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Memory, Ancestors, and Activism/Resistance in Charles Chesnutt's Uncle Julius

Elizabeth J. West

I. MEMORY AND ANCESTORS IN AFRICAN COSMOLOGY

In general, readers recognize Charles Chesnutt's 1899 short-story collection, *The Conjure Woman*, as an example of the African American folktale tradition and its central narrator, Uncle Julius, as the archetypal trickster figure of this narrative form. While this is the most apparent folklore icon to which he mirrors, as the storyteller of the community, Uncle Julius represents a far more profound and principal figure. In his role as storyteller, Uncle Julius is the storehouse of the community's collective history and memory; as he initiates acts of remembering (telling the community's stories), he is the interceder between the world of the living and the dead. In this capacity, Uncle Julius reminds us of the longstanding significance of this role in African American culture.

In numerous historical and anthropological studies as well as in fictional works by African and diasporic African authors, we find academic and creative explorations of the importance of memory and the act of remembering in Africana societies. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) has been a seminal work of fiction in this regard—that is, for its emphasis on the importance of memory/remembering and the prolific scholarship focusing on this aspect of the novel. Morrison's heroine is freed from the horrors of the past only through confronting the past, and this confrontation occurs through a coalescence of both individual and communal remembering. This dynamic is conveyed early in the text as Sethe explains the pervasiveness of memory in human experience: "'Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else'" (36).

From centuries old African rituals that invoke ancestral spirits to African American religious testimonies, blacks have maintained cultural practices that call for individual and communal remembering. Remembering, that is, the memory act, affirms the individual's understanding of self as inexplicably tied to the group or community. Through memory, individual and social place and responsibilities are ordered, and the connection between carnal and spiritual worlds is preserved. In many African belief systems the relationship between the supernatural and the human makes the human experience in the material world fulfilling. Moreover, the supernatural is presumed to exert power over humans, oftentimes steering individuals on the course to either great failure or great achievement. In many instances, the supernatural entities wielding power in the lives of humans are the ancestors who have passed beyond the world of the living. The ancestors hold great power over the living, and they regularly exert these powers in response to the requests, the deeds, and the needs of their living charges. The ancestors are then remembered by the living so that they will watch over them and help them in times of trouble.

Among African people specific funereal and ancestor rituals are performed to recognize the presence of those departed spirits that continue to influence the conditions of those still living in the union of mind and body. The renewal or affirmation of human connectedness to the supernatural occurs ritually through ceremonies, but spiritual interveners are called upon when people experience troubles or circumstances that require contact with the spirit world. The stable relationship between worldly and other-worldly beings depends on a reciprocity of acts between them. These other-worldly beings, whether gods, ancestors, divinities, or spirits, must be worshipped and venerated to ensure the fortunes of those in the corporeal world. As the most immediate entities connected to the interests of those living, the ancestors must be awarded due

attention because they "bless, protect, warn, and punish their living relatives depending upon how much their relatives neglect or remember them" (Ray 103). John Mbiti explains that this act of remembering the ancestors must continue "so long as someone is alive who once knew the departed personally and by name" (32). While we often speak of the dead in general as ancestors, the status of ancestor is generally achieved some time after death because "while the departed is remembered by name, he is not really dead: he is . . . the living-dead. The living-dead is a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him in his life as well as being alive in the world of the spirits. So long as the living-dead is thus remembered, he is in the state of personal immortality" (Mbiti 32).

Among continental Africans rituals offer a connection to the spirits who are called up through the act of remembering. Like their diasporan counterparts, African descendants in the United States sustained this cultural worldview. They were able to do so in part because they renewed these views and practices in the New World, and also because "the ongoing influx of fresh arrivals from Africa to North America reinforced indigenous African religions and philosophical outlook (claims of ultimate truth, knowledge, and meaning) from 1619 to 1807" (Hopkins 115). While early African Americans did not openly acknowledge remembering as an African carryover, they have nevertheless integrated remembering into much of black culture. In folktales, in parables, in songs, in dance, and in sermon, the act of remembering is integral, and through this act the spiritual and historical connectedness of the group is confirmed. From the earliest to contemporary writings by African Americans we find this cultural worldview represented. For example, though eighteenth-century African American poet, Phillis Wheatley, is stolen as a child from her parents in Africa and persuaded by her white benefactors to speak of Africa as a land of inferior and uncultivated inhabitants, she nevertheless repeatedly reminds her

audience of her African origins. In *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), Wheatley remembers Africa, as she reminds her audience throughout her works that she is an African. Though she has been "brought" to America (as she suggests in her poem entitled "On Being Brought from Africa to America"), she continues to refer to herself in terms that recall her Africa origins. Throughout her poetry, Wheatley uses terms such as "Egyptian," "Ethiopian," "African," "Negro," and descendant of Ham as she refers to herself and fellow blacks. These are terms that remind her audience that while she assumes their language and even their literary conventions, she remembers and invokes her African origins.

Similarly and decades after the publication of Wheatley's poetry, black activist Sojourner Truth recalls in her 1850 narrative her mother's deliberate emphasis on memory, telling her children that it is important to remember those who have been lost (through death as well as through misfortune). While her parents had suffered the loss of most of their children to the master selling them like livestock, Truth recalls that they conveyed to those children who remained the details of their family members and their family history (3). Through this family narrative, Truth was able to maintain an understanding of family bonds, family lineage, and responsibility to family. Truth's real life account of her own family's rituals of remembering is echoed in late nineteenth-century African American fiction. For example, in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1893), Iola's family is reunited during and in the aftermath of the war through cultural modes of remembrance. Iola discovers her uncle, Robert, as she encounters him in a war hospital. Unaware that the patient under her care is Robert, Iola sings to him "in low, sweet tones some of the hymns she had learned in her old home in Mississippi" (140). As Iola sings a song that was passed down from her grandmother, Robert tells her the importance of this same tune in his family. They soon learn that this song is part of a family legacy that they share.

In *Roots*, the twentieth-century account of his family history, Alex Haley underscored the importance of remembering and its historical legacy among African Americans. Through generations of family members who remembered and retold the family's history of bondage and an ancestor's involuntary removal from an African homeland, Haley was able to reconstruct for public consumption in print and film the generations of remembering that had informed and preserved his family's, as well as his own, sense of self. Conversely, through a fictional format, Toni Morrison captures the legacy of remembering that Truth and Haley remind readers is so central to African American understanding of self and the world. In Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, we see this especially represented. It is only through the memories of his elders—particularly his parents, his aunt, Pilate, and the elders of the rural Southern town of his father's childhood—that the protagonist, Milkman, arrives at an account of himself and his family that brings him ultimate peace and understanding. Through the memories of his elders, Milkman reaches back to the ancestors, particularly to the ancestor Solomon, the mystical ancestral figure who connects the Dead family to their African past. It is a past that offers Milkman an alternative metaphysical lens through which to understand himself and his past. Solomon is his ancestor who refused the ways of the whites and stepped beyond the wide Atlantic and returned to his homeland. He is the iconic representation of defiance and dignity, those qualities no more apparent in Milkman's self-interested and materialistic father. Milkman is ecstatic with the revelation of his connection to this iconic, ancestral figure: "'He could fly! You hear me? My great-granddaddy could fly!'" (328). He further relishes the idea that Solomon's power transcended the power and influence of his enslavers and western culture in general: "'He didn't need no airplane. Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay. He could fly his own self!'" (328). Solomon represents Milkman's connection

to the supernatural world of the ancestors, and through this connection Milkman's despair and sense of loss is finally alleviated.

II. UNCLE JULIUS: KEEPING ALIVE THE COMMUNITY'S HISTORY AND ITS ANCESTORS

Preceding Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Milkman's heroic mediator, Pilate, by almost a century, Chesnutt's Conjure Woman paints Uncle Julius as the revered African American folk hero who maintains connections between the living and the ancestors. Again, Uncle Julius's role exemplifies New World connections to a pre-Middle Passage cosmology. For more than a century before the birth of black Christianity in America, blacks were guided by the belief systems they brought across the Atlantic. In particular, during the first century of African enslavement in America, when slaveholders were not as concerned about their slaves' religion, many slave communities were able to transform much of their traditional culture into their new condition. Slaveholders controlled the mobility, the labor, and even aspects of everyday social interactions among slaves; however, even in a world often defined by persistent violence and abuse, slaves etched out a cultural world of their own design. Much of the African worldview retained in slave culture occurred through religious or spiritual integrations; thus, "we see the effect of an African religious survival in the African American community in the New World" (Matthews 23). In Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales we are offered a fictionalized window of this cultural phenomenon. In these tales Chesnutt captures the supernatural, metaphysical and cultural beliefs of blacks: in particular Chesnutt, conveys concepts of nature, humankind and God, and concepts of community order and hierarchy in black culture that are rooted in continental African worldviews. Uncle Julius is the narrative guide, the storyteller who highlights the unique bonds that hold together black folk culture.

While Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales have been viewed by some as merely echoing the stereotypes of black southerners that were commonly depicted in turn-of-the-century plantation narratives, Chesnutt clearly captures the richness of black folk life pre- and post-Civil War. Chesnutt's Uncle Julius, the prominent trickster hero of his *Conjure Woman* tales, illustrates Chesnutt's critical, if not sympathetic, representation of key African-rooted elements of African American folk culture. Uncle Julius's resonance with the trickster figure, a heroic type found throughout the folk traditions of subSaharan African societies, highlights Chesnutt's eye for this cultural icon. Uncle Julius relies on his wits and his power of deception to triumph over those who have political, economic, and physical power over him. This signals his connection to the iconic trickster figure of black folklore. Beyond Uncle Julius's more apparent connection to Africanity as a trickster type, he embodies a spiritual worldview that is, at its heart, African. In particular, his invocation of memory and ancestors is central to plot development as well as his emergence as hero in each tale. Uncle Julius finds agency through the tales he shares with the newcomer landowner, John. More importantly, however, as storyteller, Julius is the recorder of the community's history, thus passing on its values and worldview. His remembrances serve to maintain the connection between the living and the dead—a connection that is central to the health and survival of the community. The figurehead of the community, Uncle Julius maintains its history and then uses that history (conjures up the ancestors) for his own and the community's material gain.

The history and culture of Chesnutt's fictional North Carolina blacks are tied to the land they have worked and the land that has claimed their lives for generations, and Uncle Julius keeps this story alive as well as the reminder of the importance of the land to human sustenance. The community's and Uncle Julius's own attachment to the land underscores notions of nature and being commonly held in African societies. Among the Yoruba, for example, there is the belief that "heaven

is a holy place, but so is earth" (Cutherell-Curry 455). It is this view of the earth, of the land, that we see reiterated throughout the tales in Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*. Uncle Julius's connection to the land of his North Carolina ancestry is in accord with the divine or spiritual significance of the land as understood by northern Ibos: "land is sacred because the ancestors are ensconced in her womb and the ancestors imbue spirits which assist their progeny to live and enjoy the good things of life to a venerable old age" (Kalu 61). For the slaves, this relationship with the land has been compromised by white greed: through their quest for wealth, slaveholders have violated both the slaves and the land. The result is that we certainly see the ancestors ensconced in the womb of the earth, but the slaves often die young and hard and the fertility of the land is constantly threatened by overuse.

In "The Goophered Grapevine," the opening tale of *The Conjure Woman*, we find the slave's dynamic relationship to the land exemplified in the story that Uncle Julius tells of the slave, Henry. Henry is not young, but he is not the picture of one emerging into old age out of an exuberant and fun-filled life. He is still good for a hard day's work: this is more the case after the conjure woman, Aunt Peggy, gives him medicine to counter the deadly conjure that she had been paid to work on Mars Dugal's grapevine. Contracted by Mars Dugal', Aunt Peggy goophers the grapevine so that any slaves who steal grapes will die. New to the plantation and unaware of the conjure, Henry eats from the grapevine and escapes death only through Aunt Peggy's counter conjure. While Aunt Peggy saves Henry from immediate death, Henry becomes tied to the land, that is, to the grapevine in a way that causes his death from overuse. Under Aunt Peggy's conjure, Henry is transformed in the spring and summer into a young, hearty man. His life cycles in tandem with the grapevine. As the vines wither in autumn and become dormant in winter, so too does Henry. This cycle continues for some time until Mars Dugal' enlists the aid of a Yankee who promises that he can make the

vineyard even more productive. The Yankee's treatment of the vines and the soil does not work as he has promised. Julius explains the disaster that ensues: "dat Yankee done dug too close under de roots, en prune de branches too close ter de vine, en all dat lime en ashes done burn' de life out'n de vimes, en dey des kep' a-with'in' en a-swivelin'" (31). Henry's fate is tied to the grapevines, and "when de big vime whar he got de sap ter 'n'int his head withered en turned yaller en died, Henry died too" (31).

Mars Dugal's insatiable appetite for wealth leads to the destruction of the very resources for that wealth: Henry dies an agonizing death, and likewise, the grapevines are poisoned and destroyed. The story of Henry seems a mere tale concocted by Julius to dissuade John from purchasing the vineyard. The tale is in fact more. If John purchases the vineyard, he becomes part of the land, the community, and thus its legacy. As Julius remembers and shares the tragic story of Henry and the grapevines, he introduces John to the world he is about to enter. Julius's story conveys to John—though he fails to see—the delicate relationship between man and land. Henry's story is a call to remember that the land is a gift, from it man receives fruits or bounties that sustain and protect him. When man, however, attempts to overuse or ill use the resources that bring these bounties, an imbalance is created, and nature retaliates. The story is a warning to John to use the land wisely, moderately and with regard for the interests of all.

The keeper of the vineyard since the war, Uncle Julius treats and regards the land with reverence and care. The grapevines are uncultivated, and Julius eats the grapes that the vines naturally bear. He lives on the land with his fundamental needs met, not working the land or himself to excess. This harmony is disrupted with John's purchase of the vineyard, and the remaining tales in the collection will underscore how John issues in a new age of exploitation of land and man. John's design is to return the vineyard to a production mode, for he has come to North Carolina expecting

to undertake grape cultivation under circumstances ideal for profit. Before his arrival, John has been informed that, "the climate was perfect for health, and in conjunction with the soil, ideal for grape-culture; labor was cheap, and land could be bought for a mere song" (2-3). Just as the plantation owners had made their fortunes through reckless use of the land and the slaves, the post-war landowner, John, would make his fortune similarly. John does not follow the slaveholder's legacy of violence; however, he does maintain a power structure that leaves black laborers exploited. He reminds readers of this relationship when he explains that as he and Annie settled into life in their new home, they found Uncle Julius highly useful. Of Julius's many attributes John recalls that "he had a thorough knowledge of the neighborhood, was familiar with the roads and the watercourses, knew the qualities of the various soils and what they would produce, and where the best hunting and fishing were to be had" (64). In addition to Julius's services for his knowledge, John also found him useful as a coachman—a service that according to John, he pays Julius well enough to compensate him for "anything he lost by the sale of the vineyard" (35).

Just as slaves employed their wits to great lengths to minimize their suffering and losses under the master's cruelty and indifference, Uncle Julius calls on his wits to counter John's authority. He undermines John's presumed authority for his own personal gain as well as the benefit of others in his family and community. Uncle Julius exemplifies the model African self—that is, the individual driven not by self-interest, but defined by his connection to community and thus acting in the interest of the whole. This is in part the significance of Julius's storytelling: his stories keep alive the history of and the bonds between those in his community. This is a practical service that storytelling renders, but Julius's remembrances also strengthen a legacy of spirituality that depends on memory. Storytelling is an experience of collective remembering, and as the community remembers, the ancestors are honored, solidarity is reaffirmed, and the speaker, as well as hearers,

are reminded of the community's beliefs and values. In each tale in *The Conjure Woman*, John and Annie are Julius's audience, but as John notices with the first story, Julius is transformed as he narrates: "as he became more and more absorbed in the narrative, his eyes assumed a dreamy expression, and he seemed to lose sight of his auditors, and to be living over again in monologue his life on the old plantation" (12-13). John's description of Julius's transformation underscores the mystical power of the storyteller and the story in African and African American culture. A story is not simply a distant conveyance between an orator and an audience; rather, it is an experience, a reliving of events, a revisiting of people long gone.

John and Annie are products of a western, rational cosmology and thus will repeatedly affirm their awareness that Julius's stories are merely highly contrived tales for amusement and entertainment. For example, John welcomes Julius's story of the conjurer's revenge "to have the monotony of Sabbath quiet relieved" (108), and he invites Julius to tell the story of Sis Becky's pickaninny because he thinks it will improve the mood of his ailing wife (137). Julius's stories of slavery, however, are a reminder of the generations of slaves who suffered and worked the land that John now claims. These are Julius's ancestors, and he tells their stories humorously but also with a reverence for them and their resilience. This history of suffering and resilience on the part of the slaves does not go wholly unnoticed—even by John, who admits that "even the wildest [of Julius's tales] was not without an element of pathos" (168). Julius's memories reveal an ontological view manifested in interdependent experiences among slaves, the natural world, and the supernatural that exceeds the comprehension of western rationality. This interdependence is conveyed in "The Goophered Grapevine" as Henry's suffering and the vineyard's suffering become one and the same. As Julius tells the story of Henry and the grapevine, Henry and the grapevine become one and the same. The remembrance and reverence of one is the remembrance and reverence of the other.

This triangular interdependence is also notable in the story, “Po’ Sandy.” The story of Sandy is yet another tale that captures the ongoing struggle of slave families to stay together. Sandy’s wife, Tenie, works her conjure to turn him into a tree. With this transformation, they hope that Sandy will no longer be rented out to other plantations, separating him from Tenie for extended periods. This refuge is only temporary, however, as Sandy—in the form of a tree—is cut down and made into lumber for the construction of a new kitchen on the plantation. Transformed in death to the realm of the spiritual, Sandy’s presence is made known to the slaves who work in and around the kitchen: “Dey could hear sump’n moanin’ en groanin’ ’bout de kitchen in de night-time, en w’en de win’ would blow dey could hear sump’n a-hollerin’ en sweekin’ lack it wuz in great pain en sufferin’” (57). When the slaves learn for certain that they are hearing the moans and groans of Sandy, they become even more reluctant to be found there at night. Mars Marrabo’s wife is unable to get the slaves to stay in the kitchen long enough to get any meaningful work done. Frustrated, Mars Marrabo orders the kitchen to be torn down. The lumber/Sandy then undergoes another transformation. A schoolhouse is built from the lumber, and the slaves find peace with Sandy’s spirit in this transformation. They only used the schoolhouse during the day hours, leaving it to Tenie at night. Just as they visited at night when he was alive and Tenie would transform him back to human form for their nightly visits, Tenie went to the schoolhouse and held her nightly fireside visits with Sandy. Though Sandy’s tale is at first a tragic one, his ultimate fate represents a cosmology in which humans are transformed in death to become ancestors. Sandy’s transformation to ancestor, however, represents not only the transformation to spiritual form but also the spirit, paradoxically, manifesting itself in a material form.

Julius’s tales of slaves and nature also reveal the ill treatment sometimes meted out by blacks themselves, but these conflicts do not go unresolved. This is illustrated in “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,”

a particularly disturbing tale of revenge that leaves a trail of deaths. To avenge the death (though accidental) of his son at the hands of Dan, the conjurer contrives a plan that results in Dan killing his wife, Mahaly. Avenging Mahaly's death, Dan then kills the conjurer. The conjurer has turned Dan into a wolf, however, and with his death leaves Dan roaming the woods alone and broken. Julius explains to John (whose plan is to clear the wooded area where this tragedy played out over a half century ago) that Mahaly and Dan's ghosts (ha'nts) have roamed these woods for decades. Julius and the other black locals understand that this is spiritual ground and should remain undisturbed. He explains this to John: "eve'body w'at goes 'bout dere has some bad luck er 'nuther; fer ha'nts doan lack ter be 'sturb' on dey own stompin'-groun'" (192). John is convinced that Julius has tried to deter him from clearing this area because he has a thriving bee farm here. This tale again reminds us that Julius is in conflict with John over the use and treatment of the land. While Julius uses the land for profit—he can bottle and sell the honey he collects—his use of the land represents a harmonious coexistence. He preserves the life, both spiritual and carnal, while John, for a promise of profit, will desecrate the land and the life it supports.

III. CONVERTING AFRICAN AMERICAN WAYS OF KNOWING TO AFRICAN AMERICAN WAYS OF WINNING

The figurehead of the community, Uncle Julius maintains its history and then uses that history (conjures up the ancestors) for his own and the community's material gain. In this regard Julius's recollections reveal his own role in his post emancipation community—a role reminiscent of the conjurers of the past. Uncle Julius is an activist—not in our modern notion of the arm raised, tight-fisted image of the revolutionary of the black power movement. Quite the contrary, Uncle Julius is the soft, slow spoken, seemingly submissive black of the post Civil War

era. Beneath this mask, however, resides the central figure of subversion and power in this desolate post-Civil War world. Just as he does not mirror the iconic hero of twentieth-century black power fiction, neither does Uncle Julius represent the genteel, educated fictional hero of late nineteenth-century works of racial uplift.

Uncle Julius is clearly not the picture of Chesnutt's refined Doctor William Miller in *The Marrow of Tradition*. Dr. Miller, like his white counterparts, is a man of "culture," who is "accustomed to the society of cultivated people" (*Marrow of Tradition* 49). Miller has traveled abroad and known the company of some of the finest white families of his professional and social circle in the north. Unlike Uncle Julius and the masses of ex-slaves, slaves and their descendants, Miller was the son of a black entrepreneur who had bought his own freedom before emancipation. He remained in the south out of his benevolent desire to help his less fortunate people. Miller sees himself as an equal before whites, but by no means does he promote agitation as a means to racial equality. He is similar to Uncle Julius, his fictional North Carolina predecessor, in that he works in the interest of his community. His overt likeness to his white counterparts, however, along with the novel's final image of the town's most notable white woman on her knees before him, pleading that he save her child, clearly separates Dr. Miller from the plantation narrative representation of submissive, carefree blacks. Clearly, Uncle Julius is not a overt assertion of black power or equality, but he might be called the passive activist. He does not call for overt and confrontational encounters with whites. Instead, responding to a world in which whites hold the economic, political, legal and military might, Julius responds in traditional trickster fashion: he resorts to his wits. Through his wits, Julius both sustains the history of his slave community and packages these tales for his white audience—John and his

wife, Annie. In the framework of the plantation narrative Julius conveys his tales in a form that is unthreatening to them but simultaneously profitable to him.

And what does Julius gain? In general, this passive activism maintains Julius on the land that he presumes to rightfully belong, but to which he certainly can make no legal claim. John assumes that Julius remains on the plantation out of habit. According to John, "he [Julius] had been accustomed, until long after middle life, to look upon himself as the property of another. When this relation was no longer possible, owing to the war, and to his master's death and the dispersion of the family, he had been unable to break off entirely the mental habits of a lifetime, but had attached himself to the old plantation, of which he seemed to consider himself an appurtenance" ("Mars Jeems's Nightmare" 65). Two bits of information conveyed about Julius in the opening tale, the "Goophered Grapevine," however, suggest a more deliberate impetus for Julius's insistence on remaining on the McAdoo plantation and his seeming air of entitlement. Upon encountering Julius for the first time, John notes that he was "not entirely black, and this fact, together with the quality of his hair . . . suggested a slight strain of other than negro blood" (9-10). John's speculation is not without historical corroboration: in Chesnutt's own time as well as prior to and afterward, the reality of the mixed race legacy of America's slave populations is acknowledged in fiction, public discourse, and in governmental documents. Therefore, when Julius shortly afterwards introduces himself by name as Julius McAdoo, it is clear that beyond his history as one of McAdoo's many slaves, Julius is likely the offspring of the deceased plantation owner. What John sees as habit is more likely Julius's subtle claim to his birthright as well as the rights of his fellow former slaves who worked the land.

In *The Conjure Tales*, Uncle Julius's memory is triggered for the most part when he seeks to undermine John for a given outcome. On the surface then, the tales seem to be simply a tool

or mechanism for material gain. This even strikes John as the case in the story, "The Conjurer's Revenge." When Julius finishes this tale of a repentant conjurer on his deathbed, John and his wife can find no point in the story. Annie tells Julius that she cannot understand why he has told this story, although we learn shortly that Julius has told this story to persuade John to purchase a horse from whose sale, he (Julius) will benefit. Although the story's end clarifies Julius's ultimate material benefit in conveying this story, Julius's immediate response to Annie's displeasure with the story underscores Julius's own understanding of the cultural significance of his stories. He explains to Annie that this is a story told to him more than 25 years ago and that he has no cause to dispute it. He then defends the truth of the tale by explaining that it is no more preposterous than believing that the sun stands still and the earth moves around it. Regarding the young black student who reported this bit of scientific knowledge to him, Julius explains that he ran him off for telling such a lie. When faced with stories or theories that cannot be substantiated by observation, Julius suggests here that he is inclined to place his faith in the stories of his people rather than those of whites. Julius is the memory of the community, the preserver of its stories, and he does this without questioning or undermining them.

Julius's stories result in gain for himself as well as for his community, but again, these stories also hold the history of the community and pay homage to the dead or ancestral figures. The figure most prominent in this respect is Aunt Peggy, the conjure woman who appears in the stories throughout the collection. If we use Mbiti's definition of ancestors, Aunt Peggy is not actually an ancestor yet. She has not been dead so long that there are no longer people alive who have first hand knowledge of her. In this sense, she is what Mbiti identifies as the living-dead in African culture. Uncle Julius recalls stories of Aunt Peggy during slavery, a time during which he lived and knew this woman whose free status as well as her power as conjurer underscored

her status among the slaves. Aunt Peggy's larger than life legacy in the community paints her as revered ancestral figure. Just as the slaves during her lifetime called on her in times of trouble, Uncle Julius calls on her through memory to aid him in his war of wits with John.

"The Goophered Grapevine," the opening tale of *The Conjure Woman*, introduces readers to Aunt Peggy. She is the conjure woman consulted by Master Dugal' McAdoo to assist him in putting an end to the slaves stealing from the grape crops. One might argue that Aunt Peggy's assistance to McAdoo amounts to complicity on her part as she provides the conjure for McAdoo; however, the slaves are informed so that they will know not to steal the grapes. And when the slave, Henry, unwittingly eats the grapes, Aunt Peggy overrides the master, and provides a counter conjure to save him. Similarly, in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," the slaves call on Aunt Peggy again. This time they seek her conjuring powers to provide relief from their harsh master. In addition to highlighting Aunt Peggy as ancestral figure, this story also highlights the slave community's solidarity and their common struggle. Aunt Peggy warns Solomon, the slave who seeks her out, that she must work carefully when conjuring white folks. So, she instructs him that he must keep her informed on the events that take place on the plantation. Through their concerted effort, the slaves petition Aunt Peggy to use her powers, and the cruel Mars Jeems is transformed into a kind and amenable master. In the story, "Sis Becky's Pickanniny," Uncle Julius recalls another case of a despairing slave who calls on Aunt Peggy. Becky is taken away from the plantation as part of a deal that amounts to her master securing ownership of a prized race horse in exchange for her. Becky is taken away and her child left behind. Her new master is unwilling to take her child, even after her old master agrees to include the child in the deal free of charge. In desperation, Aun' Nancy, Becky's friend and Mose's surrogate mother, calls on Aunt Peggy to help restore little Mose to his mother. Aunt Peggy

confesses that to get Becky returned to the plantation is a tall order, one that will "'fig'rin' en studyin' ez well ez cunj'un'" (151). Nonetheless, Aunt Peggy prevails; she works her roots and successfully orchestrates the return of Becky to the plantation and the reunion of mother and child.

Uncle Julius remembers Aunt Peggy and other conjurers in the slave community, and he remembers the struggles and harsh circumstances of those slaves who sought relief through the conjurer's powers. While John, like the white readers during Chesnutt's lifetime, sees Uncle Julius as the innocuous and entertaining former slave, among those in his black community Uncle Julius is a resourceful figure. Pragmatically, he is the clever intermediary who, though not always successful in his battle of wits with John, meets with regular successes. Through the tales he spins for John, Julius secures the old school house for his church members ("Po' Sandy"); regains employment for his grandson after John fires him ("Mars Jeems's Nightmare"); purchases an impressive new suit for Sunday wearing ("The Conjurer's Revenge"); and ultimately as the narrator reveals throughout the text, Julius remains on the land that he deems his rightful home. Julius's triumphs and those of the conjurers in his stories emphasize the significance of folktales to the oppressed and marginalized. The telling and the preservation of these tales affirms "the need for the assertion of the weak against the strong and the belief that although the latter may control the earth their power is neither irrevocable nor permanent" (Levine 133). In a less temporal sense, Julius has the makings of an ancestral figure. After his death, he will live on in legacy as the living-dead and later to ancestral icon when none among the living has first-hand knowledge of him: from this moment forward, Uncle Julius stands as the iconic ancestor for activism and resistance.

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