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**THE FRAMING OF CHARLES W. CHESNUTT:
PRACTICAL DECONSTRUCTION
IN THE AFRO-AMERICAN TRADITION**

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First, three quotations.

“Under exegetical pressure, self-reference demonstrates the impossibility of self-possession. When poems denounce poetry as lies, self-referentiality is the source of undecidability, which is not ambiguity but a structure of logical irresolvability: if a poem speaks true in describing poetry as lies, then it lies; but if its claim that poems lie is a lie, then it must speak true.”—Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (202).

“They ain’t no different from nobody else....They mouth cut cross ways, ain’t it? Well, long as you don’t see no man wid they mouth cut up and down, you know they’ll all lie jus’ like de rest of us.”—Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (22).

“The text is a beautiful, slender stream, meandering gracefully through a wide meadow of margin.”—Charles Waddell Chesnutt, “Baxter’s Procrustes” (419).

As the Signifying Monkey and Brer Rabbit have always known, as Charles Chesnutt knew in 1890, as Euro-American literary theorists working in the wake of Jacques Derrida have discovered, truth lies in a lie. By focusing on the writing of Chesnutt, one of the most enigmatic figures of the post-reconstruction era, I hope to prefigure a politically significant discourse between Euro-American literary theory and the Afro-American expressive tradition it has excluded from its premises.

But before I begin, two remarks on the premises. First, an anecdote explaining the hostility toward the theoretical enterprise, until recently my central position, which may emerge throughout this essay. As a graduate student, I participated briefly in a critical theory reading group. At one meeting, a prominent theoretician responded to Missy Dehn Kubitschek’s question concerning the relevance of theory to a non-specialist audience with the contemptuous statement, “I don’t much care what the guys at the corner garage think about my work.” Juxtaposed with the frequently recondite and exclusive vocabulary of theoretical writing, this highlighted what I perceived, and to some extent continue to perceive, as an elitist stance which contributes to the effective power of the institutions deconstruction ostensibly calls into question. As an aesthetic populist who takes James Joyce, James

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Brown and George Clinton with equal comico-seriousness, I consigned the whole enterprise to the nether regions and went about my business. Only recently, inspired by the gentle chiding of autodidacts Geoff King and Charles Weir and academics Kathy Cummings of the University of Washington and Robert Stepto of the Afro-American Studies Department of Yale—a ritual ground given over to unspeakable forces in my neo-populist demonology—have I begun to realize that, professional argot and elitist individuals aside, the guys at the corner garage may have been telling lies about their true knowledge of deconstruction all along.

Second, and perhaps the paranoia inheres in the populism, I've felt for some time that I was standing alone in my reading of Chesnutt as an exceptionally complex modernist/post-modernist ironist situated on the margins of a literary marketplace conditioned first by the plantation tradition stereotypes of Thomas Nelson Page and later by the virulent racist diatribes of Thomas Dixon. Standard literary histories evince almost no awareness of Chesnutt's complexity; *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (edited by Carl Van Doren, et. al., 1917) omits all mention of Chesnutt while the fourth edition of *The Literary History of the United States* (edited by Robert Spiller, et. al., 1974) dismisses him as a minor Plantation Tradition figure overshadowed by Joel Chandler Harris. Even William Andrews' sensitive study *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* credits Chesnutt with relatively little awareness of structural irony or meta-fictional subtlety. Aesthetic isolation mocks my populist soul; on the other hand, originality intrigues my academic mind. Whatever the case, Afro-American novelist John Wideman's piece "Surfiction" in the Summer 1985 issue of *The Southern Review*—my copy of which was lost in the mail and arrived only this week, on All Souls Day—seems to be a response to my unsounded call or a call for my unsounded response. I say "seems" because, upon recognizing the Chesnutt figure created by Wideman, who recently identified Brer Rabbit as his favorite literary character when questioned by the *New York Times Book Review*, I decided not to read the rest of his piece until I had figured out my own position. Incidentally, were I permitted (to quote one of Chesnutt's more famous black contemporaries), I might suggest some duplicity in the identification of Wideman's words as "fiction" in the table of contents of *The Southern Review*. (Space for future retrospective commentary: after reading both Wideman's essay and version of this paper at a conference, I'm surer than ever that it's nothing but a lie.) With these positions in mind, we can begin.

Henry-Louis Gates suggests the implicit connection between the Afro-American folk tradition from which Chesnutt drew many of his figures and the deconstructionist sensibility when he presents “the Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse” as a figure embodying the “Afro-American rhetorical strategy of signifying [as] a rhetorical act which is not engaged in the game of information-giving. Signifying turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified” (129-31). Locating his own position in the space between Euro-American theory and Afro-American signifying, Gates applies his insights concerning “folk deconstruction” to Afro-American literary history in a diagram centering on Hurston and including Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Ishmael Reed. In response to this diagram—clearly intended by Gates as provisional rather than definitive—I would suggest that, especially in *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and the self-referential story “Baxter’s *Procrustes*” (1905), Chesnutt prefigures both the Afro- and Euro-American understandings of literary signification in a way that we have only recently begun to comprehend. In advancing this argument, I am suggesting not simply that deconstructionist methodologies can be profitably applied to Chesnutt’s work or that a general parallel exists between the Afro-American tradition and Euro-American theory. Rather, I am suggesting that Chesnutt consciously orients his discourse toward crucial elements of the deconstructionist project and that he anticipates constructive approaches to several issues which remain extremely problematic in contemporary theoretical discourse. From a deconstructionist perspective, it should come as no surprise that focusing on the excluded margin, the Afro-American literary tradition which has never enjoyed the social privilege allowing it to dismiss the masters from its awareness, should help cast light on the blind spots of Euro-American theory.

