

## More Than Mere Metamorphoses: Animals in Charles W. Chesnutt's Conjure Stories

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### ABSTRACT

This contribution will apply the theory of Animal Studies, an inter-disciplinary field which encompasses, among many other areas, literary studies. In the African American conjure fiction written by Charles Chesnutt, the animal behavior, human-nonhuman animal interactions, anthropomorphic representations of animals and the expanding ethical considerations (beyond human dimensions) will be examined. Applying Animal Studies to literary texts means in effect synthesizing writing on animals and charting their connections to human consciousness and human action toward the nonhuman world. Charles Chesnutt's fourteen conjure tales were written largely in dialect in the 1880s and 1890s and are set in a Southern plantation community. They include enslaved humans who undergo metamorphoses into various animals, some animals under the supernatural control of conjurers and finally the various animals to be consumed under ethically questionable circumstances within the slave community. The attempts at resolution to conflicts is said to reverberate in black culture well after slavery had ended, according to the black narrator.

### KEYWORDS

African American literature, Charles Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, Animal Studies, Voodoo, metamorphoses, slavery, animal meat, animal cruelty

### Introduction

Animal representations have been carefully analyzed in literary fiction in a comprehensive way in many English works of fiction written before widespread industrialization. Among other reasons for this, animals were at that time much more important in commerce, recreation and transport than they are now with tractors for farmers and trains and motor vehicles for commuters. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, fictional portraits of animals and slavery were overwhelmingly human-centric and for the most part linked with sympathy and sentiment. For example, an English novel by Sarah Scott entitled *Sir George Ellison* (1766) the eponymous protagonist marries a rich Anglo-Jamaican widow and therewith acquires a slave plantation which requires his attention and all of his management skills. Aiming to ethically reform the harsh working conditions, in particular a reduction in the violent treatment of the slaves he now owns, George Ellison comes into conflicts with his racist wife regarding her cold-hearted attitude towards slaves while she sentimentally cries over a minor leg injury of her beloved lapdog. Markman Ellis analyzes how “the lapdog allows contrasting kinds of compassion to be evaluated: despite her effusive response, Mrs. Ellison’s compassion is shown to be shallow and unfeeling, as it does not extend to...the slaves whom she does not even regard as fellow human beings.”<sup>1</sup> *Black Beauty* (1877) by Anna Sewell famously gives voices to horses relating quite directly about animal cruelty, sometimes unintentional, due to the common

1 Markman S. Ellis, “Suffering Things: Lapdogs, Slaves, and Counter-Sensibility,” in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2007), 100–101.

practices by taxi drivers in England of the period. *Black Beauty* is undoubtedly one of the most famous horse novels in children's literature.

Animal Studies theory has not as of yet been applied to conjure tales by Charles W. Chesnutt. Like *Black Beauty*, the conjure tales refer to animal cruelty but unlike that English novel or even *Sir George Ellison*, Chesnutt's conjure stories specifically link human cruelty to animals concretely to the inhumane condition of the slaves: captivity and servitude are certainly not all that Chesnutt emphasizes as Sarah Scott and Anna Sewell so effectively manage to accomplish in a sentimental way. Chesnutt has represented animal perceptions which humans cannot perceive, in, for instance, "Hot-Foot Hannibal." A number of other objectives approached in Animal Studies theory are conveyed in Chesnutt's stories. The ethics of eating animals (specifically chicken, ham and frog-legs in "A Victim of Heredity," "Dave's Neckliss" and "Tobe's Tribulations," respectively) will be analyzed to show not only the self-perception by black folk about being carnivores, but most specifically the influence of the slave diet on the post-emancipation gastronomic tradition of African Americans, i.e., a tradition by and large forced upon them by their slave masters. The brutal mistreatment of equines (a horse in "Mars Jeem's Nightmare" and a mule in "The Conjuror's Revenge") will also be closely examined in these Southern tales. Chesnutt's depictions of human mistreatment of animals as well as animals violence toward one another ("The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt") illustrate broader parallels of oppression at the interspecies as well as the interhuman levels, utterly linked to slavery. Anthropomorphic communicative interactions between humans and nonhumans will be examined in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" and "The Conjuror's Revenge." Finally, I argue that Chesnutt succeeds in revealing the humanity of slaves by means of Voodoo magic precisely through their metamorphoses into animals.

This paper will not address those conjuring tales with a metamorphoses of trees, grapevines nor other organic entities within the ecological system which do not belong to the animal kingdom although in the Yoruba religion they are regarded to have souls (Ruffin 2010: 89). The paper will not address other (non-conjure) animal stories which Chesnutt published such as his well-known dog story, "The Bouquet" which has received some scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis will instead center on Chesnutt's conjure stories with devalued humans changed through "black magic" into various animals, as well as animals under the spell of conjure women without undergoing human metamorphoses which perform the conjurer's bidding. As Yvonne Chireau points out in *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*,

Activities of such enslaved Conjure men and women have been well documented. In nineteenth-century North Carolina, a journalist described a plantation bondswoman whom other slaves believed to be "in communication with occult powers," as an accomplished seer and prophet: "Her utterances were accepted as oracles, and piously heeded"... Slave Conjurers offered consolation to other bondpersons who were at risk.<sup>3</sup>

2 Among other issues, the dog in the story enjoys greater freedom of movement than African Americans and does not need to pay heed to Southern segregation laws. For further details, see Peter Taylor, "Catalyst: Charles W. Chesnutt's 'The Bouquet,'" in *Journal of the Short Story in English – Les Cahiers de la nouvelle* 42 (Spring 2004): 1-7 and Henry Wonham, *Charles W. Chesnutt: A Study of his Short Fiction* (New York, Twayne Studies in Short Fiction No. 72, 1998), 121-123.

