Stepto argues, Walker and Wiley "seem not only to be in league with each other but to be manifestations of the same evil force."[12] Mars Dugal', too, is culpable, because he has ultimate authority on the plantation, and the success of Walker and Wiley's machinations depends upon the master's response to them. Although Dave is assailed by black and white, rich and poor, Walker seems most active in Dave's torment because, as overseer, his job is to carry out the punishments—he is paid to do the "dirty work" of Dugal's slave regime.

"Dirty work" is a phrase that repeatedly appears in accounts of the fields of labor open to poor whites in the antebellum era. In his slave narrative, William Robinson explains that the master "feels himself too honorable"

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to carry out many of the tasks associated with slave driving, "so he hires a poor white man as overseer, to do this dirty work."[13] John Aughey employs the expression to denounce the laws compelling poor whites to "patrol the country, follow the bloodhounds, arrest the fugitive slave, and do all the other dirty work which their tyrants demand."[14] Chesnutt himself uses the term, describing his novels' poor white arrivistes as "doing the dirty work of slavery" as well as "do[ing] the dirty work of politics, as their fathers had done that of slavery."[15] The expression encapsulates the logic of poor white labor, which maintains the unmarked status of hegemonic whiteness by handling the most polluting tasks of the slave system. "Dirty work" refers to the physical soiling from heavy labor that covers the body in dirt, sweat, and blood; the moral corruption from mistreating slaves; and the symbolic racial corruption from venturing beyond the bounds of respectable white behavior. Carrying out Dave's punishment in "Dave's Neckliss" is this sort of dirty work. The smokehouse larceny for which Dave is wrongly punished represents no loss to Walker, who neither owned the meat nor would have received any choicer cuts of it than the slaves, because "slaves and overseers ate similar foods prepared in similar fashion."[16] Julius' statement that "Mars Dugal' wa'n't a bad marster hisse'f, but Mars Walker wuz hard ez a rock" is thus misleading (128). Dugal' is simply cognizant enough of his social position—his unbesmirched whiteness—to have his heavy lifting—his dirty work—done by overseers.

While Julius freely expresses his disdain for poor whites, other characters challenge his assertions. Julius offers lengthy expositions against overseers Johnson and Walker, attributes thefts from kitchen gardens and chicken coops to the "po' w'ite trash" who live near him, and "look[s] contemptuously" at poor whites (137, 148). John, by contrast, says of poor whites that "they were, like Julius himself, the product of a system which they had not created and which they did not know enough to resist" (137). John is not often used as a mouthpiece for the conjure tales' social commentary. Yet in this instance (Chesnutt-as-) John contributes to a conversation taking place among African American social reformers of the turn-of-the-century era about the race-based enmity among Southern laborers—about the reciprocal conflict, that is to say, between Julius and poor whites.

Chesnutt would have been steeped in Frederick Douglass' writings while composing his conjure tales, because in 1899, the year he published the conjure collection, he also published the biography *Frederick Douglass* in the Beacon Biographies of Eminent Americans series. Douglass looks to the antebellum South for the source of postbellum discord among working people. His writings show that interracial conflict among Southern laborers "has its root and sap in the relation of slavery, and was incited on both sides by the cunning of the slave masters," who "divided both to conquer each."

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Blacks "hate and dread" poor whites because "it was from this class that their masters received their slave catchers, slave drivers, and overseers"—an observation in line with the dynamics represented in Chesnutt's tales.[17] Poor whites, for their part, buy into "prejudice against the slaves, *as men*—not against them *as slaves*"; in other words, they look past the economic harm done to them by being compelled to compete with slave labor and take solace in an empty appeal to racial superiority, ignoring the fact that "by the rich slave-master, they are already regarded as but a single remove from equality with the slave."[18] Yet Douglass depicts not only how postbellum labor competition divided poor people but also how antebellum social co-operation united them. As a young man, Douglass gave bread to poor white boys—a group of "dear little fellows" who were his friends—in exchange for reading and writing lessons.[19] In this case, interracial cooperative alliances assuaged poor people's physical and intellectual hungers.