By focusing on the general (and to the extent possible, shared) understanding of deconstruction in contemporary academic discourse, I hope to lay some groundwork for future cross-cultural discussions oriented toward the articulation and refinement of specific implications of Derrida’s positions. Terry Eagleton’s chapter on “Post-Structuralism” in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* and Culler’s chapter on “Critical Consequences” in *On Deconstruction*, two works which diverge sharply in their views of the larger significance of the movement, share a number of premises I shall treat as consensual positions. Both understand deconstruction as a philosophically grounded approach to thought which: 1) emphasizes the problematic relationship between the linguistic signifier and the “transcendent

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signified" (Eagleton, 131; Culler, 188); 2) challenges, and ultimately decenters, hierarchies of thought or expression based on binary oppositions which privilege one term over its ostensible opposite (Culler, 213; Eagleton, 132); 3) focuses on the "marginal" terms excluded from the discourse in order to recognize the way in which the text subverts its own meaning (Culler, 215; Eagleton, 132-33); 4) recognizes that all signifiers derive their meaning from "traces" of other signifiers and concentrates on the "play of signifiers," creating a theoretically endless chain which frustrates attempts at closure (Eagleton, 134; Culler, 188). Eagleton summarizes the deconstructive project as follows: "Deconstruction tries to show how such oppositions, in order to hold themselves in place, are sometimes betrayed into inverting or collapsing themselves, or need to banish to the text's margins certain niggling details which can be made to return and plague them...The tactic of deconstructive criticism, that is to say, is to show how texts come to embarrass their own ruling systems of logic" (133). Culler echoes and extends this understanding when he writes of the deconstructionist interest in "previous readings which, in separating a text into the essential and marginal elements, have created for the text an identity that the text itself, through the power of its marginal elements, can subvert." Generalizing this approach in a manner consistent with Eagleton's insistence on the contextual determinants of textual meaning, Culler asserts "One could, therefore, identify deconstruction with the twin principles of the contextual determination of meaning and the infinite extendability of context."

Chesnutt, whose active publishing career had ended by the time Ferdinand de Saussure delivered the lectures which would become the *Course in General Linguistics* between 1907 and 1911, derived his awareness of the problematical nature of binary oppositions, hierarchies in discourse, and the signifier-signified relationship from two basic sources: the folk tradition on which he drew, and the literary context in which he wrote. As Hurston, Ellison and Gates have noted in quite different contexts, the Afro-American folk tradition encodes a profound suspicion of and resistance to Euro-American expression. Placed in a marginal position enforced by institutional structures and physical violence, Afro-Americans, especially those *without* access to the mainstream educational system, have always been acutely aware of the radical inadequacy of white figures of black experience. Experiencing what W.E.B. DuBois called *double consciousness*—"this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (17)— Afro-Americans, individually and communally, learned

quickly to manipulate the gap between signifier and signified. Constructing elaborate verbal “masks” in everyday discourse as well as in the spirituals and animal tales, “slaves” (to use the Euro-American signifier) continually (and because of their political oppression, implicitly) subverted the oppositional racist association of *white* with such privileged terms as “good,” “God,” “mature,” and “civilized,” and *black* with such excluded terms as “evil,” “devil,” “child-like” and “savage.” Focusing on the “marginal” elements of the dominant discourse (i.e. themselves), they learned to effectively decenter social and political hierarchies in order to survive, psychologically and physically. Ultimately, as Ellison notes in his wonderfully titled essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” in his proto-deconstructionist book *Shadow and Act*, this shaped an expressive tradition based precisely on the closure-resisting play of signifiers articulating “a land of masking jokers” in which “the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals” (70). Chesnutt, probably the first Afro-American writer to assume the truth lying behind Ellison’s signifying, incorporates this deconstructive folk sensibility into his literary productions in a highly self-conscious manner.

The specific manifestations of this self-consciousness, however, derive directly from the tradition of racial signification in the Euro-American writing of the 1880s and 1890s. When Chesnutt began to publish in mainstream magazines such as *Family Fiction* and the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1886 and 1887, he encountered editors and readers deeply influenced by Joel Chandler Harris’s tales of Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit. Harris remains one of the least understood, and perhaps least understandable, figures in one of the least understood/standable currents of the Southern literary tradition: that of minstrelsy. On the surface, Harris appears to articulate a straightforward version of the Plantation Tradition in his tales of an essentially child-like black man gently harassed into telling charming animal stories by a young white boy who brings him sweets and affection from the big house. Occupying the center of the American consciousness of Harris—the Disney minstrel show *Song of the South* is only the most obvious of many examples—,this image would seem to dictate dismissal of the Uncle Remus tales as the type of “blackface minstrelsy” Berndt Ostendorf describes as “a symbolic slave code, a set of self-humiliating rules designed by white racists for the disenfranchisement of the black self” (66).

Beneath both the benevolent and maleficent surface(s) of the minstrel tradition, however, lie unsuspected depths where Harris joins

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William Faulkner and Derrida to comprise a significant genealogy in which Chesnutt is the crucial and crucially unrecognized missing relation. The most powerful recent Faulkner criticism, that written by John Irwin and Eric Sundquist, recognizes a troubling link between the irresolvability of the Faulknerian text—Irwin calls Quentin's narration of *Absalom! Absalom!* as "an answer that doesn't answer—an answer that puts the answer in question" (8)—and the presence of unresolved psychological tensions originating in miscegenation, the denied actuality which unrelentingly subjects racial oppositions to the type of subversive interrogation Luce Irigaray directs against Freud's gender oppositions in "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry." Orienting his discussion specifically toward Faulkner's rejection of the binary oppositions inherent in "Manichaeism," Sundquist writes: "The gothicism of *Absalom! Absalom!* is not by any means the sentimentality of a minstrel show—not the benign dream in which 'all coons look alike'—but the nightmare in which black *and* white begin all too hauntingly to look alike" (99). Harris and Chesnutt in fact prefigure this Faulknerian dilemma, a dilemma inherent in the minstrel show from the beginning. As Ostendorf writes, "Minstrelsy anticipated on stage what many Americans deeply feared: the blackening of America. Minstrelsy did in fact create a symbolic language and a comic iconography for 'intermingling' culturally with the African Caliban while at the same time 'isolating' him socially. In blackening his face the white minstrel acculturated voluntarily to his 'comic' vision of blackness, thus anticipating in jest what he feared in earnest...Minstrelsy is proof that negrophilia and negrophobia are not at all contradictory. Minstrelsy is negrophobia staged as negrophilia, or vice versa, depending on the respective weight of the fear or attraction" (67, 81). To state this in specifically deconstructive terms, the minstrel show—whether manifested in the Uncle Remus tales, Faulkner's novels, or, as Charles Sanders brilliantly suggests, T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land"—subverts its own meaning by deconstructing the binary opposition on which its hierarchical structures depend, creating a form of expression which demands confrontation with an infinitely extensive/regressive chain of signifiers. Which is to say: white minstrelsy deconstructs itself.