3 Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 15.

Obviously, human fictional characters have been changed supernaturally into animals in fiction preceding Chesnutt: werewolves were transformed humans in European folktales and medieval witch tales were popular. Chesnutt directly refers to the supernatural metamorphoses fiction by the East Prussian author E.T.A. Hoffmann in “The Conjuror’s Revenge” but not to the actual source of some of his conjure tale plots in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Previous to Chesnutt’s collected conjure stories, Mary Owen published *Old Rabbit, the Voodoo and Other Sorcerers* (1893), of which there is no evidence of Chesnutt having read. Chesnutt refers to interviews and conversations with former slaves he personally undertook in his essay “Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South” (1901)<sup>4</sup> but the animals and processes of conjuring revealed in the essay do not appear in any of his conjure tales. Chesnutt’s originality derives from the metamorphoses of enslaved humans into animals. All of his tales are set in the 1830s-1860s on a North Carolina plantation where food, cotton and tobacco are grown and harvested by over a hundred slaves owned by an educated man of Scottish ancestry.

In order to reframe the emotional human life of a slave, Chesnutt replicates plantation fiction conventions with popular animal tales such as the popular *Tales of Uncle Remus* published in 1880 by Joel Chandler Harris. Veronika Rychlá notes that “the ways in which animals are represented in literature almost always reflect our sentimental feelings,”<sup>5</sup> a view which proves valid not only in English literature but also in Chesnutt’s conjure stories, though clearly the didactic aims are different: Chesnutt’s scheme is to create sympathy for African Americans who lived through slavery by means of the animals sympathetically represented in his conjure stories while most authors represent animals to evoke sympathy for the portrayed animals. Although the portrait of “Marse Dugal’ McAdoo” is described by Julius McAdoo as a good slave master, a harmonious life is by no means what Chesnutt’s emancipated narrator depicts of the old experiences of his fellow slaves. While Voodoo is rarely represented in American plantation fiction, the religious and philosophical notion of reincarnation of humans into animals was known to Chesnutt as an idea of Plato<sup>6</sup> and in Hinduism as well as some African religions. Under the standpoint of Animal Studies theory, a realistic relationship between human life and nonhuman animal life has a rather strong disconnect in Chesnutt’s tales: supernatural change into animals forms the basis for accomplishing human-motivated revenge, escape from slavery or maintaining human companionship, among other motivations on the plantation setting. Accordingly, Chesnutt’s animals function as a direct consequence of these dynamic motivations and serve as human stand-ins, possessing no agency of their own. In the main, animals are mostly unheeded unless they have undergone metamorphosis from human forms in these tales. While numerous white people are characters in Chesnutt’s stories, no white person is transformed through conjure into an animal in any of the fourteen conjure tales by Chesnutt, thereby linking specifically and only blacks closely to animals.

4 Charles W. Chesnutt, “Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South,” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 155–161.

5 Veronika Rychlá, “Representation of Animals in Literature Matters,” in *Hradec Králové Journal of Anglophone Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 70.

6 Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 10.

## The Variety of Animals Represented in the Conjure Tales

In *The Conjure Woman* (1899), a free black woman named Aunt Peggy practicing Voodoo is consulted by both African American slaves and whites alike to perform black magic which may aid them in finding a supernatural solution to one difficulty or another. Animals permeate these fourteen conjure tales, creating both local color (background noises one hears in the warm temperatures especially in southern coastal states of the United States), as well as being significant actors in the plots. Voodoo magic consists in transforming human beings into diverse animals (amphibians, aves, canines, equines, insects, felis and finally a member of the ursidae family). Chesnutt's animals enable fractured humans to undertake acts which as human slaves they were restricted from accomplishing. Thus as animals, they become a liberating and powerful African American force (under the power of Voodoo magic). As animals they help those sold and therefore separated family members to see and hear one another (Sis' Becky's Pickaninny"), to gain revenge for the theft of a shote ("The Conjuror's Revenge"), to exact revenge for selling a child to a cruel slave master, resulting in the child's horrific death ("The Marked Tree"), or simply in order to escape slavery altogether to a northern state ("Tobe's Tribulations"). The last two tales are punctuated by many tropes of slave narratives such as loss of beloved family and familiar settings.

The Voodoo magic spells are not always fully mastered by Aunt Peggy and the other conjurers. If mistakes are made or people interested in changing their fate with the help of black magic do not follow exact procedures, outcomes can be unpredictable, usually resulting in unintended permanent consequences, such as in "Tobe's Tribulations" where Aunt Peggy's magic renders a human slave named Tobe permanently into a bull-frog or "The Conjuror's Revenge" where the slave Primus remains part human, part mule (or "humule")<sup>7</sup> for the rest of his life.