In his analyses of the divides between black and white workers, W. E. B. Du Bois focuses on the postbellum South and its cotton farms and mills. Although Chesnutt, Douglass, and Du Bois concur in seeing poor whites as pawns of the ruling class, Du Bois views them, at times, as witting pawns. Despite this divergence, Du Bois' argument about the strategies by which ruling class whites divided and thereby conquered the Southern working class is similar to Douglass'. In the words of a white patrician in Du Bois' novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), "We'll plant cotton mills beside the cotton fields, use whites to keep niggers in their place, and the fear of niggers to keep the poorer whites in theirs."[20] By using interracial conflict to keep poor people "in their place," aristocratic whites used racial divisions to reinforce class divides.

For Chesnutt as for Douglass, Du Bois, and other nineteenth-century African American intellectuals, poor people's social location must be reckoned with to understand race and class writ large. Chesnutt's treatment of the overseer reveals the fixedness of class, giving the lie to the promise of social mobility held out to poor whites by patricians who would have them view racial solidarity, rather than class cohesion, as a viable means of moving up the social ladder. Chesnutt's representation of clay eating, in turn, shows the mutability of race, shining a light on the instability of a social order based on white supremacy and apartheid.

Clay and Color

In his fictional and nonfictional writings, Chesnutt explores how racial identities can be acquired or lost. In his essays, Chesnutt considers the loss of whiteness through legal means, decrying "the manifest absurdity of

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

classifying men fifteen-sixteenths white as black men" in an 1889 article and similarly writing in 1900 that "it is only a social fiction, indeed, which makes of a person seven-eights white a Negro; he is really much more a white man."[21] In his novels, Chesnutt investigates the paradox of white non-whites, giving tangible form to the "manifest absurdity" behind legal conceptions of race. *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), for example, dramatizes the illogic of the one-drop rule through the children in the novel: as a youth, protagonist John Walden challenges the idea that he is black by observing that "the mirror proved that God . . . had made him white; and God, he had been taught, made no mistakes,—having made him white, He must have meant him to be white." The young pupils of John's sister Rena likewise cannot overcome "the evidence of their own senses" in order to understand that their white-skinned teacher is black.[22] In "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," racial change is the consequence of conjure: plantation owner Mars Jeems is transformed from white to black—and then back to white—by goopher. In "Lonesome Ben," a dark-skinned slave gains a measure of whiteness, appearing to be a mixed race person to other characters and symbolically taking on the trappings of the poor white. Changeable by law and by magic, race is fluid in Chesnutt's works.

In "Lonesome Ben," Chesnutt demonstrates the fixity of class and the fluidity of race through clay eating, a practice that changes skin color but cements social class. "Lonesome Ben" follows the narrative pattern common to Chesnutt's conjure stories: John, a white Northerner who has relocated to postbellum North Carolina for personal and professional reasons, prompts his African American coachman Julius to tell a story about antebellum life. "Lonesome Ben" opens with John and his wife Annie examining a clay bank with an eye toward using the clay to make brick. Seeing a poor white woman gather clay and then, upon realizing that she is being watched, hurry away "with a shamefaced look," Annie asks Julius what the woman is going to do with the clay. John recounts Annie's disgust after learning that the woman plans to eat it: "'Ugh!' said my wife with a grimace, 'you don't mean she's going to eat that great lump of clay? . . . I should think it would make them sick'" (148). Annie's informal interjection "ugh!" is a jarring departure from the characteristic formality of her patrician Northern speech; the exclamation "'why, Uncle Julius!'" is her typical expression of surprise (72, 174). Her startled outburst and accompanying "grimace" thus mark clay eating as even more shocking than the conjure transformations that Julius frequently narrates. Annie's subsequent commentary may explain this uncharacteristic response, for her shift from "she"—this particular clay-gathering woman—to "them" indicates that she judges the woman less as an individual than as a representative poor white. With this move from

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the singular to the collective, Chesnutt makes two narrative advances at once. First, he calls attention to Annie's classism in the grammatical shift from the singular to the plural pronoun, which is emphasized by using fourteen singular pronouns (ten instances of "she" and four of "her") to refer to the poor white woman before the shift to "them" occurs. Second, Chesnutt invokes a broader discourse on clay eating.