Nowhere is this clearer than in *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings*, the text through which Harris engendered a long line of Euro-American negrophiles. As Harris seems to have sensed—he attributed the writing of the Brer Rabbit tales to an internal "other fellow" who "is simply a spectator of my folly until I seize a pen, and then he comes forward and takes charge" (Martin, 92)—and as Bernard Wolf first

articulated in his 1949 essay "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit," the volume in fact presents a sequence of "answers that don't answer, that put the answerer in question." Just beneath the negrophiliac surface of the "charming" tales (most of them faithfully reproduced from the Afro-American oral tradition) Harris expropriates from/to the benevolently asexual Uncle Remus lies a world of violence, sexual energy, and barely subdued racial drama in which the physically weak Brer Rabbit attains at least momentary mastery over the stronger but less aware Brers Bear, Wolf and Fox through his manipulation of the gap between verbal signifier and concrete action. Encoded within the ordered hierarchy of the Plantation Tradition, the trickster figure delights in the disruption of hierarchies, textual or contextual, almost without reference to their apparent significance. At times, as in "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story," this radically subversive delight works to Brer Rabbit's detriment. When Brer Rabbit takes on the role of the "master" demanding respect from the tar baby—a profoundly charged figure for the "black" pole of oppositional racist thought (stupid, lazy, very black, a thing)—his discourse subverts his own claims of privilege as surely as his ability to turn Brer Fox into a riding horse elsewhere decenters the Plantation Tradition hierarchy. This aspect of the Brer Rabbit tales is particularly important in relation to the development of Afro-American deconstruction because it protects against substituting one set of privileged terms for another. Although Wolf's reading of the animal fables as slightly veiled allegories of racial hatred and sexual competition seems accurate, the random and frequently self-destructive manifestations of Brer Rabbit's deconstructive energies makes it clear that the tales privilege *neither* the black or white position.

An understanding of Chesnutt, however, requires some attention to the unconsciously self-deconstructing aspects of Harris' adaptation of this already deconstructive material in *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings*, which subverts its own intended meanings by encoding several thoroughly contradictory versions of its Afro-American subjects. The tension emerges clearly in a comparison of the three major sections of the book. The irascible minstrel show darky signified by the name "Uncle Remus" in "His Sayings" and the loyal slave presented in the Plantation Tradition short story "A Story of the War" evince nothing of the creative energy of the story teller of "Legends of the Old Plantation." Within the "Legends," on which Harris's reputation depends almost entirely, a similar tension exists between the frame tales, written in standard English, and the animal tales, written in a linguistically accurate dialect which Harris contrasts in his introduction specifically with "the intolerable misrepresentations of the minstrel

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stage" (39). As Harris' comment concerning the "other fellow" intimates, an anxious but not quite articulated awareness that the linguistic and thematic tensions of the book cast his own identity as a unified subject into doubt, permeates *Uncle Remus*. The opening "Legend," "Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy," establishes not one but two narrative frames, suggesting the unbridgeable distance between Euro-American signification and Afro-American experience. The most obvious frame tale concerning Uncle Remus and the seven-year-old boy establishes a symbolic equality between the ostensibly child-like black man and the actual white child, Harris's pastoral version of an earlier self similar to that constructed by Mark Twain in *Tom Sawyer*, a construction which reveals a deep longing for the Old South (Martin 92-96). Alongside this frame, however, another frame, almost entirely unrecognized, presents a "mature" perspective which "explains" how the collaboration between the two "child-like" figures happens to have been written down on paper. Presented only at the beginning of the first legend, this frame is in some ways as subversive of oppositional hierarchies as the Brer Rabbit tales themselves. The little boy is introduced as a figure of absence; his mother "Miss Sally," a curiously asexual figure who will be refigured in the "Miz Meadows" of the Brer Rabbit tales, "misses" her child. Arriving at Uncle Remus's cabin, she sees her "boys" together and steps back. Harris concludes the initial frame with the sentence: "This is what 'Miss Sally' heard." Although there is no evidence that he was doing so as part of a conscious rhetorical strategy, Harris has in effect decentered his presence into at least four components: Uncle Remus who as story-teller plays the role of "the other fellow" in charge of Harris' pen; the little boy who bears the most obvious biographical relationship to Harris; the passive "feminine" figure who resembles the Harris who collected the tales attributed to Uncle Remus from a number of Afro-American "informants;" and the silent scribe, Harris the *Atlanta Constitution* columnist who attributes his tales not directly to the black tellers but to a white female intermediary. In this complex configuration, neither whiteness nor masculinity possesses the significance—as signifiers invoking a range of transcendent creative attributes—attributed them by the explicitly patriarchal and paternalistic Plantation Tradition writers.

Given the multitude of "presences" mediating between "Harris" and his "subjects," it should come as no surprise to discover traces of mutually deconstructing forms of awareness throughout the "Legends." "The End of Mr. Bear," for example, betrays its own ruling system of logic in several ways. Most obviously, the text subverts the Plantation Tradition opposition between benevolent white master and

happy black slave through the contrast between the superficially stereotypical frame and the vicious tale. Culminating in the death of Brer Bear (on the level of racial allegory, the symbolic white man) who Brer Rabbit tricks into sticking his head into a tree where it is stung by a swarm of bees, the text closes with an expression of barely veiled joy (attributed to Uncle Remus but consistent with the folk materials) derived from contemplation of this inverted lynching: “dar ole Brer B’ar hung, en ef his head ain’t swunk, I speck he hangin’ dar yit” (136). It seems almost unbelievable that no critic prior to Wolfe seems to have understood this even in part as a warning against the racial pride—ironically projected as a savage black desire for a “shrunken head”—which enforced the social privilege encoded in the black-white opposition.

Even without reference to the animal tale, “The End of Mr. Bear” provides clear evidence of the self-deconstructing tendency of Harris’ text to “embarrass its own ruling systems of logic.” When the little boy comes to the cabin, he finds Uncle Remus “unusually cheerful and goodhumored” (133). Signifying this good humor in the way most dear to slaveholders and Plantation Tradition writers who cited the slaves’ oral performances as proof of their contentment, Uncle Remus sings a song, “a senseless affair so far as the words were concerned.” Immediately after quoting a verse of this “non-signifying” song, however, Harris contradicts himself in a peculiar manner. Unconsciously underlining Harris’s evershifting Brer Rabbit-like relation to his text, the following passages reads: “The quick ear of Uncle Remus, however, had detected the presence of the little boy, and he allowed his song to run into a recitation of nonsense, of which the following, if it be rapidly spoken, will give a faint idea: ‘Ole M’er Jackson, fines’ confraction, fell down sta’rs fer to git satisfaction; big Bill Fray, he rule de day, eve’ything he call fer come one, two by three. Gwine ’long one day, met Johnny Huby, ax him grine nine yards er steel fer me, tole me w’ich he couldn’t; den I hist ’im over Hickerson Dickerson’s barn-doors; knock ’im ninety-nine miles under water, w’en he rise, he rise in Pike straddle un a hanspike, en I lef’ ’im dar smokin’ er de hornpipe, Juba reda seda breda. Aunt Kate at de gate; I want to eat, she fry de meat en gimme skin, w’ich I fling it back agin. Juba!” This curious passage begins with an intimation of a level of awareness in Uncle Remus, associated with his leporine “quick ear,” which allows him to shift from the “senseless affair” into “a recitation of nonsense.” The reasons for the shift or the difference between the two levels of non-signifying discourse are never stated. Emphasizing the insufficiency of his written text which can provide

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only a “faint idea” of the oral expression of “Uncle Remus,” who exists only within the written text, Harris plunges into what, if recognized, would certainly have seemed a nightmarish minstrel show skit on the relationship between signifier and signified. Trapped within the hierarchical system which denies transcendence to the Afro-American subject, Harris can only dismiss Uncle Remus’s words, albeit with a great uneasiness grounded on his sense that the black voice signifies something unavailable to any white “presence” in the text.