Many varieties of animals are represented as modified humans in *The Conjure Woman*. These human stand-ins include birds, such as the sparrow, mockingbird and hummingbird; a frog, a mule; a canine – a fox; a canid and a wolf, a cat and a black bear. Other animals follow the command of Aunt Peggy such as a mockingbird and a hornet. In the tale entitled "The Marked Tree," an angry enslaved mother jinxes her master Alek Spencer by killing off, one-by-one, all of the members of the large Spencer family. The enraged slave mother, Phillis, employs through conjure a jaybird who steals a diamond ring resulting in the estrangement and eventual death of both wife, her husband Jeff Spencer, and their baby; a poisonous spider which kills a granddaughter; a rabbit who sprints in front of a horse which throws and kills Alek's second son Tom Spencer; a rattlesnake who bites and kills a Spencer cousin selling the plantation to the narrator. None of these animals were changed via metamorphosis from human form, yet following conjuring commands, they exact lethal revenge for the human slaves who were deeply wronged.

In these African American conjure tales, Chesnutt includes only those animals common to the local wildlife in North Carolina or the hybrid beast of burden frequently bred for work on

7 Following the lead of Leatherland describing animals with human qualities or communication skills under a portmanteau "humanimals," the slave Primus in "The Conjuror's Revenge" will be designated a humule. The manner in which Primus maintains his human personality and interests in mule form, using mule behavior, justifies this hybrid term for this hybrid equine. See Douglas Leatherland, "The Capacities and Limitations of Language in Animal Fantasies," in *Humanimalia: a journal of human/animal interface studies* 11, no. 2 (spring 2020): 104.

the Southern plantation – – the mule. Chesnutt excludes the “vicious” birds of prey frequently employed in Southern writing such as a crow, raven, buzzard or vulture.

## Animals and Local Color

Like most Southern writers, Chesnutt attempts to set a certain Southern mood in his fiction. A major part of North Carolina local color includes especially those animals which are common to the locale but might seem somewhat exotic to members of his readership. While framing a slave’s appalling experience and act(s) of supernatural revenge when wronged, Chesnutt invokes some animals to audibly set a peculiar and mysterious tone:

Later in the day, in the cool of the evening, on the front piazza, left dark because of the mosquitoes, except for the light of the stars, which shone with a clear, soft radiance, Julius told my wife and me his story of the old Spencer oak. His low mellow voice rambled on, to an accompaniment of night-time sounds – the deep diapason from a distant frog-pond, the shrill chirp of the cicada, the occasional bark of a dog or cry of an owl, all softened by distance and emerging into a melancholy minor which suited perfectly the teller and the tale.<sup>8</sup>

Uncle Julius McAdoo, who serves the white northerner John and his wife Ann as coach driver and at times as a deceitful advisor on farming and animal husbandry, narrates in African American Vernacular English his framed tales of voodoo set in North Carolina from the 1830s to the 1860s, and as Melvin Dixon asserts, Julius “is able to vent his aggression through the medium of the folktale against the institution of slavery which dehumanized him.”<sup>9</sup> It is precisely the stealing and killing of a shote which initiates the conflict between a free black conjurer and an enslaved black named Primus in “The Conjuror’s Revenge.” After stealing the pig, Primus gets turned into “a monst’us fine mule” in Julius McAdoo’s tale, a hybrid animal evoking both “local color” based laughter while at the same time encoding the racial-hybrid bodies of many of the slaves, including Julius himself.<sup>10</sup> This encoding includes the attempt by Guinea-born conjurer, after his conversion to Christianity years later, to reverse his black magic. Yet he dies before completely undoing his conjuring, and Primus’s body is marred with the lower leg of a mule, signifying the status of a hybrid mulatto’s body as permanently marred by the white man. Hence this humule or mule-man reflects the status of the slave-man: “Chesnutt knew sure enough that there was no ‘unmiscegenation’ for white and African American blood. Once mixed at the pleasure of the bygone southern gentleman, it is mixed forever.”<sup>11</sup>

8 Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 197.

9 Melvin Dixon, “The Teller as Folk Trickster in Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*,” *CLA Journal* 18, no. 2 (1974): 190.

10 Julius McAdoo is described by John earlier as possessing a “strain of other than negro blood” in Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 34.

11 Christopher Koy, “The Mule as Metaphor in the Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt,” in *Theory and Practice in English Studies*, (vol. 4). *Proceedings of the Eighth Conference of British, American and Canadian Studies*, ed. Jan Chovanek (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2005): 97–98.

## Animal Perceptions in the Conjure Tales

In the story "Hot-Foot Hannibal," an ordinarily reliable grey mare sees the ghost of a dead house-slave named Chloe. The mare pulling a small carriage refuses to walk forward any further near the haunted swamp. Humans, black as well as white, cannot comprehend the horse's queer behavior:

When I resumed my seat in the rockaway, Julius started the mare. She went for a few rods, until we reached the edge of a branch crossing the road, when she stopped short.

"Why did you stop, Julius?"

"I didn' suh," he replied. "'T wuz de mare stopp'. G' 'long dere, Lucy! W'at you mean by dis foolis'ness?"  
[...]

"Uh huh! I knows why dis mare doan go. It des flash' 'cross my recommen'bance."

"Why is it, Julius," I inquired.

"Ca'se she sees Chloe."

"Where is Chloe?" I demanded.

"Chloe done be'n dead dese fo'ty years er mo'" the old man returned. "Her ha'nt is settin' ober yonder on de udder side er de branch, unner dat willertree, dis blessed minute."

"Why Julius!" said my wife, "do you see the haunt?"

"No'm," he answered, shaking his head, "I doan see 'er, but de mare sees 'er."<sup>12</sup>

It is well known that horses as well as other animals may indeed perceive sounds and smells which the human ears and nose do not take in. In this tale, the horse's perception of the ghost or haunt is the means by which Chesnutt convincingly suspends the disbelief of the readers that what they perceive may not be all there is to the world. At the end of this moving tale, a sold-off male slave commits suicide and the corpse of his lover Chloe is discovered at her haunt.

In "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," a story Joseph Church designates "especially polemical and perspicacious,"<sup>13</sup> Chesnutt also shows how animals can misperceive reality just as humans can. Mahaly is the love interest of two blacks, and the slave Dan inadvertently kills his rival who is the son of a powerful conjurer. The conjurer then transforms Mahaly through metamorphosis into a black cat. Dan has been led to believe the cat bewitches his sleep with nightmares, or "runs down ter yo' cabin en bridles you, en mounts you, en dribes you out th'oo de chimbly, en rides you ober de roughes' places she kin fin."<sup>14</sup> Thus as a wolf Dan ruthlessly mauls his black cat wife. In human form, Dan had always been Mahaly's true love. The plot of an unintentional mauling of one's wife because of the scheming conjurer's pitiless act of revenge appears more tragic for the remorseful and emotionally distressed wolf-husband than for quickly dying Mahaly who, at her death, returns to human form. They make a rather strange pair, Mahaly as a woman ghost and Dan as a wolf ghost, together haunting the area of woods. Intriguingly, both animals and black humans in Chesnutt's conjure tales have ghosts – while white humans do not. The identification by black people with animals is evident in life as well as after death in these conjure tales, but it is never present with white people, neither in life nor death. As stated above, only the mare Lucy perceives ghosts. Chesnutt's depiction of animal perception as varied from human sensory awareness reflects the

12 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 110.

13 Joseph Church, "In Black and White: The Reader's Part in Chesnutt's 'Gray Wolf's Ha'nt,'" in *American Transcendental Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (June 1999): 124.

14 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 101.

well-known differing perceptiveness between human and nonhuman animals, though obviously on an unrealistic supernatural basis.

While her husband was no malicious hybrid werewolf, Mahaly's husband became an easily manipulated yet ferocious animal who had killed three people and had been cunningly tricked by a conjurer into killing his beloved wife. Dan is forever trapped in lupine form for the remainder of his life. He is shown to be constantly mourning his wife at her burial site (as a wolf). Unlike werewolf tales, Dan is not depicted as a blood-thirsty evil monster. Quite the opposite, this story reflects in numerous ways the torture and cruelty humans have shown towards wolves over the last centuries.<sup>15</sup> The act of revenge in which Chesnutt's grey wolf engages in the tale is clearly human-sourced rather than lupine. Yet as Jeffrey Masson points out with a well-documented case of a "killer whale" in an oceanarium, animals can be vengeful to address teasing or when they perceive they have been wronged.<sup>16</sup>

### Questioning the Ethics of Eating Animals

Besides the issue of animal exploitation, another major concern of Critical Animal Studies is the ethics of slaughtering and eating animal meat. This topic was debated as far back as the ancient Greeks, starting with Pythagoras; Porphyry's treatise *On Abstinence from Animal Food* is a sustained philosophical argument for vegetarianism. In three of Chesnutt's conjure stories, the practice of eating animal meat is looked into during interactions between John, Annie and Uncle Julius McAdoo. The questionable ethical conduct is raised by Julius regarding the consumption of animal-based food such as ham and frog-legs. Above all, Julius exercises a poignant critique regarding the history of consuming chicken on slave plantations.

In the opening of the tale "Dave's Neckliss," the white narrator John spies Uncle Julius eating ham:

I saw him lay it on his plate: he adjusted the knife and fork to cut it into smaller pieces, he paused as if struck by a sudden thought, and a tear rolled down his rugged cheek and fell upon the slice of ham before him.<sup>17</sup>

When asked why he had become emotional, Julius relates the experience of a Bible-reading slave named Dave who "use' ter go out in de woods en pray"<sup>18</sup> and repeatedly warned fellow slaves about sinfulness. As it was against the law for a slave to learn how to read or write or to possess any books, Dave reassured his master that the Bible condemned thievery and taught him how important it was to obey one's master and love God. Wiley was another slave who wished to have a girl whom Dave had won over, so Wiley got involved in stealing and plotting against Dave.

Eve'y night er so somebody 'ud steal a side er bacon, er a ham, er a shoulder, er sump'n fum one er de smoke-'ouses. De smoke-'ouses wuz lock'... Dey's mo' ways 'n one ter skin a cat, en dey's mo d'n one way ter git in a smoke-'ouse."<sup>19</sup>

15 S.A. Robisch, *The Wolf and Wolf Myth in American Literature* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2009), 43–46.

16 Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1995), 174.

17 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 124.

18 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 125.

19 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 127.

Spying to see who was stealing the ham, much like John spies on Julius eating ham, the rival Wiley makes a false accusation. The false identification of the thief reflects the spy society on antebellum slave plantations. This spying consisted not only the notorious night patrols of armed riding white men monitoring any unauthorized movement of slaves from plantations, but also the organizing of slaves spying on fellow slaves, just as Frederick Douglass describes the slave spy betrayal in his first failed attempt to escape from the plantation near Easton, Maryland in chapter ten of his famous *Narrative* (1845).<sup>20</sup> Wiley utterly enjoys Dave's misfortune; so does Dave's ex-fiancée Dilsey who becomes enamored with Wiley, and Dugal McAdoo wrongly punishes an honest slave for theft.

Historical night patrols are represented in the conjure tales "Lonesome Ben" and "Tobe's Tribulations" by fugitives (transformed magically into animals). The guarding of food or the widespread spying on the plantation to get a grip on widespread food theft (including the use of armed guards) occurs in "The Goophered Grapevine" and "Dave's Neckliss," the spying in the latter story resulting in the false identification of the thief.

Hunger unambiguously served as the basis of the enslaved African American's theft of food. Near the opening of his famous autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901), Booker T. Washington refers to animal theft on the part of slaves on plantations:

One of my earliest recollections is that of my mother cooking a chicken late at night, and awakening her children for the purpose of feeding them. How or where she got it I do not know. I presume, however, it was procured from our owner's farm. Some people may call this theft. If such a thing were to happen now, I should condemn it as theft myself. But taking place at the time it did, and for the reason that it did, no one could ever make me believe that my mother was guilty of thieving. She was simply a victim of the system of slavery.<sup>21</sup>

Under the daily regime of the slave community, Booker T. Washington recalls that on "the plantation in Virginia, and even later, meals were gotten by the children very much as dumb animals get theirs. It was a piece of bread here and a scrap of meat there,"<sup>22</sup> and much like adult slaves, their children went hungry too. In these tales, Chesnutt's thieves are often portrayed as tricksters reflecting the "chronic undernourishment of the labor force [that] was a common feature of the slave economy."<sup>23</sup> Hence, it was not usually regarded as theft from the white man when over the course of centuries their unrequited black labor was being stolen as well.

The punishment for stealing ham in "Dave's Neckliss" is cruel and unusual: "So Mars Walker tuk 'n tied Dave up en gin 'im forty,"<sup>24</sup> a very cruel though common-enough whipping punishment. However, Master Walker then ordered a plantation blacksmith to shackle a piece of ham around Dave's neck, telling him "Now, suh, yer'll wear dat neckless fer de nex' six mount's; en I 'spec's yer ner none er de yuther niggers on dis plantation won' steal no mo' bacon."<sup>25</sup> The meat of

20 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 126.

21 Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Bantam Classic, 1959), 4.

22 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 6.

23 Robert Bone, "The Oral Tradition," in *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 140.

24 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 128.

25 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 128.



a pig not only becomes a sign of ridicule on the plantation among fellow slaves by the ex-preacher of Sabbath sermons, but as Henry Wonham points out, it “inextricably links him to his commodity status.”<sup>26</sup> Dave addresses Julius as they worked together: “Julius, did yer knowed yer wuz wukkin’ long yer wid a ham? . . . Did yer knowed I wuz turnin’ ter a ham, Julius?”<sup>27</sup> Eventually Dave hangs himself in the smokehouse, hanging with all the other hams. Wonham interprets Dave’s fate as one who was “coerced into identification with an inanimate object” which he called “a gruesome psychological realism.”<sup>28</sup> What had become an inanimate object used to be a very much animate animal until it was slaughtered, and Dave, with the remains of an animal corpse locked around his neck for such a long time, sensed himself as like an inanimate man, echoing the horrific status of a pig which became ham and figuratively became him. When he hangs himself in the smokehouse Dave becomes just as inanimate, in unity with the smoked ham. To be sure, Dave does not contemplate the status of a hog hanging around his neck at all like the albatross around the neck of the ancient mariner in the poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Dave did not commit the crime.

In the conjure tale “Tobe’s Tribulations,” frog legs are on the menu at the home of John and Annie, who have finished their dinner just as Uncle Julius arrives.

“By the way, Annie, perhaps Julius would like some of those frogs’ legs. I see Nancy hasn’t cleared off the table yet.”

“No ma’m,” responded Julius quickly, “I much obleedzd, but I doan eat no frogs’ laigs; no *suh*, no *ma’m*, I doan eat no frog-laigs, not ef I knows w’at I’s eatin’!”<sup>29</sup>

In refusing to eat frog legs, Julius links frogs and their suffering to human suffering in his framed story about a slave named Tobe who attempted to escape slavery. He asks the white couple to listen closely and points out that one frog poignantly croaked with melancholy. Julius identifies that frog as Tobe, a slave who tried unsuccessfully to escape as an animal and remained after his metamorphosis as a bull-frog for the remainder of his life. While this framed tale is far from pointing to human-frog relations falling within the notions of Animals Studies theory, it nevertheless shows a black man identifying with the suffering of a nonhuman animal and consequently (and voraciously) refusing to eat them.

In another conjure story, “A Victim of Heredity,” chicken consuming becomes a question of contention that Black people especially love to eat chicken. According to Uncle Julius, “cullud folks is mo’ fonder er chick’n ‘n w’ite folk. Dey can’t he’p but be.” When Annie regards the statement as slanderous against Blacks, Julius responds politely but firmly: “I begs yo’ pardon, ma’m, if it hu’ts yo’ feelin’s, but I ain’ findin’ no fault wid *dem*. *Dey* ain’ ‘sponsible fer dey tase fer chick’n-meat. A w’ite man’s ter blame fer dat,”<sup>30</sup> or that chicken meat is largely consumed by black folk because of the diet forced upon slaves for centuries. Julius argues, illustrated by means of another tale, that the slave diet continues to exert an influence on African American post-bellum gastronomic customs.

26 Wonham, Chesnutt, *A Study of his Short Fiction*, 45.

27 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 132.

28 Wonham, Chesnutt, *A Study of his Short Fiction*, 45-46.

29 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 184.

30 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 174.

## Animal Communication in the Conjure Tales

Chesnutt's conjure tales feature animals communicating with humans through channels other than the spoken language of humans. Despite his adherence to anthropomorphic tropes of animal fantasy, Chesnutt's tales feature animals communicating through channels other than the spoken language of humans. To some degree, Chesnutt's remain faithful to animal behavior, including their observable means of communication, thereby mitigating other anthropomorphic representations of animals. As Douglas Leatherland points out, "Anthropomorphism permeates all narrative; any attempt to represent the consciousness or subjectivity of another individual is an instance of anthropomorphism."<sup>31</sup> For instance, the mule in "The Conjuror's Revenge" - - who had undergone a metamorphosis from a slave named Primus - - behaves and arguably even communicates in a mule way: he recognizes his owner and whinnies, and later the mule kicks a man making advances on his wife while his human form is absent. Even his human "master," Jim McGee, in a merged perception, recognizes a similarity of the mule to someone he knows:

"So de po' w'ite man tuk Mars Jim 'roun' back er de sto', en dere stood a monst'us fine mule. W'en de mule see Mars Jim, he gun a whinny, des lack he knowed him befo'. Mars Jim look' at de mule 'peared ter be soun' en strong. Mars Jim 'lowed dey 'peared ter be sump'n fermilyus 'bout de mule's face, 'spesh'ly his eyes; but he hadn' los' near mule, en didn' hab no recommemb'ance er habin seed de mule befo'. He ax' de po' buckrah whar he got de mule, en d po' buckrah say his brer raise' de mule down on Rockfish Creek.<sup>32</sup>

We may presume that Jim McGee, either subconsciously or unknowingly, recognizes his human slave named Primus in the mule he eventually decides to purchase. Chesnutt represents an animal laborer, a mule, even to the mind of a white human, as possessing specific similarities to the African American slave laborer. The human-nonhuman interaction in this story reveals a pattern of injustice toward animals despite the human-like communicative interactions that the mules makes. The narrative of the terrible fate of this mule will be covered in the subsection below dealing with animal cruelty, but suffice it to point out that the mule has a particular connection verging on cultural significance with the labor in the South linked not only with plowing fields and transporting heavy loads but is linked with the hybrid nature of mulatto slaves as well.<sup>33</sup>

In "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," Becky is a field slave traded by her owner, Colonel Pendleton, for a race horse. Sister Becky had already lost her husband to a slave trader. Her grim new owner does not want his purchase to include her small baby Moses; with no feeling whatsoever for Becky's maternal instincts, he does not want her to worry about a baby but only to be concerned with performing her work properly. Uncle Julius satirically presents her original "owner" as a good master: "Kunnel Pen'teton didn' wanter hu't Becky's feelin's, - fer Kunnel Pen'leton wuz a kin'-hea'ted man, en nebber lack' ter make no trouble fer nobody,"<sup>34</sup> so he lies to Becky and tells her he is lending her out for two days to work. (Of course Pendleton merely avoids direct confrontation

31 Leatherland, "The Capacities and Limitations of Language in Animal Fantasies," 102.

32 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 73-74.

33 For an overview of the representation of mules in many works of fiction written by Chesnutt, see Christopher Koy, "The Mule as Metaphor in the Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt," 93-100.

34 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 86.

of his cruelty, not the cruelty itself.) When she learns the truth that she has been sold, both Becky and her enslaved baby become medically ill after being separated after less than a week. At the request of Becky's fellow slaves, Aunt Peggy is asked for assistance to employ some medical conjure to save the lives of the extremely depressed mother Becky and her baby son Moses. Consequently, four animals are controlled by means of Aunt Peggy's amazing voodoo magic: a hummingbird, mockingbird, a hornet and a sparrow. She

tu'nt little Mose ter a hummin'-bird, en sont 'im off fer ter fin' his mammy. So little Mose flewed, en flewed, en flewed away, 'tel bimeby he got ter de place whar Sis' Becky b'longed.. He seed his mammy wukkin' roun' de ya'd. . .Sis; Becky heared sump'n hummin' roun' en roun' her, sweet en low. Fus' she 'lowed it wuz a hummin'-bird; dem she thought it sounded lack her little Mose croonin' on her breas' way back yonder on de ole plantation.<sup>35</sup>

Communication by humming and singing by the baby boy Moses (who again undergoes metamorphosis later into a mockingbird) is most soothing to his mother Sister Becky, who had been forlorn and approaching a mentally depressed state until she recognized Moses singing to her in the form of a bird in the faraway plantation. The effect is powerfully palliative. As Mario Ortiz Robles convincingly asserts,

If such a thing as a naturally occurring literature were to exist (and who are we to say that it does not?), it would undoubtedly be the song of birds. Scientists tell us that songbirds, or oscines, as they term them, emit songs that are so distinctive that members of the same species can identify each other by repeating vocal patterns whose frequencies, pitch and repertoire encode a language of whose multiple functions the demarcation of territory and the enactment of sexual selection are among the most conspicuous.<sup>36</sup>

The musicality of the bird's song in Chesnutt's tale is a human metaphor of debatable value in describing the avian communication systems and thus presents an anthropocentric misunderstanding of the birds' singing under Animal Studies theory. Yet in the tale, the singing does provide comfort akin to medicine, which the conjure doctor, like any modern-trained doctor, aims to apply not only to cure but to reduce pain. Moreover, the anxious slave separated from her child gets relief through this conjuring in which Moses communicates to his mother.

In "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," the sting of a hornet can be more dangerous than those of bees, and is likely the reason Aunt Peggy employs the hornet rather than a honeybee for the purpose of stinging a valuable race horse on two separate occasions, rendering the appearance of the legs of the costly equine worthless. Intriguingly, human speech interactions take place between Aunt Peggy and the hornet: "You go up ter Kunnel Pen'leton's stable, hawnet," saz she, "en stung de knees er de race hoss name' Lightning' Bug. Be shoe n git de right one."<sup>37</sup> Without answering, the hornet's perception goes well beyond the auditory; in finding the human speech intelligible, the hornet correctly follows Aunt Peggy's rather complex instructions, distinguishing between the different equines located in a stable and stinging the specified horse by name in this fantastic tale. Some animals understand human language to a limited extent and are trained to follow human language commands, but hornets or other insects are obviously not among those animals.

35 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 87–88.

36 Mario Ortiz Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 86.

37 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 89.

## Animal Cruelty in the Conjure Tales

Man's brutal mistreatment of animals has a long history in fiction and the representation of such malicious behavior is not absent in Chesnutt's conjure stories. The ethics behind the condemnation of animal cruelty has been expressed in Critical Animal Studies theory in various ways, but a major scholar on the subject, Peter Singer, puts it succinctly in his landmark book *Animal Liberation* (1972):

If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering of any other being.<sup>38</sup>

A major reason for violence waged against animals is the projection of the human psyche onto an imaginary enemy. Near the beginning of Chesnutt's conjure tale "Mars Jeem's Nightmare," a calm slow rural setting is utterly changed with a sudden jolt in this distressing scene:

While we sat there [in a horse-drawn rockaway], a man came suddenly around a turn of the road ahead of us. I recognized in him a neighbor with whom I had exchanged formal calls. He was driving a horse, apparently a high-spirited creature, possessing, so far as I could see at a glance, the marks of good temper and good breeding; the gentleman, I have heard it suggested, was slightly deficient in both. The horse was rearing and plunging, and the man was beating him furiously with a buggy-whip. When he saw us, he flushed a fiery red and, as he passed, held the reins with one hand, at some risk to his safety, lifted his hat, and bowed somewhat constrainedly as the horse darted by us, still panting and snorting with fear.<sup>39</sup>

That the horse is in distress and pain is obvious to all of the characters who witnessed the incident. The response among the whites and black witnessing this brutal man's mistreatment of a horse "of good temper and good breeding" is at once mutual revulsion, though they reach different perspectives or interpretations regarding the ultimate meaning of the cruelty:

"He looks as though he were ashamed of himself," I observed.  
 "I'm sure he ought to be," exclaimed my wife indignantly. "I think there is no worse sin and no more disgraceful thing than cruelty."  
 "I quite agree with you," I assented.  
 "A man w'at 'buses his hoss is gwine ter be ha'd on de folks w'at wuks fer 'im," remarked Julius.<sup>40</sup>

The link between "sin" and animal cruelty results in a general condemnation from a moral and religious perspective, uttered by Annie, wife of the narrator John, both of whom are upper-class white Northerners. Uncle Julius McAdoo, however, bluntly offers the perspective of the common black man and his explicit experience of bondage in the South. From his outlook, any man who mistreats a horse will be malicious toward his slaves as well, a modified version of an ethical position expressed a century earlier by Immanuel Kant.<sup>41</sup> In this manner, Julius identifies with

38 Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (rev. ed., New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 8.

39 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 57.

40 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 57.

41 Kant argues that in mistreating animals, one makes oneself more likely to wrong other people by weakening one's disposition for empathy. See Christine M. Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 144.

the affliction of the whipped animal like no white person can. The horse speaks of his suffering by “snorting in fear” and thereby showing witnesses what whipped slaves rarely showed outsiders or neighbors: cruel abuse.

The identification by this black narrator with an equine is repeated in another conjure story. In the aforementioned story “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” Julius reveals that the work of a mule used as a draft animal, usually pulling a plow, and the work of a slave, have much in common and Julius identifies closely with such animals:

“Fac’ is,” continued the old man, in a serious tone, “I doan lack ter dribe a mule. I’s alluz afeared I mought be imposin’ on some human creetur; eve’y time I cuts a mule wid a hick’ry, ‘pears ter me mos’ lackly I’s cuttin’ some er my own relations, er somebody e’se w’at can’t he’p deyse’ve’s.”<sup>42</sup>

The driving of a draft mule and the “cutting” of a mule with a hickory whip are clear references of the nature of the harsh human-equine work relations on farms and plantations where equines are “broken” and coerced by humans much like unpaid slaves. The animal term “breaking” was a common metaphor used among plantation overseers for training slaves to work whose independent ego had to be destroyed.<sup>43</sup>

Julius narrates the story of Primus who was turned into a mule whose human attributes continue to manifest themselves in mule form: wine, tobacco, alcohol and women remain constant interests of the mule, who drinks an entire barrel of wine near the vineyards. The mule experiencing an episode of alcoholic near self-destruction is an echo of Southwest humor transplanted to slave plantation fiction. Likewise, Chesnutt includes the violent cruelty applied to the plow-pulling mule by a slave named Dan who had pursued the lady Primus had wooed as a human: “[Dan] pitch’ inter de mule en lammed ‘im ez ha’d ez he could. De mule tuk it all, en ‘peared ter be ez ‘umble ez a mule could be.”<sup>44</sup> Not only does narrator Julius graphically depict specific acts of sheer brutality, but he also describes supportively the valiant demeanor of the animal while enduring the wholly undeserved punishment as humbly “ez a mule could be.” Eventually the mule kicks Dan back in return when the opportunity provides itself: “w’en de mule haul’ off en kick him clean ober de fence inter a brier-patch on de yuther side.”<sup>45</sup>

This account warrants Julius’ declaration that he does not like to drive a mule with a hickory whip (behind a plow) because he associates with the mule. In clear ways resembling Southwest Humor tales, the narration in vernacular English about back and forth violence between the mule and Dan aims at slapstick humor over a woman. Yet the severe labor performed by a mule, its whipping and the general cruelty closely duplicates the real oppressive labor experiences of slaves so that the laughter tradition is pushed back, provoking in readers a different kind of reaction – anxious laughter – describing cruel danger slaves actually experienced which hits too close to home.

When Aunt Peggy turns Tobe into a fox in “Tobe’s Tribulations” in order to aid Tobe in escaping the slave plantation and relocating to a free northern state, Chesnutt depicts the slave

42 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 71.

43 See the description of the slave-breaking techniques of Edward Covey in Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 100–105.

44 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 76.

45 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Stories*, 76.

catcher's hounds who almost succeed in hunting Tobe down and mauling him in a manner very similar to the blood sport of British fox hunts as depicted, for example, in the novels of Anthony Trollope, but with slave catchers in hot pursuit on horseback instead of aristocratic fox hunters.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

Besides human animals and nonhuman animals changing forms into one another in his stories, Chesnutt does not represent animals exerting agency in any non-anthropomorphic way. The animals in his stories are for the most part on display once they have acquired human metamorphosis, greatly limiting realistic animal behavior, agency, or animal thought processes independent of human motivation. Naturally the plot revolves around the tragic condition of slaves who, whenever transformed through conjure into an animal, are presented as even greater tragic figures when their nonhuman animal form has been made permanent and irreversible. Like most fiction confronting the dynamics of slavery, Chesnutt's tales in *The Conjure Woman* have an essentially didactic thrust. Joseph Church points out that the traditional frame narrative by which Chesnutt's tales operate following the model of *The Tales of Uncle Remus*, Joel Chandler Harris's black narrator Uncle "Remus sees the [white] boy's need for maturational wisdom, and responds with appropriate tales."<sup>47</sup> Chesnutt, on the other hand, pursued his didactic endeavor for adult white readers in a much more furtive way: as twenty-one-year-old Chesnutt himself put it in his *Journal*, "...while amusing [white adult readers] to lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling."<sup>48</sup> Therefore, Chesnutt's specified goals miss much of the aims Animal Studies scholars seek to uncover in animals authentically depicted in fiction, sourced as these stories partially are in ancient mythology and dedicated to edify white readers about racism.

Artistic license always emphasizes story telling so that animal agency and perceptions get the short shrift. However, the human-nonhuman animal interactions in these tales show enough realism to affect critical and ethical considerations regarding man's behavior toward his fellow living creatures, artistically expressing much of the ethical focus of Critical Animal Studies. Uncle Julius McAdoo's identification with animals which suffer (mule, horse, frog, etc.) while at the same time performing as a trickster demonstrates his moral authority regarding animal suffering. Moreover, Uncle Julius's perspective as well as his description of complex interactions on the plantation in Chesnutt's tales destabilize the human-animal dichotomy. To be sure, Chesnutt's animals are not idealized nor do they act in any way except to the specified needs and passions of the human beings they had been transformed from (or, in fewer occasions, serving the specific wishes of the conjurer). In several ways, Chesnutt's animals replicate the tragic experience of African American slaves; none of the animals acquire the sought after liberation which had directed the human slaves to pursue conjuring in the first place.

46 Hughes Robert, "Trollope and Fox-Hunting," in *Essays in Literature* 12, no. 1 (1985): 76.

47 Church, "In Black and White: The Reader's Part in Chesnutt's 'Gray Wolf's Ha'nt': 123.

48 Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham, Duke University Press, 1993), 140.

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