Julius depicts clay eating as a cross-racial practice by explaining that blacks and whites eat from the clay bank and following Annie's questions about the poor white woman with the story of Ben, a slave who ran away to escape a beating and was forced to subsist on clay. In this way, "Lonesome Ben" reestablishes the cross-racial history of clay eating. Documented in the American South for at least three hundred years, the history of clay eating is often told as a segregated story of two distinct and unrelated social practices. Black clay eating was recorded and treated by antebellum doctors because of the toll it could take on slave populations. Clay eating is of interest in this case because it threatens the economic health of the plantation system: slaves could be debilitated or killed by eating clay. Thus, black clay eating gives rise to a body of medical literature that documents the effects of—and cruel treatments for—clay or dirt eating.[23]

White clay eating was treated not as a medical condition but as a social one, and documented not by a small group of medical specialists but by a broad range of writers penning their impressions of the South. Travel narratives throughout the nineteenth century describe clay eating as a regionally distinctive poor white practice. Accounts of white clay eating manifest a clear attraction to the spectacle of white poverty at the same time that they write poor whites out of whiteness. As urban geographer Jamie Winders notes in her analysis of postbellum travel narratives of the South, "Southern white rural poverty was fascinating yet repulsive" to its Northern chroniclers.[24] Clay eating is the most salacious among a set of poor white consumption practices—also including whiskey drinking and snuff dipping—that produce intraracial class distinctions by means of social disgust. As Winders suggests, travel writers found clay eating fascinating enough to chronicle yet repulsive enough to censure, and so the practice engendered a social distinction between spectacle and spectator. Eating clay makes a spectacle of white poverty, rendering visible class differences among whites.

Accounts of white clay eating commonly chronicle not the act itself but the physical effects understood to ensue from the practice. The result is the construction of what we might call, following sociologist Matt Wray, a "not-quite-white" whiteness that is repeatedly described, using chromatic conventions standardized through their recurrent deployment, in nineteenth-century treatments of poor whites.[25] Travel writers habitually address

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

clay eaters' color. Some clay-eating poor whites are said to be gray—with the "gray, earthy look" of "Tennessee clay"—but the vast majority are yellow.[26] Nineteenth-century authors depict poor whites' "yellow sickly cast," "yellow mud complexion," "yellowish" tint and, mimicking the poor white vernacular, "*yaller*" teeth and skin.[27] Travel writers also commonly note poor whites' sallowness. According to one author, "when a person has once seen a clay-eater, he can, ever after, instantly recognize any one of their number by their sickly, sallow, and most unnatural complexions."[28] Still other travelogues, echoing this idea of clay eaters' unnatural look, stress the repulsiveness of their pigmentation. An 1842 text describes poor whites' "ghastly and cadaverous complexions" and one from 1863 quotes a woman who explains of the "wretched clay-eaters" that "*they do not look like fresh dead men, but men who have been dead some time*."[29]

This representational convention dehumanizes clay eaters, because the "unnatural" character of their appetites and appearances makes them unlike ruling class whites at the same time that their uncanny resemblance to other clay eaters makes them appear to outsiders too much alike among themselves. Winders writes that "representations of [Southern white rural poverty] were interchangeable, as travelers relied on similar metaphors, referenced one another's writings and passed seemingly identical judgments, despite journeying at different times and with very different understandings of their roles as travel writers," and this is borne out in the case of clay eaters.[30] The consistency of representations across temporal and geographic boundaries makes clay eaters seem like stock characters of the Southern travel narrative rather than real residents of the South. Furthermore, by treating clay eating as a look rather than as a practice, it becomes an identity rather than an act—and thus unalterable rather than easily abandoned. In this way, "clay eater" becomes another pejorative term for poor whites, as seen in an 1866 travel narrative: "I am certain that there can be no lower class of people than the North Carolina 'clay-eaters,'—this being the local name for the poor whites."[31] This description of poor white North Carolinians, published the year Chesnutt and his family moved from Ohio to North Carolina, conjoins consumption and class, ensuring that the stigma surrounding eating clay will mark poor whites whether or not they actually consume clay.