Clearly a version of the signifying rhetoric described by Gates, Uncle Remus’s speech is best understood as a quintessentially Afro-American manipulation of the “play of signifiers,” which includes numerous politically resonant images of conflict and/or Africanisms which subvert Plantation Tradition images without concern for specific referential meaning. Accepting the divergence between signifier and signified, the black voice encoded in the text subverts the previous interpretation of the words as nonsense. Immediately after the performance, which creates “bewilderment” in the young boy and, presumably, in the white readership guided by Harris’ remarks, Uncle Remus proceeds “with the air of one who had just given an important piece of information” (134). The black voice, aware that the destruction of an oppositional hierarchy resting on a simplistic sense of linguistic significance does not entail the destruction of all meaning, very nearly effects a successful revolution when Uncle Remus says: “Hit’s all des dat away, honey....En w’en you bin cas’n shadders long ez de ole nigger, den you’ll fine out who’s w’ich, en w’ich’s who.” Acutely uncomfortable with the confusion of identity established through the verbal play of the “black” voice in the “white” text, Harris seems unable to distinguish between his own voice and the voice of an “other” subverting the hierarchical system which privileges the written expression as a mark of civilization and humanity. Returning to the standard English of the frame tale, Harris attempts to reassert the Plantation Tradition stereotype which ascribes superior “capacity” to whites and only childlike significance to black expression: “The little boy made no response. He was in thorough sympathy with all the whims and humors of the old man, and his capacity for enjoying them was large enough to include even those he could not understand.” Even the reassertion reveals subversive traces, however; the boy is silenced, uncomprehending. Shortly, the angry black voice of the Brer Rabbit tales will assume the central position in the world of the text. The deconstructive black voice renders the white personae silent, thereby creating a space for articulation of the subversive animal tale ending with the lynching of Brer Bear, condemned by his inability to see

through Brer Rabbit's masks. As ironic prelude, however, and apparently without any awareness on the part of Harris, Uncle Remus effects a role reversal which places the white child in the symbolic position of the subordinate attending to the marginal details of the master's work: "Uncle Remus was finishing an axe-handle, and upon these occasions it was his custom *to allow* the child to hold one end while he applied sand-paper to the other" (emphasis added). The final sentence of the frame-story echoes, almost word for word, the standard Plantation Tradition description of slavery as a system benefiting both black and white: "These relations were pretty soon established, to the satisfaction of the parties most interested..." Operating in the newly created textual space, the final clause of the final framing sentence specifically contrasts the nonsense of the previous sections with the significance of the animal tale to come: "the old man continued his remarks, but this time not at random." Even the frame tale, the section of *Uncle Remus* in which Harris attempts to impose the oppositional order of the Plantation Tradition on the Afro-American folk materials is subject to the deconstructive energies of the black voice. As the frame story metamorphoses into Brer Rabbit tale, the white writer's voice surrenders itself to the black speaker's as written by the white writer. In effect, the text acknowledges a significance in the nonsignifying nonsense. This infiltration of what Gates would call a signifying black voice into not only the tale but the frame itself recalls Ostendorf's comments on the minstrel show and prefigures the racial and aesthetic tensions of Faulkner's greatest work.

Appropriating the voice of the Euro-American figure who established the ground on which he worked, Chesnutt recognized and consciously manipulated the self-deconstructive form of *Uncle Remus*. Particularly in *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt employs a complex rhetorical strategy, based on a deep understanding of the deconstructionist principles of the contextual determination of meaning and the infinite extendibility of context, anticipated in the Southern literary tradition only (if indeed at all) by the best work of Poe and Twain. Superficially, Chesnutt's conjure stories mimic Harris' structure; a white narrator, writing in standard English, reports the charming but absurd tales of an old black man, presented in black dialect. Like Uncle Remus, Chesnutt's Uncle Julius seems motivated by childlike selfish concerns. Uncle Remus cajoles the little boy into bringing him sweets; Uncle Julius manipulates his white listeners, the relocated northern businessman John and his wife Annie, into a variety of personal indulgences. Most critics who have discussed the relationship between frame tale and conjure story in *The Conjure*

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Woman concentrate on the economic dimension of the relationship between Julius and John, or on Julius' attempt to educate Annie concerning the realities of slavery (Ferguson; Andrews). While these observations shed light on the mimetic dimension of the text, they typically exclude those aspects which relate primarily to the communications process itself, the aspects which intimate Chesnutt's awareness of numerous deconstructive concerns.

The model of the rhetorical relationship between John and Julius in *The Conjure Woman* comments directly on Chesnutt's own position as an Afro-American writer working in a context dominated by Euro-American oppositional hierarchies, particularly the Plantation Tradition stereotypes shaped by Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, and countless others publishing in the same magazines where "The Goophered Grapevine" and "The Conjuror's Revenge" first appeared. Recognition of this parallel hinges on an understanding of the significance of the "mask" in the signifying tradition. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston described masking as follows: "the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, 'Get out of here!' We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing....The theory behind our tactics: 'The white man is always trying to know somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song'" (4-5). Most immediately, this rhetorical strategy creates a space, simultaneously physical, verbal and psychological within which the Afro-American individual and community can survive within a hostile racist culture. At times, it can serve as a more active political tool allowing Afro-Americans access to information or situations from which they would be excluded if their true motives were recognized. Set against this background, the figure Chesnutt creates in *The Conjure Woman* comes into focus as an elaborate mask, or set of masks designed to infiltrate Euro-American discourse and, in the long run, subvert the binary oppositions on which racial privilege depends. It should be noted in approaching this strategy that, as soon as an audience recognizes the mask as a mask, the mask loses all possible effectiveness. The nature of the masking strategy, therefore, depends on the trickster's ability to convince the audience that it sees his/her actual face. One of the conceptually simple but practically inexhaustible methods for attaining this goal is to construct "false"

masks, masks over masks, which the audience is allowed to see through in order to convince it that it has seen the trickster's face when in fact it is encountering only another mask. In effect, Chesnutt uses such a strategy to construct a complex model of practical deconstruction in which the masking Julius, prefiguring the doubly conscious Afro-American modernist writer, manipulates his audience through his awareness of the structure and limitations of Euro-American oppositional thought and his understanding of the potential uses of a marginal position.