Chesnutt's fiction integrates these discourses, uniting medical accounts of black clay eating with travel accounts of white clay eating. In "Lonesome Ben," Chesnutt brings together heretofore segregated clay-eating habits, insisting upon their relationship across the color line. As Jennifer Fleissner observes, Chesnutt is one of the only authors working in any of the several genres in which clay eating is addressed to treat the practice as "a metaphorical means

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

of racial mixing."[32] Chesnutt depicts clay eating as a practice that can have grave health consequences; this idea is drawn from the medical literature on black clay eating and is at odds with explanations of white clay eating, which is treated as a "diseased appetite" brought on by a "vitiated taste" rather than a serious threat to one's well-being.[33] In Chesnutt's tale, blacks and whites suffer health consequences: eating clay kills the story's eponymous hero, the runaway slave Ben, and Julius asserts that eating too much clay makes blacks and whites sick. In the same way, Chesnutt reworks the chromatic conventions established by travelogues, extending the sallowness of poor whites across the color line: John reports, "I had observed a greater sallowness among both the colored people and the poor whites thereabouts than the hygienic conditions of the neighborhood seemed to justify" (146–47).

In uniting these narratives, the conjure story reveals that two racialized practices—black clay eating, understood as a form of rebellion against slavery, and white clay eating, seen as a symptom of poor white degeneracy—are a single classed habit: an act practiced by the poor, black and white alike. In the story, clay eating undermines the logic of race as a visible aspect of identity because it changes the clay eater's color. Ben's clay diet enacts a physical transformation, as a result of which no one he knows—neither wife nor son, neither master nor friend—believes him when he claims to be Ben. As Julius recounts, when Ben identifies himself to his owner Mars Marrabo after running away, Marrabo insists he is lying: "Ben wuz black ez a coal an' straight ez an' arrer. Youer yaller ez dat clay-bank, an' crooked ez a bair'l hoop" (154). Among the denizens of the plantation, Ben is taken for a mixed race person: Marrabo suspects that the "yaller rascal" has been turned out by his master, while Ben's friend Primus calls him a "mis'able lookin' merlatter" (154, 153). Judging by his physical description, however, Ben might also be taken for a poor white. "Yaller ez dat clay-bank" echoes contemporaneous descriptions of poor white clay eaters, who often resemble yellow clay in the eyes of middle class white spectators, as descriptions of their "yellow mud complexion" and "clayeyness" make clear.[34] Similarly, the "crooked"—stooped or hunched—frame is a persistent attribute in representations of poor white men, observed in nineteenth-century illustrations of literary characters like Papp Finn and Ransy Sniffle and in twentieth-century cinematic portrayals of hillbillies and moonshiners. Also, clay eating creates a structural ambiguity for Ben that seems analogous to poor white experience. Yellow Ben can find no place for himself in the plantation economy; his former master tells him to get his "clay-cullud hide" off his land (154). This exclusion renders Ben a poor white person, pushed to the margins of antebellum Southern agriculture by the plantocracy, rather than a mixed

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

race individual, who would be decreed black not white, slave not free, and exploited by the slave system.

Chesnutt's conjure tale lays bare connections among poor people not only across the color line but also across time. "Lonesome Ben" represents poor people eating clay in the postbellum frame narrative and the antebellum tale. In this way, the story challenges any New South boosterism claiming the fin-de-siècle South offered unparalleled economic opportunities for the proletariat. Chesnutt reveals the similarly exploitative agricultural systems of the Old and New South, both of which profited a few rich whites and exploited others. Richard Brodhead rightly notes that "the real-life Uncle Julius"—the ex-slave laborer in the 1890s South—was more likely to be employed as a tenant farmer than a coachman.[35] Chesnutt's conjure tales represent a mass of poor black and white agricultural workers—"farm-hands" who live in cabins on John's land (146)—in order to shine a light on the relationship between antebellum enslaved farm labor and postbellum economically entrapped tenant farming. Yet making Julius a coachman also addresses the lack of social mobility for workers. While Julius' job is to transport John and Annie, his efforts ferry him neither beyond the boundaries of John's vast land holdings nor up the social ladder. Unlike skin color, social class is a fixed characteristic in Chesnutt's fictional world.

Chesnutt shows that the poor—black and white—live comparable and constantly intersecting lives. In the conjure stories, poor blacks and whites live alongside one another. In the antebellum era, "dey wuz a settlement er free niggers en po' buckrahs down by de Wim'l'ton Road" (36). This arrangement jibes with the historical record, which reveals a "relaxed color bar" and a series of associations among poor blacks and whites in Fayetteville, North Carolina, the inspiration for the conjure stories' Patesville setting.[36] After the Civil War, poor people live together on the fringes of John's land. In the novels, poor blacks and whites sit together at public events, receive charity from the same benefactors, experience similar social rebuffs by respectable whites, farm equally exhausted patches of land, and endure allied forms of economic exploitation by rich whites. In many of these instances, poor blacks and whites are joined not simply spatially or conceptually but also linguistically. Insistent textual links—repeated references to "lean and sallow pinelanders and listless negroes dozing on the curbstone," "some heavy-footed Negro or listless 'po' white man'" laboring in a field, and New South oligarchs "enslaving white and black alike"—create a sense of the material equivalence between the two groups.[37] Interlinked by the use of "and" and made interchangeable when connected by "or," poor blacks and whites are as resolutely linked by the economic forces of Southern

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

life as they are by the grammatical force of Chesnutt's conjunctions. Fixed places in the social order create an unchanging underclass.

At the conclusion of "Lonesome Ben," Annie wishes to have the clay bank "carted away" to keep the poor workers from consuming clay (156). John, however, refuses to remove it, insisting that "the best way to stop them from eating it was to teach them self-respect . . . and those habits of industry and thrift whereby they could get their living from the soil in a manner less direct but more commendable" (157). John means that as industrious and thrifty farmers the poor folks might grow crops for food rather than treating the clay as food. This claim is disingenuous, though, because as the owner of all land in the vicinity, only John stands to benefit from such farming. The clay eaters are wage-earning farm hands or tenant farmers, their "industry and thrift" serving them "less direct[ly]" indeed: that is, by principally enriching John. Thus the story's conclusion confirms that the poor, black and white alike, will continue to eat clay, because the poor white woman spotted at the creek is either excluded from farming altogether or already in the employ of John's agricultural enterprise and, like the sallow clay-eating farm hands encountered at the story's opening, required under John's regime to supplement her diet with clay.

Although ironic when uttered by John, "less direct but more commendable" is an apt description of Chesnutt's narrative strategy, which forwards an incisive social critique in a fictional form that also propels Chesnutt's literary ambitions. Chesnutt's conjure stories ingeniously engage with their 1890s context by highlighting the deep and longstanding divides among Southern whites at precisely the time when, by obfuscating those differences, ruling class whites were striving to convince poor whites to align with them against blacks. The white racist terrorism that reached a fevered pitch in this decade—segregation, disenfranchisement, lynching—was catalyzed by a rhetoric of white supremacy that privileged race over class, encouraging poor whites to band together with ruling class whites and accept the "public and psychological wage" of whiteness rather than the material gains that could be fought for through class-based cross-racial alliances.[38] Chesnutt's attention to differences within racial categories allows for more nuanced representations of social dynamics across racial boundaries. With the conjure stories, Chesnutt goophers Jim Crow, contesting white supremacist rhetoric by depicting the fixedness of class and the fluidity of race in 1890s America.

—University of Alabama

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Notes

1. Robert C. Nowatzki, "'Passing' in a White Genre: Charles W. Chesnutt's Negotiations of the Plantation Tradition in *The Conjure Woman*," *American Literary Realism*, 27 (Winter 1995), 20; Heather Tirado Gilligan, "Reading, Race, and Charles Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius' Tales," *ELH*, 74 (Spring 2007), 195.

2. Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 46.

3. Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1993), p. 281.

4. Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 204, 205. In Brodhead's book, the second passage I quote is in italics.

5. Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), p. 107.

6. *Plessy v. Ferguson,* 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

7. Charles W. Chesnutt, "What Is a White Man?" in *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), p. 37.

8. Thomas Nelson Page, "Ole 'Stracted" in *In Ole Virginia; or, Marse Chan and Other Stories* (1887; rpt. Nashville: Sanders, 1991), p. 147.

9. Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and other Conjure Tales* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), p. 59. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. I am following Brodhead in referring to the conjure tales as not only the seven stories published as *The Conjure Woman* in 1899 but also the seven other stories that employ the conjure formula.