Reflecting his situation as a light-skinned "black" writer born in North Carolina but living in Ohio, Chesnutt creates two personae, textual masks: John, with whom he shares geographical residence and a Euro-American literacy based on writing and knowledge of white institutional structures (Step 167); and Julius, with whom he shares racial and geographical origins and "tribal literacy," based on oral expression and specifically black cultural patterns (Step 167). Dividing "himself" into two figures who, in the binary oppositions of the Plantation Tradition, are mutually exclusive and irresolvable, Chesnutt anticipates Saussure in deconstructing the linguistic convention, crucial to mimetic fiction, which asserts the identity of signifier and signified. Nonetheless, Chesnutt's audience, excluding from its discourse any cultural traditions positing alternatives to oppositional thinking and assuming the identity of signifier and signified, was almost totally unprepared to understand his critique. Chesnutt's "solution" to the problem brought the implicitly deconstructive elements of the masking/signifying tradition of Afro-American culture very near the surface of *The Conjure Woman*.

What I am suggesting is that Julius in *The Conjure Woman*, like Chesnutt in the literary culture of his era, constructs a sequence of increasingly opaque masks, predicated on his knowledge of the structure of his audience's belief systems and implying a recognition of the underlying perceptions asserted in Culler's identification of deconstruction with "the twin principles of the contextual determination of meaning and the infinite extendability of context." On the surface the Julius of "The Goophered Grapevine" appears to be motivated by economic self-interest, telling the story of the haunted vineyard in an attempt to scare John off and keep the grapes for himself. But this mask is absurdly transparent. Julius, of course, has no hope of frightening John, the "hard-headed" businessman, with romantic fancy. If John grants Julius any economic concessions it is because he is an essentially well meaning "master." In fact, Julius seems aware of the actual economic dynamic when he stresses the past bounty of the

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vineyard and the crucial role played by blacks in maintaining its productivity. In addition to suggesting a less direct economic motive, this double voicing intimates Julius's awareness that his white audience is in fact less unified than it appears. Employing many of the standard images associated with the 19th century sentimental fiction addressed primarily to a female audience—particularly those focusing on the division of families (Fiedler)—Julius addresses not only John but also Annie, whom he gradually educates concerning the inhumanity of the slave system of the old South. Given the composition of Chesnutt's magazine audience, it seems likely that he perceived the parallel between Julius's rhetorical strategy and his own. Allowing male readers seeking escapist fantasy to perceive him, like Julius, as a simple storyteller who "seemed to lose sight of his auditors, and to be living over again in monologue his life on the old plantation" (12-13), Chesnutt simultaneously educated his "female" audience, which itself occupied a marginal position in patriarchal/paternalistic culture, concerning the actual brutalities of racial relations.

Adopting an essentially deconstructive narrative technique, Julius places his subversive criticism of the romantic image of the "Old South" in the margins of his tale. Frequently, his most pointed criticism occurs in the background descriptions of what life was like "befo' de wah," a common formula in the nostalgic stories of Page and others. In "The Goophered Grapevine," for example, Julius says: "I reckon it ain' so much so nowadays, but befo' de wah, in slab'ry times, a nigger did n' mine goin fi' er ten mile in a night, w'en dey wuz sump'n good ter eat at de yuther een'" (14). Contrasted with the illicit treats the boy gives Uncle Remus or with the slave banquet in Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "The Party," the political point of Julius' marginal "literary criticism" seems unmistakable. Especially in the early tales, Julius makes political points obliquely since more direct approaches might alienate John and result in his exclusion from the situation in which he can address Annie. As Julius establishes himself within the structure of John and Annie's lives, however, he alters his strategy. By "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," the third story in the collection, he focuses on a harsh master whose attitudes change substantially after he is transformed into a slave for a period of time; clearly, Julius feels free to include much more explicit social commentary than he had previously. Although John retains his condescending belief in the childlike simplicity of blacks in his ironic comment—"I am glad, too, that you told us the moral of the story; it might have escaped us otherwise"—, there is no danger that he will use his social privilege to exclude Julius from the discourse into which they

have entered. The strategy of "Mars Jeems' Nightmare" depends, therefore, on that of "The Goophered Grapevine" which disarmed John by playing on his belief that he "understands" Julius when he has actually only seen through a transparent economic mask. The long-term success of the strategy, however, requires periodic reenforcement of John's assumption, evidence Julius provides in "The Conjuror's Revenge" when he tricks John into buying a blind horse. The real significance of Julius's interaction with John, then, lies not in the success or failure of a particular trick but in the control he attains over the context in which he can direct his "marginal" address to Annie to communal rather than individual benefits.

When he allows this mask to become transparent in the didactic "Mars Jeems' Nightmare," Julius extends the basic principle to another level of contextual complexity. By convincing relatively liberal whites such as Annie, who are willing to face the somewhat distanced reality of the brutality of the Old South (itself part of a binary opposition of north-civilized/ south-primitive) that they have seen the true face of the black "petitioner", Chesnutt creates a context in which his more radically subversive deconstructive message can infiltrate the literary forum. Having entered this discourse, Chesnutt may in fact discredit both conservative Old South and liberal New South through the structural analogy between the whites in the fables Julius tells and those in the frame story Chesnutt writes. From this perspective, John and Annie can be seen as new incarnations of the old masters subjecting Afro-Americans to a system of discourse and institutional organization that denies their humanity. Allowing his readers to penetrate a sequence of transparent masks, Chesnutt articulated an extremely intricate parody which expands to deconstruct the ostensible opposition of "liberal North" and "reactionary South," both of which manifest a similar set of racist attitudes. Condescension, active oppression and pity are equally compatible with the binary oppositions of the Plantation Tradition. Perhaps Chesnutt's final target, in his immediate context, is the predominantly Northern readership who, like John and Annie, are willing to indulge the transparent "entertainments" of a charming black storyteller, perhaps even accepting a limited political critique, as long as it leaves the social framework undisturbed.

Each level of this process moves toward the actual context in which Chesnutt wrote, raising questions regarding the interaction of text and world and implicitly repudiating the traditional view of fiction as a privileged form of discourse. Extending this approach temporally, it would be possible to see Chesnutt as attempting to educate a future audience, or perhaps future Afro-American writers, in the methods of

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deconstructionist/masking reading and writing. Of course such reading writers, whites or “literate” blacks, themselves would be subject to interpretation as new incarnations of John and Annie determined to master Afro-American experience through ever more subtle techniques. At some point in this infinitely extendible context, Chesnutt’s deconstructions flip over into a kind of structuralist (thought not ahistorical) awareness of the persistence of the deeply ingrained oppositional structures characterizing Euro-American discourse and supporting oppressive institutions. In speculating on the long-term implications of the rhetorical structure of *The Conjure Woman*, I realize I have ventured forth onto shifting ground. The final stages of the process outlined above are unsupported and, by nature, unsupported. The last mask must always remain opaque, at least to its immediate audience. Any evidence of its construction renders it partially transparent and subjects it to possible exclusion from the public forum, destroying any hope of political effectiveness. The play of signifiers must resist closure in order to resist the power of the dominant discourse. Nevertheless, Chesnutt provides enough textual evidence to suggest this approach is not simply a postmodernist imposition, an academic re-voicing of the plantation tradition distortion of the Afro-American voice. Both the contrast between John’s and Julius’s linguistic practices and the specific choices of material for the tales Julius tells intimate Chesnutt’s conscious awareness of basic deconstructive approaches to discourse.

Possessing only a minimal sense of irony, John assumes the identity of signifier and signified. Because his attitude toward southern life has been shaped by literature, John perceives Julius in terms of the signifiers of the plantation tradition. Rather than leading to a relaxation of his belief in the adequacy of the signifiers, perceived discrepancies between signifier and signified are resolved by adjusting his conception of the signified. John’s belief in the plantation tradition stereotype attributing mental capacity solely to the white term of the white/black binary opposition leads him to create a mixed ancestry for Julius: “There was a shrewdness in his eyes, too, which was not altogether African, and which, as we afterwards learned from experience, was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character” (9-10). Similarly, the frame story of “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare” emphasizes the underlying structure of the binary opposition which defines blacks as subhuman. Extending the black-physical/white-mental dichotomy, John describes Julius’s relationship with the “natural” world: “Toward my tract of land and the things that were on it—the creeks, the swamps, the hills, the meadows, the stones, the trees—he maintained a peculiar

personal attitude, that might be called predial rather than proprietary. He had been accustomed, until long after middle life, to look upon himself as the property of another. When this relation was no longer possible, owing to the war, and to his master's death 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" (64-65). In addition to supporting politically destructive institutions, such reduction of the black subject reveals John's simplistic linguistic and philosophical premises. Foregrounding the deconstructionist tendencies implicit in *Uncle Remus, The Conjure Woman* suggests ways of subverting the power of the discourse resulting from such simplistic premises.

Recognizing John's tendency to confuse white metaphorical signification with the actuality of the "black thing" signified, Julius bases his strategy on the manipulation of the unrecognized distance between signifier and signified. Where John assumes presence, Julius implies absence. Frequently, Julius' speech implies the inadequacy of the signifier=signified paradigm, drawing attention to the ways in which the linguistic position serves institutional structures whose actual operations the language veils. For example, Julius describes Mars Jeems's relations with his slaves as follows: "His niggers wuz bleedzd ter slabe fum daylight ter da'k, w'iles yuther folks's did n' hafter wuk 'cep'n' fum sun ter sun" (71). Rhetorically accepting the distinction between "daylight ter da'k" and "sun ter sun," this sentence parodies the way in which white folks, especially when they want to evade their own position in an unjust system, employ different signifiers to obscure what from the Afro-American perspective appear to be identical signifieds. Although the sun rises after light and sets before dark, the distinction, which might be emphasized by a good master as evidence of his kindness, does nothing to alter the fact that in either case, the enforced labor is of murderous duration. Frequently Julius bases his rhetoric on the apparent acceptance of a white signifier, as in "The Gophered Grapevine" which identifies the slave Henry with the vineyard in much the same way John identifies Julius with the "things" of the plantation. By adapting John's preconceptions, Julius finds it much easier to construct an effective mask. As Gates notes in his discussion of the "Signifying Monkey," who along with Brer Rabbit provides the closest analog for Uncle Julius in the folk tradition, "the Signifying Monkey [Julius, Chesnutt] is able to signify upon the Lion [John, the white readership] only because the Lion does not understand the nature of the Monkey's discourse....The Monkey speaks

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figuratively, in a symbolic code, whereas the Lion interprets or 'reads' *literally*" (133-134).

A similar dynamic is at work in relation to the "folk" tales which charmed and fascinated both Julius' auditors in the text and Chesnutt's readership. Because the tales are presented in dialect within a frame readily familiar to readers of Harris, most contemporary reviewers assumed that Chesnutt was presenting "authentic" Afro-American folk tales; several hostile reviews criticized *The Conjure Woman* for simply repeating folk materials without adequate imaginative transformation. As Melvin Dixon demonstrates, however, only one of the tales ("The Goophered Grapevine") is an authentic folk tale. While the remainder incorporate folk elements, Chesnutt transforms them in a way which deconstructs the hierarchy on which the negative judgments rest. The recurring images of transformation in the tales—Sandy turns into a tree, Mars Jeems into a slave, Henry into a kind of human grapevine, etc.—implicitly repudiate the identification of signifier with transcendent signified. Identity is multiple, shifting, a play of forces rather than a transcendent essence. Chesnutt charmingly plunges his readers into the Faulknerian minstrel show/nightmare in which the answers place the answerers in question, names surrender their significance, becoming a source of ironic play in which the devil turns from black to white: "Mars Jeems's oberseah wuz a po' w'ite man name' Nick Johnson,—de niggers called 'im Mars Johnson ter his face, but behin' his back dey useter call 'im Ole Nick, en de name suited 'im ter a T" (75). Deprived of their linguistic base, dichotomies collapse, including that of white-classical-written-civilized/black-vernacular-oral-savage. For, although Chesnutt used Afro-American folk materials, the clearest source of the charming stories in *The Conjure Woman* is Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. The illiterate former slave and the classical poet play one another's roles in the minstrel show in which black and white begin to look very much alike. In a rhetorical gambit worthy of "The Purloined Letter" or the Signifying Monkey, Chesnutt draws attention to the similarity between Julius' concerns and those of the Euro-American philosophical tradition at the beginning of "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" when John sits down with Annie and reads: "The difficulty of dealing with transformations so many-sided as those which all existences have undergone, or are undergoing, is such as to make a complete and deductive interpretation almost hopeless. So to grasp the total process of redistribution of matter and motion as to see simultaneously its several necessary results in their actual interdependence is scarcely possible. There is, however, a mode of rendering the process as a whole tolerably comprehensible. Though the genesis of the rearrangement of every evolving aggregate is

in itself one, it presents to our intelligence" (163-164). When Annie repudiates the passage as "nonsense," John claims that this is philosophy "in the simplest and most lucid form." His failure to understand either the deconstructive implications of the emphasis on transformation and interdependence or the similarity between the philosophical passage and Julius' tales would seem clumsily ironic were it not for the fact that Chesnutt's ostensibly "literate" Euro-American readership shared the blindness. In addition, Annie's impatience with the philosophical discourse, contrasted with her eager but simplistic acceptance of Julius's oral versions, suggests intriguing approaches to the problem of audience which effects both Afro-American writers and Euro-American theorists.

"Baxter's *Procrustes*," the last story Chesnutt published prior to the literary silence of his last twenty seven years, reflects his growing despair over the absence of an audience sensitive to his concerns. Not coincidentally, the story provides clear evidence that, even as he wrote the "conventional" novels (*The House Behind the Cedars*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, *The Colonel's Dream*) which have veiled the complexity of the works which frame them, Chesnutt continued to develop his awareness of concerns which have entered the mainstream of Euro-American literary discourse only with the emergence of the deconstructionist movement. To a large extent, the issues raised in "Baxter's *Procrustes*" are those described in Culler's chapter on the "Critical Consequences" of deconstruction. Culler catalogs four levels on which deconstruction has effected literary criticism, the "first and most important [of which] is deconstruction's impact upon a series of critical concepts, including the concept of literature itself" (180). Among the specific results of deconstruction he lists the following propositions. Deconstruction focuses attention on 1) the importance and problematic nature of figures, encouraging readings of "literary works as implicit rhetorical treatises, which conduct in figurative terms an argument about the literal and the figural" (185); 2) "intertextuality," the "relations between one representation and another rather than between a textual imitation and a nontextual original" (187); 3) the gap between signifier and signified, leading to the conclusion that there "are no final meanings that arrest the movement of signification" (188); 4) the *parergon*, the "problem of the frame—of the distinction between inside and outside and of the structure of the border" (193); and 5) the problematic nature of self-reflexivity, which implies "the inability of any discourse to account for itself and the failure of performative and constative or doing and being to coincide" (201).

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“Baxter’s *Procrustes*,” a parody of a literary club tricked into publishing and giving glowing reviews to a book which contains no words whatsoever, reads from a contemporary perspective as a treatise on the deconstructive issues Culler identifies. The “figural” descriptions of the reviewers, including the narrator, entirely supercede the book’s “literal” contents, underlining the problematic relationship between signifiers and signified. The text’s emphasis on the value of “uncut copies” of the book, ostensibly a printing of a poem parts of which Baxter has presented orally, draws attention to the problem of intertextuality. In Chesnutt’s configuration, written copy and verbal “original” assume significance only intertextually, as they relate to one another; the probability that no “original” of Baxter’s *Procrustes* exists renders the concept of “final meanings that arrest the movement of signification” absurd. Even the critical attempts to construct a final meaning are presented in terms of intertextuality. Responding to the comments of a fellow critic, the narrator observes: “I had a vague recollection of having read something like this somewhere, but so much has been written that one can scarcely discuss any subject of importance without unconsciously borrowing, now and then, the thoughts or the language of others” (419). Especially in regard to a “text” consisting entirely of absence, the most promising field of play for original critical thought, no definitive interpretation is possible. At his most insightful, the narrator half-recognizes the distance between his figuration and the actual text, writing that he “could see the cover through the wrapper of my sealed copy” (420). Chesnutt seems explicitly aware that this deconstruction of critical/philosophical certainties implies a parallel deconstruction of the idea of the unified transcendent subject. The interrelationship between psychological and linguistic realities assumes a foreground position when the narrator claims that Baxter “has written himself into the poem. By knowing Baxter we are able to appreciate the book, and after having read the book we feel that we are so much the more intimately acquainted with Baxter—the real Baxter” (418). Like all “subjects” of deconstructive thought, Baxter’s significance can be perceived only through recognition of his absence.

The most interesting aspects of “Baxter’s *Procrustes*,” however, involve framing and self-reflexivity. Tracing the concept of the *parergon*—the “supplement” or “frame” of the aesthetic work—to its ill/logical extreme, Chesnutt again anticipates the deconstructive perception summarized by Culler as follows: “The supplement is essential. Anything that is properly framed...becomes an art object; but if framing is what creates the aesthetic object, this does not make the

frame a determinable entity whose qualities could be isolated" (197). "Baxter's *Procrustes*" foregrounds this issue; frame and object simultaneously give one another significance—a significance derived purely from the traces each leaves in the other's field of absence—and deconstruct the hierarchical relationship between "ground" and "figure." The binding, which is the sole concern of the narrator's "review" is decorated with the fool's cap and bells, in effect becoming the "work" which derives its meaning from the *parergonal* absence of the empty pages. The narrator's description of the form of the words on the page in Baxter's *Procrustes*, based entirely on intertextual hearsay, articulates both his blindness and his insight: "The text is a beautiful, slender stream, meandering gracefully through a wide meadow of margin" (419). This recognition in turn suggests an awareness of context as frame. Extending the concern with the audience introduced in *The Conjure Woman*, "Baxter's *Procrustes*" presents a model of a literary discourse in which cultural frame and literary text cannot be clearly distinguished.

Published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, this openly self-reflexive text comments on itself and its audience, anticipating the deconstructive concern with the way "Texts thematize, with varying degrees of explicitness, interpretive operations and their consequences and thus represent in advance the dramas that will give life to the tradition of their interpretation" (Culler 214-215). Sharing a title with an empty book reviewed by fools who drive the author out of their community while they continue to profit from his production—a "sealed copy" of Baxter's *Procrustes* is sold for a record price at a club auction after Baxter's expulsion—Chesnutt's "Baxter's *Procrustes*" anticipates its own "misreadings." Interestingly, it also anticipates future "positive" readings in the club president's suggestion that Baxter "was wiser than we knew, or than he perhaps appreciated" (421). The retrospective appreciation of Baxter's "masterpiece" (420), however, relates solely to its economic value. Suspended in a context in which Uncle Julius' original auditors, Chesnutt's contemporary readers, and, perhaps, even his future (deconstructionist) critics share an inability to perceive the true values of an Afro-American text, ("Baxter's *Procrustes*") seems acutely aware that its self-reflexivity does not transcend the gap between signifier and signified, attain closure or imply self-possession. In this recognition, as in so much else, Chesnutt seems much more proto-deconstructionist than the marginal Plantation Tradition figure he has traditionally been seen to be.

To remark Chesnutt's engagement with deconstructive concerns does not imply his ability to resolve their more disturbing

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implications. Confronting his marginalization and the failure of his audience to respond to anything other than the surface of his texts, Chesnutt fell into a literary silence like that of another pre-modernist American deconstructionist Herman Melville, or those of the women writers Tillie Olsen discusses in her profoundly moving essay on "Silences." Olsen catalogs a number of professional circumstances which drive marginal writers into giving up their public voices. Among the most powerful forces are "devaluation" ("books of great worth suffer the death of being unknown, or at best a peculiar eclipsing," 40); "critical attitudes" ("the injurious reacting to a book, not for its quality or content, but on the basis of its having been written by a woman [or black]," 40); and, perhaps most important, the "climate in literary circles for those who move in them" ("Writers know the importance of being taken seriously, with respect for one's vision and integrity; of comradeship with other writers; of being dealt with as a writer on the basis of one's work and not for other reasons," 41). Chesnutt clearly confronted each of these problems without finding an adequate solution.

This breakdown (or absence) of contact between artist and audience parallels a similar situation, also leading to withdrawal from engagement with the context, which some observer/participants, myself among them, see as a major problem of contemporary theoretical discourse. Critics whose insights would seem to possess profound social significance find themselves in the situation of John reading to Annie; the form of their discourse and lack of contextual awareness alienate their audience and, all too frequently, the critics respond by retreating into a contemptuous solipsism which guarantees that the subversive implications of their work will not have substantial effect on the context. One particularly unfortunate manifestation of this pattern has been the almost unchallenged alienation of Euro- and Afro-American discourse, an alienation addressed but not yet contextualized, by a small group of Afro-American (Stepto, Gates) and feminist theorists (Johnson, Rich). Still, further work towards a context which allows, to use Culler's phrase, "these discourses to communicate with one another," offers intriguing possibilities for avoiding the nihilistic impasse and tapping the political potential of deconstructive thought. To begin, deconstruction possesses the potential for substantially alleviating the conditions which forced Chesnutt—and a long line of successors including Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, and William Melvin Kelley—into exile. By focusing attention on the margin and articulating the recurring concerns of the folk-based Afro-American tradition in a vocabulary which can be recognized by the educated Euro-

American readership which continues to comprise the majority of the literary audience, deconstruction at least theoretically could help create an audience sensitive to the actual complexities of Afro-American expression. At present, this potential remains unrealized, in large part because the literary community in which deconstruction has developed continues to exercise its social privilege in a manner which suggests a continued belief, clearly inconsistent with its articulated perceptions, that its own cultural tradition serves as the center of serious literary discourse.

Precisely because Afro-American culture continues to be excluded from, or marginalized in, Euro-American discourse, writers working in the wake of Chesnutt offer a great deal of potential insight into the blindness of the Euro-American theoretical discourse (which most certainly offers an analogous set of insights in return). A passage from Derrida's *De la grammatologie* quoted in Culler's chapter on "Writing and Logocentrism" provides suggestive evidence of both the actuality and the implications of the Euro-American exclusion of Afro-American expression. Referring to the privileging of speech found in numerous European discussions of the nature of writing, Derrida writes: "The system of 'hearing/understanding-oneself-speak' through the phonic substance—which *presents itself* as a non-exterior, non-worldly and therefore non-empirical or non-contingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, arising from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and non-ideality, universal and non-universal, transcendental and empirical" (107). Asserting that a particular European philosophical discourse "necessarily" dominates the "history of the world," Derrida excludes a wide range of cultural traditions based on relational conceptions of identity which treat significance as derived from process. Contrasting with the beliefs in individual subjectivity and transcendental signification characteristic of the system Derrida deconstructs, many African-based discourses (while no doubt subject to analogous deconstructions) suggest approaches to impasses in thought and action which, at the very least, should be of interest to those members of the deconstructionist movement concerned with the practical impact of their perceptions. Specifically, the conception of performance embedded in Afro-American aesthetics (Jones, Sidran, Scheub), particularly as articulated in music and verbal signifying, suggests that the feeling of alienation characteristic of many deconstructionist texts is not a necessary product of the recognition that speech does not create a "non-exterior, non-worldly and therefore non-

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empirical or non-contingent signifier." From the perspective of the excluded tradition which uses "call-and-response," the performative dynamic in which the meaning of any signification derives from the interaction of individual and community in relation to a specific set of social circumstances, the inadequacy of the Euro-American system which Derrida deconstructs seems obvious. More important than the parallel perception as such is the fact that Afro-American writers, experiencing the "double consciousness" which makes it impossible for them to exclude the Euro-American tradition from their expression even if they so desire, have been exploring the practical implications of the intersection of modes of thought for nearly a century. Opening theoretical discourse to consideration of complex Afro-modernist texts such as Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery*, Langston Hughes' "Montage of a Dream Deferred," and Hurston's *Moses Man of the Mountain* might substantially alter the "feel" if not the conceptual underpinnings of contemporary theoretical discourse.

Perhaps the most important result of such consideration, derived from the origins of the Afro-American concern with deconstruction in both the relational conception of signification characteristic of the African continuum and the political circumstances of slavery and continuing oppression (based on the continuing dominance of the binary oppositions of American racial thought), would be to caution against 1) a relapse into the solipsistic withdrawal available primarily to those capable of exercising social privilege and 2) the separation of deconstructionist discourse from engagement with the institutional contexts in which it exists. Despite the prevalence of such separation in American academic discourse, it is not in fact inherent in deconstruction, a point made by both Eagleton and Culler. Attributing such separation to Anglo-American academicians (a.k.a. the demons of Yale), Eagleton stresses that "Derrida is clearly out to do more than develop new techniques of reading: deconstruction is for him an ultimately *political* practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force" (148). Similarly, Culler emphasizes that "inversions of hierarchical oppositions expose to debate the institutional arrangements that rely on the hierarchies and thus open possibilities of change" (179). Acutely aware of the ways in which even his sympathetic readers, and I suspect that would include many of the critics (I would not except myself) working toward an opening of discourses, continued to reenact the hierarchical minstrel show of the plantation tradition, Charles Chesnutt sensed this significance nearly a century ago. Like the guys at the

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garage—and, I suspect, the “girls” at the grocery—, he knew that the man’s mouth is cut cross ways and that the cross cuts a figure flattering to the man. Now we can begin to figure out where the meanings lie.