10. Ralph Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), p. 166.

11. Sarah Katherine Stone Holmes, *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone 1861–1868*, ed. John Q. Anderson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1955), p. 5. See also Avery O. Craven, "Poor Whites and Negroes in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Negro History*, 15 (January 1930), 22.

12. Robert B. Stepto, "'The Simple but Intensely Human Inner Life of Slavery': Storytelling, Fiction, and the Revision of History in Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius Stories,'" in *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture*, ed. Günter H. Lenz (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1984), p. 41.

13. William H. Robinson, *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen Years in Slavery* (Eau Claire: Tifft, 1913), p. 20.

14. John H. Aughey, *The Iron Furnace: or, Slavery and Secession* (Philadelphia: Martien, 1863), p. 228.

15. Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905; rpt. New York: Harlem Moon, 2005), p. 37; and *The Marrow of Tradition* (1909; rpt. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 34.

16. John Solomon Otto and Augustus Marion Burns III, "Black Folks and Poor Buckras: Archeological Evidence of Slave and Overseer Living Conditions on an Antebellum Plantation," *Journal of Black Studies*, 14 (December 1983), 195.

17. Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, rev. ed. (Boston: De Wolfe and Fiske, 1892), p. 468.

18. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855), p. 310.

19. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845; rpt. Mineola: Dover, 1995), p. 23.

20. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911; rpt. Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1989), p. 391.

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

21. Chesnutt, "White Man," p. 38, and "The Future American: A Complete Race-Amalgamation Likely to Occur" in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches,* ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz III, and Jesse S. Crisler (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), p. 134.

22. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900; rpt. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988), pp. 160–61, 244.

23. For an overview of medical journals' coverage of clay eating, see Robert W. Twyman, "The Clay Eater: A New Look at an Old Southern Enigma," *Journal of Southern History,* 37 (August 1971), 441.

24. Jamie Winders, "White in All the Wrong Places: White Rural Poverty in the Post-bellum U.S. South," *Cultural Geographies,* 10 (January 2003), 48.

25. Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2006).

26. Gail Hamilton, *Wool-Gathering* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1867), p. 210.

27. Henry Ker, *Travels through the Western Interior of the United States* (Elizabethtown, N.J.: the author, 1816), p. 352; Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1863), p. 146; John Russell Bartlett, *Dictionary of Americanisms: A Glossary of Words and Phrases Usually Regarded as Peculiar to the United States,* 4th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1877), s.v. "clay-eaters"; Edmund Kirke, *Among the Pines: or, South in Secession-Time* (New York: Gilmore, 1862), p. 75.

28. Emily P. Burke, *Reminiscences of Georgia* (Oberlin: Fitch, 1850), pp. 205–06.

29. J. S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (London: Fisher, Son and Company, 1842), I, 551; J. J. Geer, *Beyond the Lines: or, A Yankee Prisoner Loose in Dixie* (Philadelphia: J. W. Daughaday, 1863), p. 272, italics in original.

30. Winders, p. 48.

31. Sidney Andrews, *The South Since the War: As Shown By Fourteen Weeks of Travel and Observation in Georgia and the Carolinas* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1866), p. 177.

32. Jennifer L. Fleissner, "Earth-Eating, Addiction, Nostalgia: Charles Chesnutt's Diasporic Regionalism," *Studies in Romanticism,* 49 (Summer 2010), 328.

33. Fredrika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World; Impressions of America,* trans. Mary Howitt (New York: Harper & Bros., 1858), I, 365; Buckingham, I, 551.

34. Kemble, p. 146; Andrews, p. 182.

35. Brodhead, introduction to *The Conjure Woman and other Conjure Tales,* by Chesnutt (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), p. 14.

36. Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1992), p. 90. Cecil-Fronsman's survey of crime reports—one of the best sources of information on this largely illiterate and dispossessed population—reveals that "poor whites and blacks drank, whored, and plotted crimes together" (90).

37. Chesnutt, *Colonel's Dream,* pp. 18, 220, 119. For similar examples in Chesnutt's other novels, see *Marrow of Tradition,* pp. 10, 29, 96, 196 and *House Behind the Cedars,* pp. 26, 46, 64.

38. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (1935; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), p. 700.

This content downloaded from
137.204.24.180 on Wed, 21 Dec 2022 15:09:13 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms