REMOLDING THE MINSTREL MASK: LINGUISTIC VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE IN CHARLES CHESNUTT’S DIALECT FICTION

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ABSTRACT

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When Charles Chesnutt entered the American literary sphere in the late 1800s, the nation was rife with racial turmoil following the Civil War. Both North and South attempted to rebuild economically and socially, making technological innovations such as the Transcontinental Railroad, and instituting Jim Crow laws aimed at limiting black social and economic mobility. Along with such rebuilding, though, came revisions of history—particularly, of slavery and the plantation system—through popular culture: literature, the continuing popularity of blackface minstrel shows, and film. The blackface minstrel stage and writers like Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page worked to romanticize slavery’s narrative in writing plantation fiction: works set on the plantation, written largely to represent the writers’ versions of black speech and culture. Harris and Page’s works put forth a longing for a past that consisted of white benevolent paternalism and black subservience.

Charles Chesnutt draws on the plantation fiction tradition in his works and uses several of the same mechanisms, like the representation of black speech and often, the plantation setting, in order to subvert the plantation myth. In the project that follows, I examine the role of Chesnutt’s dialect representations in The Conjure Tales and The Marrow of Tradition. I argue that rather than simply participating in dialect fiction, Chesnutt innovates within it; he uses dual meanings in the respellings of his words, legitimizes black orality, and represents a spectrum of dialect differences. This undermines the happy darky stereotype and de-hierarchizes racial structures constructed by plantation fiction and the plantation myth. Chesnutt breaks minstrel and dialect
fiction tropes; while he draws on the exaggerated black speech of minstrelsy and plantation fiction, he effectively disrupts its subjugation of blacks and forges a unique, coded version of black dialect.
For Aunt Jeri
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INTRODUCTION

When Charles Chesnutt entered the American literary sphere in the late 1800s, the nation was rife with turmoil following the Civil War and Reconstruction. The United States attempted to socially and economically rebuild itself in the wake of the devastation caused by the Civil War. Jim Crow laws and legal rhetoric pushed anti-miscegenation and racial segregation. Such legislation was largely founded on stereotypes about black sexuality and attempts to extend slavery and white power into the postbellum United States (Litwack 7-9). However, stereotypes about blackness surfaced well before the era of Jim Crow legislation. This project will examine these stereotypes, their history, and the role of Charles Chesnutt’s dialect fiction in breaking them.

Prior to and following the Civil War, popular culture—blackface minstrel shows, literature, advertisements, and music—depicted blackness in ways that perpetuated white supremacy. The stereotypes were many: blacks were portrayed as having large appetites for ham, chicken, and watermelon; as monstrous or beastly; uneducated, ignorant, or superstitious; or as the Uncle Tom—a happy, content, subservient slave with blind loyalty to his master. Blackface minstrel shows and literature played a central role in establishing these notions of blackness. The blackface minstrel show, as Eric Lott describes it, was chiefly a Northern practice; it was a white performance “organized around the quite explicit ‘borrowing’ of black cultural materials for white dissemination, a borrowing that ultimately depended on the material relations of slavery[;] the minstrel show obscured these relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural” (3). That is, blackface minstrelsy allowed white performers to demonstrate benevolent paternalism and imitate what performers felt to be black authenticity (Lott 3).
The white performer Thomas D. Rice popularized the blackface minstrel show around 1830, creating a type of entertainment and a set of racist tropes that lasted well into the twentieth century (Lott 18). Thus “the father of American minstrelsy,” Rice invented the character—or rather, caricature—of Jim Crow, who became common in blackface minstrelsy and after whom Jim Crow laws were named (Green 389-390). Rice and other blackface minstrel performers projected their version of plantation life through Jim Crow, a character exhibiting several stereotypes about blackness. When dressed as Jim Crow, blackface minstrel performers donned a clownish, comic slave look: exaggerated pink or white lips, a deformed or crippled physique (usually his leg), and skin painted pitch black (390). Rice’s song and dance implied that Jim Crow enjoyed his work as a slave and established the character as carefree and cheerful (390). Rice and other minstrel actors popularized the “happy darky” myth—the idea that slaves were carefree, leisurely, and cheerful in their work (Martin 19). Rice’s depiction of Jim Crow pushed stereotypes about black physicality and intelligence and functioned to delegitimize the idea that slavery caused damage by insisting that slavery was leisurely and benevolent to slaves.

Rice invented and subsequently popularized other characters—“Dandy Jim from Caroline” and “Spruce Pink,” who projected similar stereotypes about blackness—for blackface minstrel shows, but he was not the only performer to capitalize on stereotyping blacks (Green 391). Blackface minstrelsy increasingly gained popularity in both the North and the South in the years prior to the Civil War, but also saw popularity following the Civil War and Reconstruction. Audiences as well as minstrel performers psychologically benefitted from such performances. Green indicates that in such shows, even in representations of abolitionist texts like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, minstrel characters showed that “the country [was] happy and unified, and everyone knew his place” while characters like “‘Jim Crow’ . . . presented models so outrageously
incompetent, harmless and grotesque that even the most anxiety-ridden member of the American democracy could forget his troubles and roar with laughter at the antics of the ‘nigger’” (395). Green reveals an important point: blackface minstrelsy was, in short, fueled by a psychological need for reassurance. Both white audiences and white performers needed reinforcement of their supposed superiority over slaves, and later, black neighbors.

This white need for reassurance of white superiority in the antebellum United States prevailed through and following the Civil War. Blackface minstrelsy practices continued, and during Chesnutt’s time, blackface minstrelsy depicted the Old South in a nostalgic light, which helped meet northern needs in particular:

[I]mages of a glorious South served the double purpose of giving meaning to the war by creating a heroic foe, and of welcoming the prodigal siblings back into the fold by acknowledging the virtues of their society and the tragedy of its loss. Evocation of the plantation myth also allowed northerners to ignore the issue of racial justice in America, allowing the problems of incorporating freed African Americans into society to disappear, if only temporarily, beneath the smile of a happy darky. (Martin 19)

Here, Martin reveals the particularly northern white American desire to combat social and economic strife by romanticizing the narrative that caused it. Although it could seem that the purposes for blackface minstrel performances shifted from stereotyping blacks in the antebellum stage to nostalgia for a lost past in the postbellum, racial stereotypes continued. Blackface minstrelsy, whether antebellum or postbellum, reinforced social and racial hierarchies. The blackface minstrel stage acted to romanticize slavery, thereby glossing over slavery’s dark history and recasting it as a system under which blacks happily and willingly served their white
masters. Such images of slavery not only denied slavery’s horrors, but presented whites as benevolent parental figures of blacks. The blackface minstrel stage, replete with these romanticized versions of slavery, depicted blacks as ignorant, compliant in slavery, and in need of white guidance.

Blackface minstrelsy also cast blacks as inferior and ignorant with its interpretation of black dialect. That is, white performers in blackface spoke and sang in what they and audiences took to be authentic black dialect (Lott 15-16). As Eric Lott points out, white “[audiences], without derision, heard Negroes singing” (16). Although white audiences took these interpretations of black dialect to be authentic, black speech was often exaggerated for comic effect. Such exaggeration reinforced racial hierarchies in both antebellum and postbellum America, as Gavin Jones shows: “the ‘humorous’ inability of the blackface caricature to command the full meaning of conventional English suggested racial difference and deficiency; black minds were made to seem absolutely trapped in an inferior dialect world” (Jones 178). In other words, blackface minstrel performers positioned “white” language as superior to black speech, which positioned blacks as ignorant (178).

Following the Civil War, such attempts to capture black authenticity through depictions of black speech bled into the literary sphere (Jones 1-2). While prior to the Civil War, writers used dialect sparingly and black dialect representations were limited to the blackface minstrel stage, shortly following the Civil War, the United States saw an explosion of dialect literature, a “movement…identifiable by [its] techniques of representing phonetics of unfamiliar speech” (Jones 2). Plantation fiction was a subset of dialect literature; it was dialect literature set on the plantation, seeking to represent authentic blackness with its employment of black orality and depiction of black speech. Plantation fiction presented tales ridden with the same paternalism and
guise of authentic blackness as in blackface minstrelsy. Like blackface minstrelsy, plantation fiction pandered to white Northern desire for a romanticized pre-Civil War narrative. Prior to plantation fiction and other dialect literature, the blackface minstrel stage established linguistic hierarchies between blacks and whites. Blackface minstrel performances romanticized the plantation system, perpetuated the happy darky myth, and employed exaggerated black vernacular, creating a set of tropes that in turn structured the representations of blackness in plantation.

In addition to the blackface minstrel stage, plantation fiction writers such as Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page played a big part in not only revising and romanticizing the South’s narrative of slavery, but also in establishing racial hierarchies through language (Martin 17). Plantation fiction writers tried to capture authentic blackness by transcribing black vernacular and employing oral storytelling, a type of storytelling seen as unique to blacks of the time period. However, like blackface minstrel performers, writers like Harris and Page exaggerated black dialect and thus attempted to highlight educational differences between blacks and whites; “[dialect fiction writers] encode[d] an essential blackness in the written representation of speech, making the lines of writing into color lines designed to segregate upon the printed page” (Jones 107). Rather than authentic, such portrayals acted as a kind of verbal blackface under which Harris and Page could reinforce racial hierarchies based on educational differences and black stereotypes. In effect, Harris and Page’s works acted as a facet of blackface minstrelsy, as both writers, under the guise of communicating black authenticity, put forth an idyllic version of the South and demonstrated a longing for the lost past that consisted of happy, submissive slaves and benevolent, paternalistic plantation owners.
Charles Chesnutt, then, faced a tumultuous atmosphere in which the legal system and popular culture perpetuated racial tension, ideas of white supremacy, and stereotypes of blackness. As one of the first major African American writers, Chesnutt also faced prejudices in the publishing industry (Martin 17-18). However, it is important to note, as I will examine in this project, that not all white attempts to define authentic blackness, on the minstrel stage, in literature, or otherwise, were successful. Eric Lott shows that opportunities for figuring out racial politics arose in blackface minstrelsy. For Lott, blackface minstrelsy offered attention to black culture, however misinterpreted by whites (Lott 17). As Lott points out, critics often see blackface minstrelsy as either racist incorporation of black culture or a performance with “potentially liberating results [for blacks]” (17). However, Lott complicates this by arguing that blackface minstrelsy was more complex than this dualism, and a product of its time (17). Thus, blackface minstrelsy both reinforced racism and helped provide avenues for black subversion of white supremacy, and black performers eventually took to the minstrel stage (Jones 178).

However, black advancement by way of minstrelsy was not limited to blacks simply participating in it; rather, black minstrel performers radically changed the minstrel genre. Schroeder indicates that black actors set black minstrelsy apart from blackface minstrelsy by innovating within the minstrel genre in a manner that allowed for a critique of white supremacy. For instance, black actors, who still used greasepaint or burnt-cork blackface, would often manipulate the blackface mask used in minstrel shows to criticize, complicate, and ultimately dismantle the blackface mask and caricature of Jim Crow (Schroeder 139-140). Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen show that

while black [minstrel] shows featured performers imitating the dehumanizing stereotypes used by whites in blackface, African Americans were able to
distinguish themselves from their pale imitators by bringing humanity to the
 caricatures and providing coded messages to their brothers and sisters. As an
African American theatergoer told a white writer attending a black-written, black-
cast play in the early twentieth century “we get things in the show you couldn’t
possibly react to” . . . black minstrelsy involves not only stereotypes and
caricatures, but comic traditions, linguistics, low humor, verbal dexterity,
improvisation, and numerous other elements. (Taylor and Austen 187)

Black minstrel performances, then, provided an area for discourse between the actors and
audiences regarding racial equality, racist attitudes and stereotypes, especially in front of mixed-
race audiences (Schroeder 140). Henry Louis Gates Jr. also indicates that blacks often use
“double-voiced words and double-voiced discourse” as a means of subverting white-driven
stereotypes about blackness (Gates 415). For Gates, blacks signify alternate linguistic meanings
of conventional words in writing or verbally (415). In the context of minstrelsy, black minstrels
could signify new meanings in self-representations of black dialect (415). Black minstrel
performers forged a new type of performance that was different from white-performed blackface
minstrelsy. In black-performed minstrelsy, blacks opened up avenues for critical dialogues about
and critiques of racial hierarchies in the United States.

Similar to black minstrel performers, Chesnutt worked within a genre previously used to
perpetuate white supremacy—dialect fiction—in order to undermine racial caricatures and
stereotypes. Some critics take Chesnutt to task for participating in dialect fiction, claiming that
he used the genre for self-advancement and even deeming him a “black parrot for white racist
ideals” (Wonham 2). However, in the chapters that follow, I argue that Chesnutt forged a unique
writing style that used plantation fiction and dialect to refute caricatures of blackness. Rather
than *participating* in and perpetuating the racist structures, minstrel tropes, and caricatures put forth by plantation fiction and blackface minstrelsy, Chesnutt worked within dialect fiction in order to revise it, yet in the meantime develop an authentic voice with unique, coded dialect portrayals. In effect, Chesnutt participates in Gates’ concept of “signifyin(g);” Chesnutt uses dialect as “double-voiced words” and engages “double-voiced discourse” to more accurately portray slavery than white plantation fiction writers (Gates 415).

Several critics—Matthew Martin, Dean McWilliams, Eric Sundquist and others—focus on Chesnutt’s ability to explode myths about blackness and racial stereotypes. Much current scholarship focuses on how Chesnutt does so by offering an accurate depiction of slavery; in other words, critics often focus on Chesnutt’s antiracist themes, such as his inclusion of miscegenation, death, or brutality against slaves, his use of Julius as narrator or trickster, and his employment of dual narrators in *The Conjure Tales*. Current scholarship highlights Chesnutt’s work under the plantation fiction genre, but neglects or glosses over the role of dialect in his texts. While several scholars, particularly Dean McWilliams and Gavin Jones, note Chesnutt’s use of dialect, their acknowledgement is limited to arguing that Chesnutt worked under dialect; Baker calls Chesnutt’s use of dialect a “mask” to pander to white desire while revealing realistic views of slavery (qtd. in Jones 187).

In this project, I build upon these ideas to offer a fresh view on Chesnutt’s use of dialect. I examine specific linguistic choices which Chesnutt makes throughout his works that de-hierarchize white supremacist-based racial structures and signify dual meanings within the texts. I argue that Chesnutt does not just capture black speech or mimic plantation fiction, but successfully alters the genre through his specific use of dialect and other linguistic choices that do more than convey black dialect. Rather than simply act as a mask under which Chesnutt can
work to challenge dominant narratives of history, Chesnutt’s use of dialect also functions as a way to challenge white supremacy. While the dialect can act as a mask under which Chesnutt works, Chesnutt alters that mask, uses it to challenge the way dialect works in white-written dialect literature, and ultimately forges alternate versions of the antebellum and postbellum South.

In this project, I examine several functions of dialect in Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Tales* and *The Marrow of Tradition*. Dialect literature writers typically use two strategies to represent dialect on the page: eye dialect and respellings. These terms can often be used interchangeably, but I distinguish between the two for the purposes of this project. “Eye dialect” signifies changes to conventional word spellings on the page to indicate a dialect difference when the pronunciation of the word is the same between characters of different regions (Malin 229-230). An example of this would be spelling “relaxation” as “relax-ay-shun” (Malin 230). In this example, while the pronunciation of “relaxation” is the same, the writer has changed the spelling to signify some difference in dialect, even when there is not an audible difference in pronunciation; this use of eye dialect, then, places the focus not on dialect differences but on differences in literacy. Eye dialect is most commonly used to highlight a character’s illiteracy by tying dialect to it. Both northerners and whites would have accents, but eye dialect writing implies that only one character has an accent and the other speaks in some equivalent of the written word. The example above reveals that a literate character and an illiterate character would pronounce the word the same, but draws attention to the illiterate character by the spelling alteration; this changing in spelling, then, implies that the character speaking “relax-ay-shun” does not know the conventional spelling of the word and is illiterate. Eye dialect, as in the example above, works to establish linguistic hierarchies based on literacy. In plantation fiction,
those linguistic hierarchies are tied to race, and white characters, as I will show, are positioned as superior in speech and language, while blacks are positioned as inferior and ignorant through mispronunciations and misspellings of words. Eye dialect, in short, reveals not differences in dialect, but differences in literacy between characters in dialect literature.

The term “respellings,” as I refer to it in this project, indicates alterations to conventional word spellings in an attempt to capture authentic speech. Respellings indicate that differences in dialect are not necessarily tied to literacy. The spelling alterations project a difference in pronunciation, rather than just a difference in how the word appears on the page. An example of this would be “gwyne” for “going” or “marster” for “master.” Both of these examples, unlike eye dialect, reflect a difference in word pronunciation. Although respellings could indicate a difference in literacy between characters, respellings also show a difference in the word’s pronunciation between characters of different regions. Throughout this project, I will refer to any change in spelling to a conventional word that functions outside of revealing a character’s illiteracy as a respelling. I employ both the terms “eye dialect” and “respelling” throughout the project and examine how Chesnutt uses both.

In Chapter 1, I examine Chesnutt’s representations of dialect in The Conjure Tales in conjunction with other linguistic devices, such as metaphor and narrative framing. I analyze the meanings and implications of specific dialect respellings, and also examine the role of literacy and how it connects to black dialect. I examine how dialect functions to deconstruct hierarchies based on race in The Conjure Tales, as well as how dialect choices and respellings such as “neckliss” can function as a dual signing system; that is, how dialect respellings can refer to literal meanings yet also have metaphorical, sinister implications. In Chapter 1, I focus on “Dave’s Neckliss,” which encompasses several of these ideas. However, the unique ways that
Chesnutt uses dialect are not limited to “Dave’s Neckliss.” Chesnutt’s subversive dialect writing is prevalent in several other tales, as well; “The Goophered Grapevine” and “Mars Jeems Nightmare” both speak to how Chesnutt works with dialect and minstrel tropes.

For example, in “The Goophered Grapevine,” Julius, a black, illiterate narrator of The Conjure Tales, refers to watermelon as “watermillyums” (Chesnutt 5). Dean McWilliams, one of the few critics who addresses implications of Chesnutt’s dialect representations, indicates that this respelling is “more evocative than [its] Standard English [counterpart]” (McWilliams 95). McWilliams addresses how this respelling calls attention to Julius’ performance and how Julius can gear his performance toward a specific audience. In other words, Julius acts as a minstrel figure in order to become less threatening to John, the white Northerner for whom he works, but is able to subtly manipulate John (96). However, while McWilliams focuses on what the respelling does—he argues that “watermillyums...better express[es] [Julius’] gustatory pleasure than [its] dictionary equivalent”—McWilliams overlooks other important implications of this (and other) respellings (95). What McWilliams and other critics overlook is how the dialect physically functions to dismantle white supremacy. I would argue that the dialect in this passage—that is, the misspelling and Julius’ mispronunciation of “watermelon”—draws attention to and linguistically obliterates the stereotype of blacks having a particular appetite for watermelon. McWilliams is right in asserting that “watermillyums” conveys more than a dialect difference. Spelling watermelon as “watermillyums” calls attention to exactly how exaggerated stereotypes of blackness were, with the addition of the word “yums” and also through the exaggeration and lengthening of “watermelon.” Here, the spelling itself becomes exaggerated, the word is lengthened, it borders on parody. However, the respelling also physically breaks up the word “watermelon.” Julius commits a linguistic violence on the word watermelon—he
breaks it up, exaggerates it, gives it new meaning, modifies it—in effect, he cuts it in half. By literally deconstructing the word and calling attention to Julius performance, Chesnutt calls the stereotype into question. In short, as McWilliams notes, Julius performs these stereotypes in order to keep John comfortable; I add to this and argue that not only does Julius perform the stereotypes, but he (and Chesnutt, as the writer) exaggerate stereotypes produced by blackface minstrelsy and plantation fiction to the verge of parody, and also deconstruct them at a literal, physical, and linguistic level.

This type of work can also be seen in “Mars Jeems’ Nightmare,” in which a brutal slave overseer ends up spending time as a slave himself. In the story, Chesnutt respells the word “new” as “noo” in reference to Mars Jeems as a “noo nigger” (Chesnutt 31). This obviously draws attention to the fact that Mars Jeems is “no nigger,”—that is, he is not black—in addition to dually signifying that he’s a “new nigger” on the plantation. The respelling of new as “noo” sounds no different than “new,” and therefore, there is no other reason to respell it; it could, in fact, be seen as eye dialect. In most plantation fiction, respelling “new” as “noo” would convey a difference in dialect, although the pronunciation remained the same, which would highlight differences in education between characters. However, the change in spelling functions outside of highlighting black ignorance. The word “noo,” as shown above, serves multiple purposes and has several implications beyond conveying Julius’ illiteracy, which ultimately challenges hierarchizing on the basis of race and/or education. It is respellings such as these, as well as the work Chesnutt does with pejorative terms such as “nigger” in his stories, that I analyze in Chapter 1 of this project. Such respellings and the multiple levels on which dialect functions, among other linguistic choices, I argue, work alongside the antiracist themes and narrative framing present in The Conjure Tales to refute racial caricatures and romanticization of the “Old
South” produced by blackface minstrelsy and plantation fiction. Chesnutt’s dual signification, though, also works to break out of the plantation fiction genre and newly represent black dialect.

In Chapter 2, I examine *The Marrow of Tradition* and how Chesnutt’s linguistic choices revise the narrative of Reconstruction and its aftermath. I argue that ultimately, *The Marrow of Tradition* shows the postbellum South as a continuation of slavery because of the continuing oppression of blacks by whites legally, socially, and otherwise. My argument regarding *The Marrow of Tradition* centers on Chesnutt’s depiction of differences in dialect. Unlike his Julius tales, *The Marrow of Tradition* takes place in the postbellum South. *The Marrow of Tradition* is a fictionalized account of the Wilmington Massacre of 1898. In this novel, Chesnutt chooses again to represent differences in dialect between characters, although the dialect differences are not limited to black characters. As in Chapter 1, I examine respellings of words that convey dialect differences; I argue that those respellings can serve as a type of signifying that metaphorically links Reconstruction and its aftermath to slavery. I deconstruct respelled words and dialect and examine possible meanings and implications based on the respellings. I analyze how respelling certain words recontextualizes, breaks, and alters their conventional English counterparts. Further, I analyze how such respellings relate to the oppression of blacks in the late nineteenth century. This relates to minstrelsy in that Chesnutt draws the trope of representing black speech, but modifies it (as black minstrel performers modified the shows) to do more than play into black stereotypes. Again, Chesnutt breaks minstrel and dialect fiction tropes; while he draws on the exaggerated black speech of minstrelsy and plantation fiction, he effectively disrupts its subjugation of blacks and forges a unique, coded version of black dialect.

In Chapter 2, I expand upon ways in which Chesnutt engages with minstrel tropes and ultimately, the idea of white superiority. *The Marrow of Tradition* features a character, Jerry,
who on the surface, inhabits several minstrel tropes. Chesnutt even characterizes him as a “good Negro,” as he acts as if he is compliant with his white employer’s demands. Chesnutt also chooses to represent his speech in dialect similar to that of blackface minstrelsy and plantation fiction, as seen in the passage below:

Dere’s one thing sho’—dey’re gwine ter git after de niggers some way er ‘nuther, an’ w’en dey does, whar is Jerry gwine ter be? Dat’s de mos’ impo’tantes question. I’m gwine ter look at dat newspaper dey be talkin’ ‘bout, an’ less’n my min’ changes might’ly, I’m gwine ter keep my mouf shet a’ stan’ in wid de Angry-Saxon race. (90 emphasis mine)

Importantly, Chesnutt revises Jerry’s dialect; rather than act as an exaggerated minstrel performance, Jerry’s dialect dually signifies Jerry’s impressions of whites and ultimately, racial tensions of the time period. The words “angry” and “Saxon,” although on the surface a comical mistake based on Jerry’s illiteracy (thus projecting him as a minstrel figure), are spelled conventionally, which draws attention to them and does important work in revealing Jerry’s understanding of race relations in the nineteenth century. This ultimately refutes the idea that Jerry is simply a minstrel caricature.

Throughout Chapter 2, I expand on this and other respellings that in Chesnutt’s use of dialect in *The Marrow of Tradition*. In addition to focusing on respellings, I also focus on how dialect and other linguistic cues such as signs, signing systems, and white speech function within the text to interrupt narrative, to oppress, or to empower characters. In short, in this chapter, I analyze words—largely those that convey dialect differences—through both a literal and metaphoric lens in order to discuss the way language ties Reconstruction and its aftermath to slavery through Chesnutt’s engagement with and refutation of minstrel tropes.
In undertaking this project, it is my hope to bring a fresh lens to Chesnutt’s employment of dialect and representations of black speech in his works. The work that Chesnutt does with dialect and other linguistic choices in this novel and in *The Conjure Tales*, I argue, supersedes exaggerated minstrelsy and works to remold its mask into something both subversive and authentic. Although Chesnutt may have worked under the mask of dialect fiction and minstrel tropes, he altered the mask to make it his own.
CHAPTER 1: DIALECT FUNCTIONS IN “DAVE’S NECKLISS”

Several critics analyze the ways in which Chesnutt’s *Conjure Tales* subvert the plantation myth and challenge the romanticism of the antebellum South. Current scholarship focuses largely on Chesnutt’s use of narrative devices, such as plot, character, antiracist themes, and narrative framing in *The Conjure Tales*. However, there is little scholarship on Chesnutt’s linguistic choices and representations of dialect (black and white) in these works. While scholarship exists about Chesnutt’s employment of dialect in these works, critics have neglected to address dialect representations as tools that help portray the antebellum and postbellum South more realistically.

In this chapter, I build on this existing scholarship on Chesnutt’s use of plot, character, and narrative devices, but analyze Chesnutt’s use of dialect more closely. I argue that Charles Chesnutt’s work in *The Conjure Tales*, specifically in “Dave’s Neckliss,” achieves a more realistic view of slavery than projected by plantation fiction and the blackface minstrel stage. I argue that Chesnutt achieves this more accurate version of slavery not only by including themes of brutality, death, and miscegenation and his use of narrative devices, but also with his linguistic choices. Chesnutt complicates white dialect fiction’s romanticizing of slavery with his word choice and word respellings. Chesnutt uses dialect as a tool to revise whitewashed narratives of slavery; rather than imitate white dialect representations of black vernacular, Chesnutt uses specific dialect respellings to forge a new, more accurate account of slavery. Because *The Conjure Tales* have been challenged on the basis that Chesnutt buys into black stereotypes, it is crucial that we look closely at Chesnutt’s attention to black vernacular and appreciation of black orality. Doing so not only helps us see another way in which Chesnutt challenges stereotypes,
rather than reinforces them, but also shows newly shows us a level at which his works function to undermine white supremacy.

**Current Criticism, Storytelling, and Black Orality**

Many critics posit Julius, the narrator of *The Conjure Tales*, as instrumental in Chesnutt’s revision of the antebellum South. Paul Petrie explains that Chesnutt employed the familiarity of plantation fiction to white readers—the use of a seemingly subservient black Uncle Tom figure, Julius, as narrator, and the use of black vernacular—in order to help alter white racial attitudes (Petrie 184). Petrie tasks the literary reformist, in this case, Chesnutt, with “soften[ing] white resistance to accepting African Americans as equals” (185). Petrie’s scholarship shows that by showcasing the black realities of the antebellum South through the familiar genre of plantation fiction and its trope of a white, overarching narrator who encounters a black, purportedly illiterate narrator, Chesnutt works to change white attitudes about blackness on a relatively subtle level. I argue that Chesnutt not only works under plantation fiction tropes, but deconstructs them—specifically, white representations of black speech—to complicate stereotypes about blackness. Besides using the familiar genre of dialect fiction to help whites empathize with blacks and to showcase a more accurate picture of the antebellum South, Chesnutt reveals blacks as equals by consistently and realistically portraying Julius’ dialect and by depicting Julius’ control of the story.

Donald Shaffer argues that Julius’ storytelling displays black agency and helps in the act of racial formation (Shaffer 325). For Shaffer, Julius works as “a kind of inverted minstrel performance that obscures the real meaning behind his tales while tacitly manipulating his audience” (330). Shaffer explains, then, that Julius’ storytelling is a way of manipulating John,
and subsequently, readers, which reverses power dynamics in the text, an important revision of plantation fiction (330-331). What Shaffer points to, here, is important: Julius can be seen as a minstrel figure, because of his exaggerated simple speech, appetite for ham and watermelon, and his subservience to John and Annie. Chesnutt complicates Julius as a minstrel figure by revealing him as more dynamic than a caricature because of Julius’ orality and wit. Shaffer shows how Chesnutt uses dialect fiction to depict slavery as a system of subjugation through oral storytelling (331). Shaffer implicitly acknowledges Julius as intelligent, although uneducated, through his explicit acknowledgement of Julius as a trickster figure. Julius, to Shaffer, displays agency through his manipulation of John. Not only does Julius revise the narrative of slavery, but Julius also self-advances and manipulates whites through that narrative and orality. I add that Julius uses oral storytelling rather than the written word or literacy to overcome subjugation by whites, and, in the case of “Dave’s Neckliss,” shows literacy as something that can even be damaging, which would refute critics’ ideas of Chesnutt’s classism and biases against uneducated blacks.

That is, Julius not only demonstrates agency through his storytelling, as Shaffer asserts, but also shows literacy as a complex and sometimes damaging force. Julius, as an illiterate narrator and dialect speaker with the capacity to manipulate John and readers, reflects a more complex view of achieving equal rights—one which is not limited to assimilating into the white man’s world through becoming literate in English, but rather, one that includes subverting white supremacist ideals through traditions of oral storytelling.

“Dave’s Neckliss” opens with Annie, John’s wife, offering Julius dinner. At dinner, Julius tells them a plantation tale: a story about a slave marriage under Julius’s slave master. Throughout The Conjure Tales, Julius acts as a trickster figure and constantly fools Annie and
John; “Dave’s Neckliss” is no exception. In “Dave’s Neckliss,” Julius ends up using the tragic story of a slave marriage in order to acquire food, in this case ham:

"Eber sence den," said Julius in conclusion, "w'eneber I eats ham, it min's me er Dave. I lacks ham, but I nebber kin eat mo' d'n two er th'ee poun's befo' I gits ter studyin' 'bout Dave, en den I has ter stop en leab de res' fer ernudder time."

There was a short silence after the old man had finished his story, and then my wife began to talk to him about the weather, on which subject he was an authority. I went into the house. When I came out, half an hour later, I saw Julius disappearing down the lane, with a basket on his arm.

At breakfast, next morning, it occurred to me that I should like a slice of ham. I said as much to my wife.

"Oh, no, John," she responded, "you shouldn't eat anything so heavy for breakfast."

I insisted. "The fact is," she said, pensively, "I couldn't have eaten any more of that ham, and so I gave it to Julius." (Chesnutt 101-102)

On the surface, Julius becomes a caricature reminiscent of minstrelsy under the humorous guise of his ability to eat “two or three pounds” of ham before he thinks about Dave, a fellow slave who ends up dying in a scene reminiscent of lynching in a ham smoker (101). Interestingly, as part of Julius’ dialect, Julius says “I lacks ham” (102). Chesnutt respells “like” as “lacks” in order to show a difference in dialect between John and Julius. “Lacks,” however, serves a dual function. At the same time that it conveys a difference in dialect, the respelling also indicates that Julius literally lacks ham; he does not have it, and ends up, by the end of the story, procuring it
for himself through oral storytelling and wit. Julius, then, complicates the minstrel caricature; through his oral literacy, Julius demonstrates that he is cunning, witty, and self-sufficient.

Chesnutt is showing that intelligence is not always limited to literacy. While in *The Conjure Tales*, literacy can be used to threaten or enforce power, Chesnutt also uses dialect to legitimate storytelling as a way to undermine white supremacy. In all of the Conjure Tales, Chesnutt does not use respellings or eye dialect when writing John’s or Annie’s speech, as evidenced in the passage above: “‘The fact is . . . I couldn’t have eaten any more of that ham, and so I gave it to Julius’” (102). John and Annie’s dialect however, is Northern; by writing their speech in conventional, standard English, Chesnutt ties their dialect to literacy rather than region. John and Annie’s dialect is not written to call attention to its sounds; that is, when John or Annie speaks, there are no instances of eye dialect or respellings that show differences in pronunciation. Chesnutt does not stress how John or Annie’s dialect would sound when spoken, but rather writes in standard English when they speak, thereby linking their dialect to the written word and literacy. By using eye dialect and respellings only in Julius’ speech, Chesnutt positions John and Annie as literate and Julius as illiterate; this is a tactic commonly used in plantation fiction to project supposed black ignorance. However, rather than focusing on Julius’s ignorance, Chesnutt uses Julius to insist that intelligence is not limited to literacy, and even argues that other types of literacy (oral storytelling) are fully legitimate ways of knowing. Chesnutt places John, and subsequently, literacy—if we choose to see dialect as tied to literacy—in the background and Julius, illiteracy, and oral literacy in the foreground. Chesnutt foregrounds Julius and his oral literacy by choosing not to highlight John’s dialect with respellings or eye dialect. Such foregrounding of Julius prioritizes oral storytelling as a fully legitimate way of knowing. Below,
I will show how the representations of Julius’ dialect work to call attention to his story and command John and readers’ attention.

Throughout all of the tales, John and his wife, the literate whites who have power over Julius monetarily, end up the fools, and Julius is able to use them for his advantage, a way of using the white man’s world to self-advance. Julius uses a different type of intelligence than literacy to manipulate John. Rather than become literate, Julius takes hold of his circumstances through storytelling. This is important because, at the same time as Julius revises the work that white writers did to romanticize the antebellum South, Julius also claims power over John through the stories that he tells. Julius’ manipulation of John by way of storytelling obliterates the hierarchies that plantation fiction writers established based on literacy. Plantation writers tied illiteracy to black speech and therefore connected blackness to ignorance. Chesnutt disconnects blackness and ignorance by establishing orality as a legitimate, alternate form of literacy, knowing, smarts, and subversion through his trickster narrator, Julius. Although Julius cannot read, Julius is literate in plantation narratives and controls the narratives, John, and readers. Julius, I argue, is instrumental in inverting the twinned idea that illiterate means ignorant and literacy is inextricable from knowledge; Julius, in fact, often renders the literate John and readers as ignorant.

Jennifer Riddle Harding discusses how Chesnutt’s stories’ effects on readers. In effect, Chesnutt also participates in oral storytelling by pushing his audience to experience and read the tales aloud, which, I argue, further legitimizes oral storytelling as a subversive force:

Chesnutt . . . almost forces readers to engage with the oral tale by reading out loud and turning a literate experience into an oral experience—in the conjure tales, the entire inner framed narratives are in dialect . . . readers are forced to slow down as
they sound out the words and hear the speech of Julius. As a result, readers encounter the tale at a pace that is similar to the experience of listeners who are hearing rather than reading the story. (Harding 426)

The dialect that Chesnutt employs shifts his tales into being heard rather than read. The dialect, then, highlights the importance of oral storytelling in self-advancement on a level beyond Julius’ manipulation of John through oral storytelling. Chesnutt’s employment of dialect showcases the importance of oral storytelling not just to John, but to Chesnutt’s readers, who, as Harding mentions, are pushed into reading the stories aloud in order to understand them. Lisa Cohen Minnick addresses how Chesnutt self-advanced through writing the conjure stories, arguing that Chesnutt “capitaliz[ed] on the popularity of literary representations of African American dialect speech” and “deployed them as a central part of his strategy for persuading the publishers to support his work, encouraging readers to buy it” (Minnick 78). Here, Minnick points to Chesnutt’s adaptation of plantation fiction, a conventionally white genre, and argues that Chesnutt used it to advance his publishing career.

However, Donald Shaffer argues that Chesnutt appropriated the plantation fiction genre, yet altered it to foreground other issues, such as the importance of oral storytelling:

If the fictional work of Joel Chandler Harris reflected a nostalgic view of slavery and a disarming view of African American folk culture, Chesnutt’s work operated as a counter-hegemonic narrative that linked black folkloric expression to the struggle for human dignity and freedom. Uncle Julius's conjure tales posit slavery and white supremacy as the social ground black people had to traverse in order to achieve human agency. Julius himself achieves this agency through the act of story-telling as his stories always hit their mark in persuading (at times coercing)
John to unwittingly accept this point of view. Thus, although Chesnutt appropriates Harris's formula by placing the story in Uncle Julius's mouth, the text foregrounds this act of story-telling as an act of interpretation—as a meta-discursive expression that reveals within its humor and absurdity the enduring pathos and struggle that sustained black life. (Shaffer 329)

Shaffer argues here that Chesnutt uses Julius’ ability to persuade/coerce John to foreground oral storytelling as a type of black agency. This refutes the idea put forth by critics such as Henry Wonham, that Chesnutt devalued subculture and failed to identify with “the poor black man or the slave” (Minnick 79). In other words, Chesnutt foregrounds oral storytelling in order to insist that such storytelling offers a form of agency and a means to undercut white supremacy.

To build on this scholarship, I assert that rather than assimilate into the white world through white mechanisms (literacy in English), Chesnutt’s work pushes black advancement in several ways that are not limited to literacy. In *The Conjure Tales*, Chesnutt’s depiction of dialect insists that equality is not limited to black literacy. Chesnutt, as aforementioned, also *participates* in retaining black agency through storytelling and pushing his readers to read his stories aloud. This evidences Chesnutt’s attempts to connect to slaves and impoverished black men, as Chesnutt employs some of the same techniques to achieve agency through his focus on the importance of oral storytelling. Furthermore, the participation in oral storytelling establishes Chesnutt’s work as more than a response or revision to white plantation fiction writers. While it can certainly be argued, and is argued by Harding, that other plantation fiction also forces readers to participate in oral storytelling, Chesnutt’s work functions differently in themes, narration, and his depiction of dialect, as I will continue to show. Chesnutt effectively uses oral storytelling to advance, in terms of publication and in working toward his mantra of “elevating
Chesnutt’s writing, then, draws on a previously white-dominated genre, but retains black cultural values. Chesnutt effectively tears down the white man’s house with the white man’s tools—dialect fiction—yet builds a new, unique, antiracist structure at the same time. Chesnutt achieves an important revisionist history of slavery, yet also innovates within and revises a white genre. Below, I will show how Chesnutt’s employment of specific respellings and dialect representations, in conjunction with legitimizing oral storytelling as examined above, undercut white plantation fiction writers’ work to project whites as superior. However, as I will show, Chesnutt also newly represents black speech in ways unseen in plantation fiction.

**Eye Dialect, Respellings, and Plantation Fiction Conventions**

Through their plantation stories written after the Civil War, Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page were instrumental in establishing a romantic vision of the antebellum South. Harris and Page framed their works with two narrators: one white, one black. The black narrator relays his stories to a white character, who has either stumbled upon him in Reconstruction or grown up with him on the plantation, and the white character then relays the stories to readers, preserving the first person narrative. Readers receive dual narration, but also receive stories filtered through a white narrator, even though those stories seem to be narrated by a black voice. Harris, Page, and other plantation fiction writers used eye dialect and respellings in the attempt to capture an authentic black voice. Eye dialect, as aforementioned, refers to changes in conventional spellings to indicate a difference in dialect even though the pronunciation of the word is the same; for example “wuz” for “was,” as seen in the passage I will
examine below. Rather than convey a difference in pronunciation, these changes in spelling call attention to a character’s illiteracy. Respellings, on the other hand, are changes in conventional word spellings that indicate a difference in word pronunciation; as in the passage below “gwine” for “going.” Respellings can be used to call attention to differences in literacy, but are usually more accurate in conveying differences in pronunciation of words by region.

Chesnutt employs both eye dialect and respellings in order to convey dialect differences. Because Chesnutt employs eye dialect, one could argue that Chesnutt plays into stereotypes by calling attention to black illiteracy. However, in this section, I argue that in several ways, Chesnutt’s employment of eye dialect and respelling act differently than eye dialect and respellings in white-written plantation fiction. While plantation fiction often calls attention to black illiteracy and ties illiteracy to ignorance, Chesnutt portrays dialect and dialect speakers in a manner that uncouples illiteracy from ignorance. That is, while plantation fiction’s dialect portrayals call attention to supposed black ignorance, Chesnutt works to reveal that achieving equality is not limited to becoming literate. In “Dave’s Neckliss,” Chesnutt reveals several complexities about literacy and its power in the context of slavery.

Although Chesnutt employs eye dialect and respellings in his works, he portrays differences in dialect more consistently than plantation fiction writers such as Thomas Nelson Page. While Page includes both white and black dialects, the way in which Page does so highlights the ignorance of black characters in his work. In Page’s “Mars Chan,” for example, when a black character quotes white characters, the white dialect is different from the black dialect, even though the black character is speaking. Because the black character quotes the white character, the dialogue should be written in the same vernacular as the black character, since the black character is the one speaking. However, Page writes white speech differently
even when the white speech is spoken by a black character. Furthermore, the white dialect is more easily decipherable to readers and contains less instances of eye dialect or respellings. In the passage below, the bold-face words indicate eye dialect or respellings when the black character narrates and the italicized words represent dialect changes when a white character is quoted:

“I don’t know; it is our first sperience,” says Mistis. “We are much ondebted to you, though, suh.”

“Mayn’t I interduce myself?” says he, comin’ up a little closer to we all, an’ meckin’ anurr bow very grand. “I think I may claim to be a kinsman at least of my young Southern cousin here” (meckin’ a bow to Meh Lady whar wuz standin’ lookin’ at him); “I’m half Virginian myself. I am Captain Wilton, the son of Colonel Churchill Wilton, of de ole army,” says he.

“It is impossible,” says Mistis, bowin’ low’n him. “Churchill Wilton was a Virginian, do’ he lived at de Norf; he wuz my husband’s cousin an’ my dear friend.”(He come from New York or somewhar, an’ he had been co’tin’ Mistis same time Marster co’t her. I know him well: he gi’ me a yaller satin weskit; a likely gent’man too, but Marster beat him. You know he gwine do dat.) “But you cannot be his son, nor a Virginian; Virginians never invade Virginia.” (Page 126, emphasis mine)

The bolded and italicized words indicate a glaring difference between the dialect representations of black and white characters in Page’s story even though the black character narrates the whole passage. Here, there are 26 instances of eye dialect and respellings afforded to the black
character, compared to 10 in white dialogue, not counting reordered words to convey dialect difference. While this stark difference could be explained in the difference in the amount of dialogue afforded to each character, even on a sentence level, there are stark differences in the amount of respellings/eye dialect between black and white. For instance, if we examine the first sentence by “Mistis,” who is from the same regional area as the black character, we see that out of 16 words, there are 3 instances of alterations to words to indicate dialect. If we examine the first 16 words that Mistis’ slave utters, there are 6 instances that convey dialect. Here, the amount of dialect doubles when a black character is portrayed as speaking. Furthermore, the last sentence of the passage, spoken by a white character, is free of respellings or eye dialect. Every sentence spoken by the black character contains eye dialect or respellings. This underuse of eye dialect and respellings with white characters could indicate a difference in literacy between the white and black characters, but literacy does not always affect dialect or accents. That is, even literates speak in dialect; no one is essentially without it. Furthermore, the dialect representations should only change when narration changes to another character. The fact that Page depicts white dialect as more decipherable, and affords white dialect less respellings and eye dialect, even when relayed through a black narrator, evokes a perception that whites are superior to blacks, because it highlights supposed black ignorance and illiteracy. According to Jane Walpole, eye dialect “can be linguistically illogical and socially offensive,” something which happens in the passage above, as the instances of eye dialect are arbitrary and inconsistent (Walpole 191).

However, Walpole also indicates that eye dialect can be “dramatically indispensable,” and to Chesnutt, it is (191). Chesnutt, particularly in “Dave’s Neckliss” preserves Julius’s—the black, ex-slave narrator of The Conjure Tales—vernacular, even if he quotes white characters.
This establishes consistency in his portrayal of Julius’s speech, and implicitly exposes the racist assumptions underlying the use of dialect in works like Thomas Nelson Page’s “Mars Chan.” While there are differences between white and black dialect that convey differences in literacy, the dialect differences are also tied to region, which complicates the notion of dialect differences being tied to literacy. For example, when John, the white narrator of *The Conjure Tales* speaks, like the white characters in “Mars Chan,” his speech is easier to read and understand, but he is also from an entirely different region (the North) than Julius (the South), and, as aforementioned Julius attains a certain power and control over readers, and ultimately, over John, through the narratives he shares. Also, if we examine a passage in which Julius quotes white characters from the same region, we see that the dialect is consistently Julius’s dialect, such as in the passage below. Below, Julius quotes a literate white man, but the dialect, unlike in Page’s work, does not shift:

> “Dave, w’en yer en Dilsey gits ready fer ter git married, I ain’ got no rejections. Dey’s a poun’ er so er chawin’ter-backer up at de house, en I reckon yo’ mist’iss kin fine a frock en a ribbin er two fer Dilsey. Youer bofe good niggers, en yer neenter be feared er bein’ sol’ ‘way fum one ernudder long ez I owns dis plantation; en I ‘spec’s ter own it fer a long time yit.” (Chesnutt 94)

In this passage, although Julius quotes his (literate) master, the dialect does not shift to portray the master’s dialect. Rather, Chesnutt remains true to Julius’ speech. By doing so, Chesnutt does not highlight differences in education, which presents a stark contrast to Page’s “Mars Chan.” I do not want to argue that Chesnutt conveys dialect more accurately than Page, in sound or by location; rather, I argue that, as demonstrated above, Chesnutt portrays dialect more consistently than other dialect fiction writers, and therefore undermines dialect differences as indicators of
ignorance. By doing this Chesnutt challenges the work Page and other plantation writers do to establish intellectual hierarchies between whites and blacks in Page’s work.

In “Dave’s Neckliss,” Chesnutt not only works to dismantle ties between dialect and literacy, but also works to show literacy’s power as fluctuating, and even oppressive. “Dave’s Neckliss” centers on a man, Dave, a slave under plantation owner Mars Dugal. Dave loves and intends to marry Dilsey, a fellow slave under Mars Dugal. Dugal, surprisingly, approves of Dave and Dilsey’s marriage, but throughout the story, Dave and Dilsey’s relationship becomes increasingly threatened as, I argue, a result of Dave’s becoming literate. Mars Dugal initially sees Dave as subservient, likely the reason for his approval of Dave and Dilsey’s marriage, as Dugal sees them as “good niggers” and gives them permission to marry (94).

However, Dugal soon finds out that Dave learned how to read the Bible, which, during this time period, was illegal. Importantly, in order to justify his breaking of the law by learning to read, Dave manipulates Dugal when Dugal confronts him with the crime: “Marster, I l’arns dat it’s a sin fer ter steal, er ter lie, er fer ter want w’at doan b’long ter yer; en I l’arns fer ter love de Lawd en ter ‘bey my marster” (92). Here, Dave picks and chooses parts of the Bible to relay to Dugal that Dave knows will appease Dugal to hear, such as Dave’s learning to obey his master (92). Dave manipulates Dugal, avoids punishment, and achieves the opportunity to not only continue reading, but to transmit his knowledge to other slaves on the plantation, as Dugal tells him to teach such lessons to his fellow slaves. Although the story does not specify which parts of the Bible Dave has learned to read, it is important to note that Dave is aware that the outcome of the confrontation with Dugal depends on his answer; the passage indicates that Dave carefully considers his answer before he shares what he’s learned from the Bible. Julius indicates that “Dave wa’n’t no fool,” after which Dave chronicles the “lessons” that he has learned that
appease Dugal. Dugal sees this as an opportunity to use the Bible (literacy) to his own advantage and keep slaves under his control: “So Mars Dugal’ tolle de oberseah fer ter let Dave preach ter de niggers, en tell ‘em w’at wuz in de Bible, en it would he’p ter keep ‘em fum stealin’ er runnin’ erway” (93). However, while Dugal thinks that the Bible (and subsequently, literacy), keeps Dave subjugated, Dave controls what he shares with Dugal and uses his wit and new literacy to his advantage. Throughout this scene, the power of literacy shifts: first, it poses a threat to Dave, then it empowers Dave and threatens Dugal.

The above scene reveals that literacy functions in complex ways: while literacy empowers Dave as a preacher to fellow slaves and threatens Walker’s power over Dave, literacy also poses a threat to Dave. The threat of punishment because of Dave’s literacy overshadows the scene, and it is Dave’s wit, in addition to his literacy, that keeps him from avoiding punishment. That is, literacy both empowers and threatens Dave in this text, and Dave must use wit and manipulation to navigate the threat which his literacy poses to him. Dave’s wit undercuts, at least briefly, white superiority in the text, as Dave acts as a sort of trickster in this scene. Dave uses both the stories that he has presumably read or learned about in addition to his knowledge about the potential consequences of what he will reveal to Dugal. Dave, then, manipulates Dugal by anticipating Dugal’s reaction to Dave’s summary of the Bible. The complex ways in which literacy functions in this text refute that Chesnutt prioritized literacy as the sole way of undercutting white supremacy. Here, in the context of slavery, Chesnutt prioritizes wit and intuitiveness as equally subversive to, if not more subversive than, literacy. In conversation with Chesnutt’s portrayals of dialect, since black dialect in literature is often linked to illiteracy and highlights supposed black ignorance, Chesnutt breaks the link between illiteracy and ignorance in this text. Just as the illiterate Julius, as discussed above, uses alternate ways of
knowing to manipulate literate whites, Dave uses wit and manipulation to buffer the threat which literacy, and literate whites, pose to him. Although literacy certainly can be used to exert and threaten power, Chesnutt shows that literacy can also function as damaging and shows wit as another legitimate way to navigate white threats to black bodies and intelligence.

Chesnutt further reveals literacy’s fluctuating power in his portrayal of the slave overseer, Mars Walker: “Mars Walker…could n’ read ner write” (92). Walker’s illiteracy indicates a hierarchy of power based on literacy. Dugal, as master, is at the top of the hierarchy, followed by Walker, the overseer, followed by Dave. Chesnutt questions this socially constructed system by challenging linguistic hierarchies, which could be assumed to be literate slave master, partially-literate or illiterate overseer, and illiterate slave. Chesnutt blurs these lines by drawing attention to Walker’s illiteracy, which ultimately questions Mars Walker’s linguistic power. Chesnutt portrays Walker as illiterate, as well as points out his economic status, through Julius, “Mars Walker wa’n’t nuffin but a po’ buckrah, en folks said he could n’ read ner write hisse’f” (92). Because Walker is illiterate, the power dynamic shifts when Dave learns how to read the Bible. Walker becomes aware of the potential power shift and readers quickly become aware of his panic: “he did n’ lack ter see a nigger w’at knowed mo d’n he did; so he went en tole Mars Dugal” (92). Here, Walker fears Dave’s literacy because of the potential power shifts. Walker does not want Dave to know more than him, and runs to Dugal to presumably punish Dave for challenging Walker’s power.

When Dave avoids that punishment by manipulating Dugal, Walker continues to look for ways to exert power over Dave. Because Dave is literate and Walker is not, Walker must use his privilege as white, rather than literate, to exert power over Dave, and ultimately ends up punishing Dave for becoming literate. When Wiley, a fellow slave, becomes jealous of Dave’s
relationship with Dilsey, he steals a ham from Dugal’s smoker and frames Dave for the theft. Walker, the overseer, automatically assumes Dave to be the thief, not only because the ham was found in Dave’s cabin, but also because “it wuz des ez [Walker] ‘spected: he did n’b’lieve in dese yer readin’ en prayin’ niggers; it was all ‘pocrisy, en sarve’ Mars Dugal’ right fer ‘lowin Dave ter be readin’ books w’en it wuz ‘g’in de law,” (95). Here, Dave’s literacy condemns him; Walker sees an opportunity to squelch Dave’s threat to him. Walker’s jealousy of Dave’s literacy already established, Walker has been waiting to retaliate—clearly, in this passage, Walker is angry not only that Dave has become literate, but that Dugal has allowed him to do so—it “sarve’ Mars Dugal right” for failing to punish Dave when Walker first went to Dugal (95). Now, Walker sees an opportunity to punish Dave, not for stealing the ham, but for being literate, something which threatens Walker’s position—again, this brings attention to Walker’s illiteracy, which could, but ultimately does not, undermine his privilege as white. Walker feels like he must reinforce his power, and uses the theft as a way to do so, ultimately taking Dave to the blacksmith, who fastens a ham around Dave’s neck with a chain. This action ultimately undermines Dave’s position as a leader among the slaves, who now “piled hard words on him” and did not believe that Dave was innocent (95-96). Fellow slaves even go so far as to make fun of Dave, “‘Wat kine er collar dat nigger got roun’ his neck?’ er, ef dey knowed ‘im, ‘Is yer stole any mo’ hams lately?’ er ‘W’at yer take fer yer neckliss, Dave?’ er some joke er ‘nuther ‘bout dat ham” (97).

Jennifer Harding comments on Dave’s literacy and Walker’s reception of it: “Dave's loss of his identity as a literate and important member of the community, an identity which disintegrates when the overseer burns his Bible, the community turns against him, and all believe he has stolen a ham, leads to madness” (Harding 437). Walker effectively strips Dave of his
position of leadership, and, as Harding notes, his identity, all on the basis of literacy, evidenced also by Walker’s burning of Dave’s Bible. Dave’s status as a literate now carries a detrimental weight, rather than providing an opportunity for uplifting Dave and other slaves. Chesnutt, then, demonstrates the fluctuating power of literacy in his attention to Dave’s literacy, Walker’s illiteracy, and how the two collide and incite conflict. Literacy poses a threat to both characters. Dave’s literacy, while temporarily empowering him, also disempowers him; Walker’s illiteracy, while potentially threatening to his power, is mitigated by his status as white. This exposes literacy’s power as fluctuating, and deconstructs the idea that literacy equals power and illiteracy, often indicated by eye dialect and respellings, equals ignorance.

Literacy continues to pose a threat to Dave throughout the tale. If it is not enough that Walker literally burdens Dave with a ham and strips Dave of any social power he has, Dave eventually ends up dying as a result of his punishment, and, I argue as a result of becoming literate within the slave system. Dave begins to see the ham as part of himself, and Walker has the ham and chain removed. However, Julius indicates “but de ham had be’n on his neck so long dat Dave had sorter got use’ ter it. He look des lack he ‘d los’ sump’n fer a day er so atter de ham wuz tuk off, en did n’ ‘pear ter know w’at ter do wid hisse’f” (98). Dave feels lost without the ham, and proceeds to make a new “necklace” out of rope, tie the ham to it, and hide it under the floor of his cabin (98). When alone, Dave takes the necklace out and puts it on, and wears it to sleep (98). Dave has spent so much time under this punishment that he sees the ham and chain as part of his person, so much so that he eventually views himself as a ham. Here, the punishment—initiated by Walker’s bias against Dave because of Dave’s literacy—becomes so oppressive that Dave, previously objectified by Dugal and Walker, now objectifies himself by equating himself with a piece of meat. He cannot view himself as separate from a piece of meat, and ends up
hanging himself in a meat smoker as a result. This shows that although literacy has the ability to challenge the power dynamic on slave plantations in *The Conjure Tales*, literacy also oppresses, and ultimately kills, which offers a complex view of literacy in the context of slavery. By exposing the complexities of literacy and illiteracy on the plantation—both tied to dialect in plantation fiction—Chesnutt brings a more realistic view of slavery to the table. Chesnutt simultaneously calls attention to the horrors and oppression present in the slave system and opens a dialogue about how literacy functions within that system. Chesnutt reveals that literacy does not function in a simple way: literacy does not equal power nor does it always threaten. Often, literacy both empowers and threatens, and while dialect literature often positions literacy as superior to illiteracy, Chesnutt deconstructs that superiority by revealing moments in which literacy causes damage and by showing the ways that illiterate characters exert power.

Such attention to literacy relates also to my discussion of language and dialect in “Dave’s Neckliss” and *The Conjure Tales* because it shows that Chesnutt’s speech representations do more than garner white attention because of white familiarity of the genre. Many critics claim that Chesnutt exhibited a “middle-class black assimilationist” attitude, asserting that Chesnutt was “estranged” from and “embarrassed of illiterate black countrymen” (Brodhead qtd. in Minnick 78). According to Brodhead and other critics, Chesnutt valued literacy as a means to assimilate into the white world. Chesnutt’s employment of dialect—largely but not always confined to illiterate characters—could evoke stereotypes of illiterate blacks based on these arguments. However, I argue that in Chesnutt’s texts, dialect works as a tool to show how literacy can be used to oppress and that illiteracy can be used to exert power (as in the case with Julius, a speaker of dialect, and the power he exerts over John through oral storytelling). While it could appear that Chesnutt favors literacy as a type of self-advancement, Chesnutt uses both
illiterate (Julius) and literate (John) dialect speakers to demonstrate that achieving equality is more complicated than becoming literate. As I have shown above, Julius, an illiterate character with a heavy, sometimes difficult-to-understand dialect, exerts power over John, a literate Northerner. Dave, a character who started out illiterate, becomes literate and experiences power shifts based on that literacy, as does Walker, another illiterate character. All of these shifts in power dynamics work insist that achieving equality, especially when economic, linguistic, and racial hierarchies exist, cannot be simplified into becoming literate. Dialect, then, while sometimes an indicator of illiteracy, complicates linguistic hierarchies in Chesnutt’s texts. Regardless of what Chesnutt believed, Chesnutt’s texts, particularly “Dave’s Neckliss” evoke that literacy’s role in equal rights is more complex than would be suggested by a binary in which literacy equals power and illiteracy equals ignorance. Chesnutt’s attention to literacy, through his employment of dialect representations in “Dave’s Neckliss,” shows both the uplifting power of literacy and its oppressiveness, as well as a more realistic depiction of slavery.

The “Neckliss”: Metaphors, Duality, and Linguistic Violence

Chesnutt uses dialect as one way to revise history and innovate within the genre of plantation fiction. Although portrayals dialect often seem random or arbitrary, there are several moments in The Conjure Tales and “Dave’s Neckliss” in which word respellings are very deliberate and contain dual meanings; that is, Chesnutt respells words in “Dave’s Neckliss” and The Conjure Tales to signify more than the words’ conventional definitions.
In several of Chesnutt’s plantation tales, slave masters are vehemently against, or, at the very least, are indifferent to, marriages between slaves. However, as Julius tells it in “Dave’s Neckliss,” this is Dugal’s reaction to Dave and Dilsey’s relationship:

Dave, w’en yer en Dilsey gits ready fer ter git married, I ain’ got no rejections. Dey’s a poun’ er so er chawin’ter-backer up at de house, en I reckon yo’ mist’iss kin fine a frock en a ribbin er two fer Dilsey. Youer bofe good niggers, en yer neenter be feared er beiin sol’ ‘way fum one ernudder long ez I owns dis plantation; en I ‘spec’s ter own it fer a long time yit. (94)

Here, linguistically, a number of important things happen. First, Dugal asserts his position of power, even though under the guise of paternalism. Dugal, indicates that he is giving Dave and Dilsey permission to marry and instructs them on how the wedding will play out. Dilsey will have to wear a hand-me-down “frock” and “a ribbin or two” (94). Although Dugal seems benevolent by providing chewing tobacco and a hand-me-down frock, Dugal very clearly controls the fate of Dave and Dilsey’s relationship (94). Dugal even controls whether or not Dilsey wears a dress to their wedding—and implicitly establishes that he can sell Dave and/or Dilsey at any time, should they deviate from the behavior he expects, “Youer bofe good niggers, en yer neeter be feared er beiing sol’ ‘way fum one ernudder” (94). Here, Dugal shows that he has the power to sell Dave and Dilsey and establishes that he dictates their relationship’s fate; Dugal can break them up by selling them away from each other, should he desire, or should they fail to continue to be “good.”

Dugal reinforces his superiority by calling Dave and Dilsey “good niggers.” The Oxford English Dictionary cites the first pejorative use of the word “nigger” in American literature at 1775, but even if we choose to view the word “nigger,” here, as synonymous with “Negro,” or as
a descriptive noun meaning black, the fact that Dugal brings attention to their difference from him reinforces his position as master (Oxford English Dictionary). Dave and Dilsey have to worry about their behavior—whether or not they are being good—and he does not. Here, he affirms that he owns them, they must answer to him, and they must behave according to his rules. Under the guise of a “good master,” Dugal shows a sinister side of slavery—the fact that slave masters could, at any time, break up marriages and families by selling human beings.

Dugal also brings attention to the fact that the plantation could switch ownership, rendering Dave and Dilsey vulnerable, “yer neeter be feared er being sol’ ‘way fum one ernudder, long ez I own dis plantation; and I ‘spec’s ter own it fer a long time yit” (94, emphasis mine). In this part of the passage, a few aspects indicate the fact that Dave and Dilsey’s marriage is tied to and affected by the fate of the plantation. Perhaps the most overt indication of this is the first part of the passage, “yer neeter be feared er being sol’ ‘way fum one ernudder, long as I own dis plantation” (94, emphasis mine). Here, Dugal implicitly states that should the plantation change in ownership, Dave and Dilsey might be sold away from one another. This underlying threat also shows Dugal’s manipulation of Dave and Dilsey: he attempts to paint himself as the good master by indicating there are others out there who would sell them, which implicitly demands Dave and Dilsey’s gratitude. Even though Dugal participates in a system that subjugates Dave and Dilsey, Dave and Dilsey, from Dugal’s perspective, should be grateful to him for allowing them to marry and remain (in slavery) on his plantation.

An important aspect of this passage is the word “spec’s.” Readers can presume that Chesnutt uses this word in lieu of “expect” to convey a dialect difference. The word “expect”, in this use, can be defined as “to look forward to (an event), or regard (it) as about to happen; to anticipate the occurrence of” (Oxford English Dictionary). Expect can also be defined as “to look
forward to as one’s goal,” in this context (Oxford English Dictionary). Both of these definitions convey a sense of uncertainty—just because Dugal “expects” something to happen, does not mean it will. Dugal fails to definitively say that he will always own the plantation, or that Dave and Dilsey will never have the chance of a broken marriage as part of the slavery system.

Furthermore, Chesnutt’s respelling of “expects” as “spec’s” is more closely reminiscent to the word “speculate” in spelling and sound, which has an even more uncertain meaning: “to observe or view mentally; to consider, to examine or reflect with close attention; to contemplate, to theorize upon;” or, more tellingly, “to engage in the buying and selling of commodities or effects in order to profit” (Oxford English Dictionary). In this passage, “spec’s” functions in several ways; “spec’s” does not just indicate a dialect difference, but also signals threats to slave marriages. Importantly, the respelling also signals meanings of “speculate” which parallel common practices in the plantation system; that is, “spec’s” signals the buying, selling, and commoditization of blacks for white profit. In this way, Chesnutt does highlight black ignorance, but rather, employs a system of dual signage through his portrayal of Julius’ dialect.

In the passage above, Dugal adds that he thinks he will be the owner of the plantation for “a long time yet,” which implies that his ownership will eventually cease, whether through selling the plantation, his death, or other unpredicted circumstances. In Chesnutt’s mimicry of plantation fiction, he posits Mars Dugal as a “good master,” but implies a more sinister side to Dugal through the dialogue Chesnutt affords him. The linguistic choices in this passage, then—from the paternalistic tone of the passage and the use of the term “good niggers,” to the implications of Dugal’s dialogue—implicitly reference the instability of slave marriages and show the threat that slavery posed to families and relationships.
Chesnutt also does important work in recontextualizing the term “nigger.” When Dugal learns of Dave’s ability to read and confronts Dave, as examined above, Dave manipulates Dugal into seeing a benefit, rather than a threat, in Dave’s becoming literate: “Dave wa’n’t no fool, ef he wuz a nigger, en sezee: ‘Marster, I l’arns dat it’s a sin fer ter steal, er ter lie, er fer ter want w’at doan b’long ter yer; en I l’arns fer ter love de Lawd en ter ‘bey my marster” (92). Here, Chesnutt does a few important things in his depiction of Dave. Chesnutt first acknowledges Dave’s position as a slave, but questions the term “nigger” as descriptive of Dave through the fragment, “ef he wuz” (92). The use of “if”, here, indicates uncertainty, which deconstructs “nigger” as a qualifier of Dave, establishing Dave as more than the term’s definition, if the term is used pejoratively. Further, the phrase “if he wuz” could be assumed to mean “even if he was.” The surface meaning of this phrase, “he wasn’t a fool even if he was a nigger” could be taken pejoratively or descriptively; however, the phrase demonstrates a deeper meaning. Julius points out Dave’s intelligence and ability to think critically, which breaks the stereotype of black ignorance. Chesnutt removes pejorative connotations around the word by indicating that “Dave wa’n’t no fool,” (92). Conventionally, whites use the term “nigger” to dehumanize blacks as ignorant or bestial in attempts to establish whiteness as superior to blackness. The fact that Julius questions Dave’s status as a nigger and highlights Dave’s intelligence questions Dave as inhabiting the term while simultaneously deconstructing it, if we see “nigger” as indicating blackness rather than ignorance. If Dave “wuz a nigger”—that is, if he is black—he isn’t a fool; Chesnutt, here, strips white efforts to define blackness as ignorance by showing Dave’s control of narrative and the power he exerts over the whites around him, whether or not whites choose to view him as a “nigger.”
Chesnutt also does important work regarding the word “neckliss.” In “Dave’s Neckliss,” Chesnutt respells the word “neckliss” to convey a difference in dialect. However, the respelling of “necklace” as “neckliss” works to create a new term, new definitions, and new significations and implications of “necklace.” Conventionally, necklace is taken to refer to a piece of jewelry hung around the neck. In the story, the “neckliss” holds several meanings, all of them divergent from the conventional meaning. “Neckliss” is an ironic term; while Dave’s “necklace” imitates the physical structure of jewelry, it burdens Dave and eventually, a noose and Dave’s corpse becomes the necklace in question—hardly jewelry. First, the term “neckliss” refers to the ham-chain that Dave must carry as punishment for stealing, a crime he didn’t commit. Walker takes Dave to a blacksmith and has a ham fastened to a chain to be carried around Dave’s neck, to which the term “neckliss” refers. Chesnutt’s respelling of this word not only calls attention to it—indeed, titling the work “Dave’s Neckliss” already calls enough attention to it—but also allows Chesnutt to complicate the functions of eye dialect.

The words “necklace” and “neckliss” evoke the same sound when read. This qualifies “neckliss” as eye dialect, then, since the respelling is unnecessary beyond conveying dialect (and by proxy, educational) differences. Plantation fiction writers largely relied on arbitrary word respellings to convey dialect difference; on the surface, “neckliss” could evoke similar arbitrariness because of its closeness in sound to “neckless.” However, in this case, the respelling makes sense because the definition of “neckliss,” while reminiscent in image of “necklace,” differs from it. The definition of necklace/neckliss takes on an ironic, tragic meaning throughout the story, eventually connoting Dave’s death and symbolizing lynching—as “necklace” would traditionally connote jewelry, adornment, and even wealth, “neckliss” signals subjugation, dehumanization, burdening, lynching, and suicide.
Harding explores the multiple meanings of “neckliss”:

The differences in structure between the concepts of punishment and jewelry—a person wears a necklace as a voluntary adornment which causes no pain, whereas Dave is wearing his putrid ham involuntarily and with much discomfort—leads to an emergent ironic reading when the ham on a chain (heavy, putrid, painful) and the necklace (light, pretty, accessorizing) are brought together. The metaphoric blend of visually similar objects that entail such different implications further emphasizes the distress that this chained ham and the slaves' rejection causes Dave. Since we learn that Dave is innocent of the theft, the contrast between this putrid ham and a necklace seems even worse given the fact that the punishment was unwarranted. (Harding 434)

“Neckliss,” then, is a pun—it looks and sounds similar to “necklace,” but signals different, much more sinister definitions. Chesnutt uses the respelling of necklace as an opportunity to explore the realities of life as a slave—here, the respelling transcends eye dialect; it serves alternate purposes beyond showing dialect difference between Julius and John, namely ironizing “necklace” and ultimately revealing the ugliness of plantation life.

Dave’s fellow slaves refer to the “neckliss” as a collar: “W’at kine er collar dat nigger got roun’ his neck?” (97). While “collar” can connote a fairly neutral object, such as the neck of a shirt, it also carries meanings that indicate control and subjugation: “a band put round the neck of a dog or other animal, as a means of control or identification,” and “a band of iron or other metal fixed round the neck of prisoners, worn as a badge of servitude, etc” (Oxford English Dictionary). Here, Chesnutt points to Walker’s power over Dave. Dave is either akin to an animal or a prisoner, and Walker effectively “controls” him and forces Dave into wearing a
“badge of servitude” or sorts, as a punishment. Here, Walker reinforces his power as overseer, and Chesnutt uses the word collar, refers to the neckliss, as a way of signaling these power dynamics.

Besides “collar,” “neckliss” also means “chain,” as used in the passage, “de plantation blacksmith, fasten a chain . . . roun Dave’s neck” (95). Beyond the literal meaning of chain as “a connected series of links,” chain also means “to restrain or fetter, confinement, imprisonment, captivity, a binding or restraining force which prevents freedom of action” (Oxford English Dictionary). The chain in this context, then, is connection of links, but also works as a fetter:

> He had wrap’ de chain roun’ wid a rag, so it did n’ hurt his neck, but w’eneber he went ter wuk, dat ham would be in his way; he had ter do his task, howsomedever, des de sam ez ef he did n’ hab de ham. W’eneber he went ter lay down, dat ham would be in de way. Ef he turn ober in his sleep, dat ham would be tuggin’ at his neck. It wuz de las’ thing he seed at night, en de fus thing he seed in de mawnin’. (Chesnutt 97)

In this scene, the neckliss burdens and restrain Dave. The chain (neckliss) reinforces Dave’s position as subject to white control, as whites not only place the chain on him, but also expect him to work as if he does not have the chain, as the passage above indicates. Later in the story, however, the chain becomes the ultimate “binding, restraining force,” as it causes Dave to lose his identity as human and start to see himself as a piece of ham. Dave becomes literally objectified by the chain, and ultimately, the slave system, for which the chain and ham become a metaphor. Because of this objectification, any “freedom of action” that Dave has becomes restrained through his death—the result of the neckliss, collar, chain, and ultimately, racist structures such as slavery.
While “neckliss” refers to Dave’s punishment and the physical chain around his neck, neckliss also signifies the burdens which the plantation system placed on blacks. Swift and Mamoser address the ham as a larger metaphor for the Biblical curse of Ham, which they assert helped to justify slavery. I argue that the ham not only makes metaphorical Biblical references, but the ham and chain “neckliss” work together to convey the systematic subjugation and objectification of blacks under the slave system. Harding explores the multiple avenues that “ham” as metaphor in this story takes, one being Chesnutt’s allusion to and complication of the stereotype of slaves’ appetite for ham, as we also saw in Julius’ storytelling (Harding 431). “Ham” in the story can also be metaphorical for Dave’s body, equating him to an animal (432). Dave is treated as less than human, and ultimately sees himself as such (434). Harding’s arguments support the idea that the ham “neckliss” can act as a metaphor depicting the slave system as a whole—Dave’s “neckliss” (slavery), dehumanizes, subjugates, restrains, and kills, as Dave ends up hanging himself in the meat smoker, at which point, the word “neckliss” takes on the meaning of “noose.”

This definition, in particular, is important, as an outdated definition of necklace is, in fact “a hangman’s noose,” and can also refer to lynching (Oxford English Dictionary). The “neckliss” in “Dave’s Neckliss” functions as a hangman’s noose and is also reminiscent of lynching; however, in contrast to lynching and being hung by a hangman, Dave hangs himself. This contrast to “necklace” is important, yet subtle. In the story:

Hanging functions doubly as the way to prepare ham for consumption, and as a form of suicide. Julius eventually finds Dave hanging in the smokehouse. The noose with which Dave hangs himself is another "necklace" that blends a third image with the existing "neckliss"/necklace metaphor. The visual similarity
between the ham on a chain, and a necklace with a pendant, is now mapped yet again to another concept in which the visually similar object is a noose, with Dave's body hanging down like the ham or pendant in the other images (Harding 434-435)

Harding explores several meanings of “neckliss” and how it acts as a metaphor for “necklace.” Harding implicitly acknowledges that the respelling of “neckliss” is deliberate to indicate deeper meanings. “Neckliss,” rather than an arbitrary instance of dialect, signals meanings to readers other than “necklace’s” conventional meanings. “Neckliss” functions on several levels to reveal the horrors of slavery. Neckliss becomes a unique word which carries unique definitions; all at once, it is the physically burdensome chain and ham, it is an object which separates Dave from his community—Dilsey, his love interest included—it is the hangman’s noose, it is representative of the plantation system and white supremacy, and in all of this, as well as in its respelling, it is the foil of “necklace.” Linguistically, “neckliss” disrupts the conventional spelling of “necklace” as well as redefines it and ironizes it. The second half of “neckliss”—“liss,” a seemingly arbitrary misspelling—breaks up and foils the parallel “lace” in “necklace.” “Lace” is beautiful, decorative, and delicate. “Liss” disrupts the conventional spelling of “necklace” and changes its appearance on the page. As the neckliss in the story inflicts violence on the body, so does “neckliss” inflict violence on “necklace.” Chesnutt, in levelling linguistic violence on “necklace” under the guise of eye dialect, challenges the paternalistic, exaggerated minstrel tropes of plantation fiction. That is, Chesnutt reveals the violent implications of “neckliss” and breaks up the conventional spelling of “necklace,” not to relay differences in word pronunciations between dialect speakers or highlight black illiteracy, but to reveal the horrors of slavery.
“Dave’s Neckliss” is a complex narrative which explores the ugly dimensions of slavery while working to undermine stereotypes and romantic visions of the South. “Dave’s Neckliss,” with Chesnutt’s attention to detail in depicting dialect, illiteracy and literacy, and his foregrounding of oral storytelling as important for self-advancement, is rich with metaphor and instrumental in the act of racial formation. Through writing this particular story, Chesnutt offers an alternate history to the damaging narrative put forth by white writers of dialect fiction, and participates in, albeit through the written word, the act of oral storytelling. Further, Chesnutt uses dialect to dually signify the circumstances under slavery rather than highlight black ignorance, an important innovation to the plantation fiction genre. Chesnutt does not assimilate into a traditionally white genre, but draws on it and innovates within it. In effect, he forges a genre of his own, and works to dismantle a genre traditionally used to demean blacks. In his Conjure Tales, Chesnutt creates a space for black voices—literate and illiterate—that generates an appreciation for, rather than a condemnation of black speech, oral storytelling, and tricksterism. Further, Chesnutt’s dual signification in his portrayals of black dialect offer an alternate historical narrative; Chesnutt uses dialect as a tool to signify that slavery was not the benevolent paternalistic system cast by plantation fiction, but a system of subjugation, oppression, and violence.
CHAPTER 2: LINGUISTIC DUALITY IN THE MARROW OF TRADITION

Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* is generally understood to be an important account depicting the white supremacist psychology that led to the Wilmington Massacre of 1898 (Sundquist vii-xi). Chesnutt sets the novel in the fictional Wellington circa 1898, and from the beginning of the novel, Chesnutt foregrounds racial tensions; the first chapter, conveyed largely in black dialect, reveals miscegenation between a master and his slave. Miscegenation runs as a major theme throughout *The Marrow of Tradition* and reveals sexual power dynamics in master-slave relationships as well as the resulting challenges to blacks—women, children, and men—posed by whites around them. In addition to miscegenation, early on in the novel, Chesnutt reveals tensions between black and white news presses; in other words, Chesnutt shows tensions between competing narratives to define racial experiences. When combined with the themes of miscegenation and the perceived black threat to white female bodies, the inability of whites in the novel to reinforce themselves as superior, much as in the nonfictional Wilmington Massacre, eventually incites violence: a near-lynching, the murder of several blacks, and white deaths as a result of black resistance to the riot.

Both historically and in the novel, white claims of racial superiority over blacks often depended on language, specifically on the white representations of black speech examined in Chapter 1, and on representations of speech in press, legal language, signs, and rumors. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt establishes language, particularly, the written word and literacy, as a powerful force that whites can use to exert dominance. However, Chesnutt also shows how blacks can undercut that dominance through several linguistic avenues. In the scholarship that addresses dialect representations in *The Marrow of Tradition*—most scholarship on Chesnutt’s employment of black dialect focuses largely on *The Conjure Tales*—critics often argue that
Chesnutt prioritizes literacy as a means of undermining white supremacy; LeRoi Jones, for instance, called Chesnutt’s writing “embarrassing and inverted paternalism” (qtd. in Finseth 8). The scholarship on *The Conjure Tales*, Chesnutt’s “dialect tales,” as I examined in Chapter 1, also charges Chesnutt with “simply catering to a white audience by recycling exaggerated forms of black speech” (Finseth 9).

More recently, Ian Finseth has brought attention to the role of dialect in *The Marrow of Tradition*—one of few scholars to look beyond what could pass for exaggerated minstrel speech in the book. Finseth makes important observations regarding dialect (and other linguistic) representations in *The Marrow of Tradition*, ultimately showing that linguistic multivocality in the novel serves a larger purpose than drawing in a white audience or establishing literacy and assimilation as the means of black advancement. In this chapter I build on Finseth’s ideas about dialect functions in the novel. Finseth focuses on how Chesnutt’s “linguistic realism” erases the color line, which is certainly true and important. However, he overlooks other important functions of the dialect in the text, namely, the role of re- and mis- spellings. I want to add that Chesnutt employs unique representations of dialect—often purposeful misspellings—to shift dialect conventions in American literature. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt not only challenges dominant historical narratives, but also forges a unique space for several black voices while changing portrayals of black speech. In this chapter, I will show how Chesnutt works to legitimate the voices of uneducated black characters; in similar ways as Chesnutt works in *The Conjure Tales* to dismantle minstrel tropes, I argue that Chesnutt uses specific dialect respellings to demonstrate alternate, unique ways of knowing, understanding, signifying, and ultimately, resisting.
Orality, Dialect, and Making Meaning

Chesnutt’s retelling of the Wilmington Massacre functions on many levels to challenge dominant white narratives. In the same breath as Chesnutt himself challenges white supremacy, he foregrounds other types of black resistance, one being oral storytelling. According to Finseth, Chesnutt rewrites the events of the Wilmington massacre by drawing on the stories of those who “lived to tell the tale” (Finseth 8). Chesnutt’s use of the words of survivors effectively insists that oral histories are real, legitimate alternatives to dominant white narratives (8). As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, representing black speech was key in depicting black oral storytelling during the nineteenth century. Dialect fiction writers attempted to capture black voices by highlighting differences in dialect between blacks and whites through the trope of an uneducated black storyteller. Rather than enforce black orality as an alternate, legitimate way of making and sharing knowledge, plantation fiction highlighted educational differences between whites and blacks, thereby positioning blacks as ignorant. Chesnutt, on the other hand, employs dialect not to highlight differences in education, but as a way to forge more realistic histories. Additionally, Chesnutt uses dialect to signify meanings outside of the conventional meanings of the words the dialect is written to represent, which I will examine throughout this chapter.

In Chapter 1 of the novel, Chesnutt introduces Jane, an ex-slave and long-time servant of the white Carteret family. The Carteret family is a focal point of The Marrow of Tradition, and key in revealing the themes of miscegenation that prevail the novel. Jane, their servant, is illiterate and demonstrates several characteristics of a minstrel figure. Chesnutt, though, uses Jane to legitimize black oral storytelling, and subsequently, dialect speaking. Although an unnamed omniscient narrator introduces the readers to the story, Jane, called “Mammy Jane” throughout the novel, functions as a dual narrator of Chapter 1. That is, Jane narrates the
majority of the chapter. Jane’s narration interrupts the overarching narrative, causing readers to slow in their reading of the text. Chesnutt writes the overarching narrator in Chapter 1 in conventional English: “a dim light was burning. An old black woman, [Jane,] dressed in a gingham frock, with a red bandanna handkerchief coiled around her head by way of turban, was seated by an open window” (Chesnutt 3). Here, the narration reads quickly and positions Jane as a mammy figure—“Uncle Tom’s female equivalent [:] harmless, happy, and sexless”—a common minstrel caricature and black stereotype (Taylor and Austen 259). The narration directly following drastically changes, both establishing Jane as a dialect—and purportedly illiterate—speaker, and commanding close attention to her narrative from readers:

“Now look a-hyuh, Doctuh Price . . . you don’ wanter come talkin’ none er yo’ foolishness ‘bout my not takin’ keer er Mis’ livy. She never would a’ said sech a thing! Seven er eight mont’s ago, w’en she sent fer me, I says ter her, says I: Lawd, Lawd, honey! You don’t tell me dat after all dese long w’ary years er waitin de good Lawd is done heared yo’ prayer an’ is gwinte ter sen’ you de chile you be’n wantin so long an’ so bad?” (Chesnutt 3)

This is the first instance in the text in which readers come into contact with a different dialect. Because Jane’s narration so starkly contrasts the previous narration, Jane’s narration commands readers’ attention. Jane’s dialect acts as a barrier to Jane’s narrative; that is, because of the dialect, and because Jane is narrating rather than the overarching narrator, readers only have partial access to Jane’s narrative. Jane controls what narrative readers receive and ends up revealing a narrative of miscegenation, oppression, and subjugation. Chesnutt prioritizes Jane’s narrative and narration; without, or without understanding, Jane’s chapter-long narration, readers will lose understanding of the rest of the plot. Chesnutt establishes Jane’s narrative as crucial
through its content, but does so in a way which also legitimizes dialect-speaking and (in this case, illiterate) black orality; because Chesnutt employs English that is not “conventional,” he pushes readers to slow down and focus on Jane’s narrative, which prioritizes it.

While the same could be said of plantation fiction—that the unconventional narration ends up legitimizing black orality—plantation fiction shows white paternalism and positions blacks as intellectually inferior. White-written plantation fiction, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, tied dialect speakers to illiteracy and ignorance. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt not only prioritizes uneducated black narratives, but also reveals that achieving equality is more complicated than becoming literate and commanding conventional English. Chesnutt reveals black orality as a means of knowledge-making as well as resistance. Some critics focus on dialect as an indicator of oppression, rather than as a method of resistance. Finseth, for one, focuses on how language oppresses, rather than empowers Jane: “through her, Chesnutt implies that the truth about the South’s history of miscegenation might not be, or cannot be, told in the language of the master” (Finseth 10). Chesnutt does use dialect to present the ugliness of the antebellum and postbellum South, but, I argue, shows dialect speech as an empowering alternative to “conventional” English. Finseth implicitly acknowledges that Chesnutt legitimizes illiterate black speech; he asserts that “the truth-value of dialect represents an antidote to the articulate lies of white society” (10). However, I want to take this argument a step further and say that we should not only value the truth which Jane’s dialect reveals, but the dialect representation itself—a way of speaking that is just as legitimate, if not more so, than articulate/literate “white” speech.

Jane’s vernacular functions as more than an antidote to the “articulate lies of white society” (10); it also serves as a divergence from and a threat to white language. In effect, Jane’s
narration enacts a type of violence on the overarching narrative voice; it disrupts, breaks up, modifies, and controls the standard English of the overarching narrator. As examined in Chapter 1, standard English is conventionally tied to whiteness; that is, conventional English is usually seen as white language, while dialect is usually tied to blackness. Plantation fiction writers were instrumental in solidifying the ties between whiteness and standard English and between blackness in dialect. Chesnutt capitalizes on these ties and uses Jane’s narration to disrupt the overarching, presumably white narration. Further, even if the narrator is not white, Chesnutt disrupts the ties between standard English and whiteness; if the narrator is black, those ties are broken, as standard English is no longer tied to whiteness. The racial background of the omniscient narrator aside, Jane’s dialect still interrupts language readers would take to be white.

Since, as noted in Chapter 1, popular culture (plantation fiction, minstrelsy) worked to hierarchize ways of speaking, readers during this time period might prioritize standard English as a way of speaking, and standard English dominated written texts, despite the surge of dialect representations. Jane’s dialect, then, works to interrupt so-called “white” language; it interrupts the dominant language, calls attention to itself and demands reader attention, and recontextualizes conventional English words.

For example, Chesnutt’s respelling of the word “Lord” as “Lawd,” although conveying dialect difference, could also signify important differences in Jane’s spirituality from white Christianity. Since whites often used Christianity to subjugate blacks, and in particular, attack black sexuality Chesnutt could very well be setting Jane’s spirituality apart from that of whites. Respelling “Lord” as “Lawd” changes the word as well as the meaning of it; rather than use the word “God” or the phrase “my God” as whites tend to say throughout the book, the respelling to sets black spirituality apart from the religious rhetoric whites used to subjugate blacks.
Further reinforcing the dual signification about religion, Chesnutt legitimizes black “superstition.” The word “omen” recurs, as I will examine later on in the chapter, in several variations. In Jane’s chapter, Chesnutt, on the surface, positions Jane as superstitious, which could indicate that he perpetuates stereotypes about black superstition:

Old Mammy Jane, however, was not entirely at ease concerning the child. She had discovered, under its left ear, a small mole, which led her to fear that the child was born for bad luck. Had the baby been black, or yellow, or poor-white, Jane would unhesitatingly have named, as his ultimate fate, a not uncommon form of taking off, usually resultant upon the infraction of certain laws, or, in these swift modern days, upon too violent a departure from established social customs. It was manifestly impossible that a child of such high quality as the grandson of her mistress should die by judicial strangulations; but nevertheless the warning was a serious thing, and not to be lightly disregarded. Not wishing to be considered as a prophet of evil omen, Jane kept her own counsel in regard to this significant discovery. (Chesnutt 10)

In this passage, Jane reads the child’s mole as a death omen, or at the very least, a sign of bad luck to come. Jane then buries a bottle of “mysterious ingredients…as a good luck charm to ward off evil” (11). While this could very clearly indicate Chesnutt’s participation in stereotyping blacks as superstitious—the characterization of Jane as an “Old Mammy,” (10) in conjunction with the significance she places on a mole and the subsequent burial of mysterious materials—Chesnutt ends up legitimizing this superstition. The child in question ends up nearly dying as a result of croup, and needs an operation to prevent his suffocation. Chesnutt implies that the child’s coming down with croup is the result of his father’s associations with white supremacy;
in the above passage, Jane forecasts the end of the novel and projects the child’s possible death by “judicial strangulation” (10). Jane tries to prevent this eventuality, though, with a good luck charm. Although the novel’s end is open as to whether or not the child lives, hope remains for the child, indicating that Jane’s good luck charm worked, or at least had some beneficial effect.

In this passage, Jane’s attention to the child’s body is a kind of reading, treated by the novel as a form of folk literacy not based on the written word. Instead, Jane’s ability to read the child is a skill that generates knowledge unavailable to white characters. In fact, Jane hides this knowledge from her white “mistress.” Granted, Jane’s motivations for withholding this narrative from the whites around her stem from a fear of being labeled a “prophet of evil omen,” or implicitly, as superstitious (10). Jane, then, does not want to be reduced to a stereotype; in effect, she preserves her dignity through controlling white access to this information. Whatever her motivations, though, Jane, and the conjure woman that she visits, hold knowledge—that is, ways of reading and meaning-making—that whites cannot access. Here, black spirituality again diverges from white spirituality. Chesnutt legitimizes this spirituality and ultimately, other ways of knowing and literacy through Jane. Chesnutt, then, undercuts literacy and assimilation as ways of achieving equality. At the same time, Chesnutt uncouples literacy from dialect difference by revealing Jane as literate in ways other than the conventional ability to read and write. That is, while Jane is illiterate, as indicated by her dialect, Jane is also intuitive and intelligent. Jane is not ignorant; rather, Jane possesses several types of knowledge—from the knowledge of her master’s miscegenation and sexual exploitation of his slaves to the intuition about the fate of her now-mistress’s child. Jane breaks the minstrel stereotype of black ignorance and rises above the minstrel caricature of the unintelligent, desexualized mammy.
Post-Civil War Slavery, as Signified by Dialect

In the introduction to the *Penguin Classics* Edition of *The Marrow of Tradition*, Eric Sundquist notes that the antebellum and post Reconstruction worlds coexist in the novel (xxi). Similarly, the antebellum and post Reconstruction worlds coexisted in the historical period in which the novel takes place. Gene Gorman, in his study of convict labor and its presence in *The Marrow of Tradition* argues that in many ways, for blacks, Reconstruction was “worse than slavery” in that legislation targeted blacks, ultimately increasing rates of black imprisonment (Gorman 5). In criminalizing blackness, whites continued to build America through unpaid, black labor, although this time in chain gangs rather than on the plantation (3-5). However, Chesnutt shows that the fusion of the antebellum and postbellum worlds was not limited to chain gang labor. Chesnutt draws attention to the fact that the exploitation of black bodies that was the slave system continued into the post-Reconstruction South; while revealing this exploitation, Chesnutt also points to forms of black resistance to it. In this section, I examine how dialect signifies such exploitation and forms of black resistance to that exploitation.

Sandy, Mr. Delamere’s black servant demonstrates but ultimately refutes the stereotypes of black dog-like fidelity and subservience. Sandy’s speech also signals post-Reconstruction as a kind of continuation of slavery, which I will examine below. Chesnutt introduces readers to Sandy early on in the novel, at a christening party for the newly-born Theodore Carteret. Upon arriving to the party, Sandy seems genuinely concerned with Delamere’s health: “This attendant gave his arm respectfully to the old gentleman, who leaned upon it heavily, but with as little *appearance of* dependence as possible. The servant, assuming a similar unconsciousness of the weight upon his arm, assisted the old gentleman carefully up the steps” (Chesnutt 14, emphasis mine). Here, Chesnutt foregrounds Sandy’s fidelity to Delamere by foregrounding Sandy’s
physical support of Delamere, and yet Chesnutt also highlights Delamere’s dependence on Sandy. Delamere does not want to appear dependent on Sandy, yet very much is, as he is “painfully weak in the legs,” elderly, and hard of hearing (13-14). Appearing dependent on Sandy would threaten Delamere’s position and power over Sandy as a white man, yet Chesnutt questions the extent of Delamere’s white superiority by calling attention to the fact that he is dependent on Sandy.

Later in this passage, Mrs. Ochiltree, another seemingly powerful white character in the novel, utilizes Sandy as a butler, because her own butler has been injured after falling. In the process Ochiltree demeans blacks—“negroes are so careless!”—and Delamere speaks for Sandy in equally demeaning language: “Sandy will be pleased to serve you, if you desire it, to the best of his poor knowledge” (14-15). Sandy, though, does not outright resist Ochiltree and Delemare’s commoditization of him: “Ef Mis’ Ochiltree ain’ gwine ter need me fer de nex’ fifteen minutes, I kin ride back home in de’ ca’ige and dress myse’f suitable fer de occasion, suh” (15). In fact, Sandy even indicates that he would like to be dressed more suitably for the occasion, as he is dressed for a prayer-meeting that he is now going to miss (15). On the surface, Sandy’s actions perpetuate the stereotype of the Uncle Tom. Sandy does not question white authority; he is subservient.

Chesnutt uses Sandy’s dialect speech to subtly indicate that Sandy is not in fact subservient, and that Sandy connects his servitude to slavery. When examined more closely, this scene reflects how Chesnutt challenges white supremacy through his linguistic choices. In the passage, Sandy indicates that he can “ride back home in de ca’ige” (Chesnutt 15). While readers know that “ca’ige” refers to carriage, the word looks like “cage,” which is reminiscent of white oppression of blacks. Here, Chesnutt’s representation of dialect does not simply relay the sounds
of black vernacular, but also uses the sight and sound of the word “ca’ige” to highlight links between Southern gentility and slavery—not just the “slavery” of the antebellum South, but that of Reconstruction. Mr. Delamere, the wealthy, white man, can be seen as Sandy’s master, who inhabits the qualities of the Southern gentleman. Although kind to Sandy, Mr. Delamere is paternalistic, at best, as we can see in his qualifying of Sandy’s knowledge as “poor” (15). Sandy, as aforementioned, can be seen as a loyal slave figure. Major Carteret, one of the key white figures in the novel who owns a newspaper press, classifies Sandy as a “good Negro” because of his fidelity, “No doubt Sandy is an exceptionally good Negro—he might well be, for he has had the benefit of your example all his life—and we know he is a faithful servant” (26). Here, Sandy is an “exceptionally good Negro” because he is a faithful servant, while white characters see threats in other characters who challenge the power dynamic, such as Dr. Miller, a biracial physician who can be seen as the protagonist of the novel. Sandy, although not having assimilated into the white world by way of becoming educated as Dr. Miller has, presents a threat to Delamere, who is dependent on Sandy. Furthermore, because his intelligence is tied to his speech, Sandy demonstrates ways of knowing outside of conventional education. The passage shows that Sandy has served Delamere his entire life, which no doubt acts as a “cage” to Sandy. Sandy signals that Reconstruction is parallel to, if not worse than, slavery, while Chesnutt’s use of dialect simultaneously challenges the idea of Southern paternalism. Sandy’s status as a “good Negro” is conditional on his servitude to whites, and Chesnutt, through the way that he respells carriage, simultaneously dismantles the idea of Southern gentility and shows the “good Negro” role as a type of imprisonment.

Jerry, a worker in Carteret’s newspaper press, also conflates the antebellum and postbellum worlds linguistically. Jerry, on the surface, also demonstrates minstrel stereotypes:
Jerry is an illiterate black worker in a white-owned newspaper press, and at several times, acts as the faithful, ignorant, “good Negro.” Jerry calls his white employer, Carteret, his master. Not only does Jerry call Carteret master in a time when slavery is outlawed, but Carteret and whites around him still treat Jerry as a commodity. Carteret passes Jerry to other whites who he does not work for, as a slave master might sell or borrow out slaves. This brings to mind the consequences of commodifying blacks; by treating blacks as property, whites could sell, trade, or even murder their slaves. Jerry’s naming of Carteret as master, then, equates him to a slave owner, and he acts as one.

An important facet of this master/slave dynamic between Carteret and Jerry is not just the fact that Jerry calls him “master,” but how Chesnutt writes this naming. To be clearer, Chesnutt, in order to convey Jerry’s dialect difference to whites, respells “master” as “marster,” a convention of most dialect fiction. This respelling, though, takes on a new significance—dual signing potential—in this context. The word “marster,” then, could be deconstructed into “mar-ster,” or, “one who mars.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word mar as to “impair the appearance of, disfigure, [or to] impair the quality of, spoil,” (Oxford English Dictionary). As a white, and racist, character, Carteret is both Jerry’s master and “marster,” meaning one who “spoils,” or “impairs the quality of” Jerry’s life, and Jerry’s linguistic ability. Carteret is instrumental in marring Jerry’s life; indeed, the threat of lynching, violence, beatings and burning is ever present for Jerry. While working under Carteret, Jerry is continually exposed to Carteret’s white supremacist ideas, especially when McBane, a fellow white supremacist and friend of Carteret’s, arrives. Jerry is constantly reminded that “impudent nigger[s] ought to be horsewhipped and run out of town,” that whites are among “[a] race of weaklings,” and that blacks should be kept in order by lynching (Chesnutt 85-86). Not only does Jerry not have access
to political language as a result of Carteret’s exploitation, Jerry also remains under the threat of whipping and lynching. Such threats mar Jerry’s autonomy; in effect, Jerry is pushed into the role of the good Negro in order to avoid violent punishment. Furthermore, Jerry dies as a result of Carteret and McBane’s tirades. Carteret and McBane incite a near lynching, which develops into a riot in which Jerry dies. Jerry, trapped in a burning building, calls out for Carteret to acknowledge him and save him to no avail (307). Jerry dies a death reminiscent of the threat posed to him: lynching. Throughout the novel, the chant “burn the nigger” prevails from white mouths, and in the end, Jerry is burned to death (182). While the good Negro role allows Jerry to survive temporarily, Carteret’s white supremacist ideas initiate a riot that kills Jerry; Carteret mars Jerry to the point in which he dies. Chesnutt’s focus on this marring, through his dialect depiction of Jerry, problematizes the continued efforts to keep blacks enslaved in the postbellum United States.

**Black Resistance: Linguistic Signs, Alternate Meanings, and Militancy**

In addition to revealing that the postbellum United States effectively continued rather than removed the slave system, Chesnutt also uses Jerry to, like Jane, legitimize alternate ways of knowing and provide black resistance to white supremacist structures. Chesnutt seemingly characterizes Jerry as ignorant:

Jerry could hear the words ‘vote,’ ‘franchise,’…and other expressions which marked the general tenor of the talk, though he could not follow it all—partly because he could not hear everything distinctly, partly because of certain
limitations which nature had placed in the way of Jerry’s understanding anything very difficult or abstruse. (37)

This passage characterizes Jerry as unable to interpret legal language, and on the surface, establishes him as ignorant by indicating that “nature had placed [certain limitations] in the way” of his understanding (37). This scene, however, shifts the meaning of “nature” to mean not essential ignorance, but limitations placed by whites on Jerry. Since Jerry has been barred from participating in political discourse, Jerry fails to understand the language of politics rather than the concept of politics.

Even though Jerry is purportedly illiterate, later in this scene, Chesnutt shows Jerry’s capabilities to not only draw conclusions about McBane (Carteret’s friend/acquaintance) and Carteret’s conversation, but also to manipulate them. Jerry ultimately uses McBane and Carteret’s assumptions about blackness against them as a form of black resistance. Following the above passage, McBane refers to blacks “with alarming frequency, [as] ‘the damned niggers,’” and also proposes a toast to “‘no nigger domination’” (36-37). After, McBane asks Carteret to “use” Jerry, “if [Carteret] will permit [him]” and sends him on an errand for liquor (38). Again, we see commoditization of blacks; whites shift Jerry around at their whim. However, Jerry demonstrates both that he is not ignorant and that he is able to resist white supremacist efforts:

‘No nigger damnation!’ Dat soun’s all right. I’m sho’ dere ain’ no nigger I knows w’at wants damnation...but ef dat one-eyed Cap’n McBane got anything ter do wid it, w’atever it is, it don’ mean no good fer de niggers—damnation’d be better fer ‘em dan dat Cap’n McBane! He looks at a nigger lack he could jes’ eat ‘im alive (39).
Even though Jerry does not understand the political language in the scene, the above passage demonstrates that Jerry does understand the implications of white supremacy in the political sphere and makes an important connection between “domination” and “damnation.” For Jerry, damnation would be better for blacks than to be dominated by McBane and other whites. Although Jerry misnames the word “domination” in this text because of his illiteracy, Jerry still understands the implication of white political control. This could be written off as a humorous engagement in the minstrel trope of exaggerating black speech; however, when examined closely, this misnomer is part of a dual system of signing. Jerry says “damnation,” but initiates a dialogue about the implications of the panic about “Negro domination” during this time period. The fear of “Negro domination” was widespread, but particularly “virulent…in the North Carolina press,” where black “lawlessness…and alleged sexual crimes” were highlighted (Sundquist ix). The fear of Negro domination helped incite the massacre. It is no surprise, then, that Jerry proclaims “nigger damnation” as better for blacks than McBane’s white supremacist agendas. This misspelling, then, at the same time as it conveys dialect difference, signals racial dialogues; Jerry expresses his concerns in language different from whites, but demonstrates that he is equally as knowledgeable about current racial structures and the consequences of white panic about black domination of political structures.

Another instance in which Chesnutt dually signs through Jerry’s dialect is in Jerry’s description of McBane: “Dey says he got dat eye knock’ out tryin’ ter whip a cullud’ ‘oman,” (35). In this passage, Jerry calls attention to McBane’s violence towards blacks, namely black women, but Jerry also acknowledges that woman’s resistance, on two levels: first, at the level of storytelling, by informing readers that the woman knocked out McBane’s eye in the struggle and second, through the respelling of “woman” as “’oman.” While the dropping of the “w” is
characteristic to portrayals of black vernacular, Chesnutt recontextualizes the respelling. The dropping of the “w” can signal multiple conversations, here. One, in dropping the “w” from “woman” Chesnutt acknowledges loss; the respelling of the word parallels the dehumanization of black women often by white men. Here, the woman loses part of herself; McBane whips the woman, an action which objectifies her. The loss of “w” in “woman” parallels the objectification of the woman. McBane does not see a woman but part of one, as readers do not see “woman” on the page but part of the word.

However, the focus here lies not just in white oppression of blacks. “Oman” signals a reference to the word “omen,” which could also signify the threat, or bad omen that white male bodies posed to black female bodies. The respelling, though, also signifies the threat that the black woman poses to McBane. The woman in question is not submissive, and causes McBane to lose his eye. In effect, the woman is also a bad omen to McBane, who loses not just an eye as a result of black resistance to his supposed white superiority, but dies in the end of the novel as a result of black militant resistance. Respelling the word “woman,” then, signals more than dialect and educational differences between Jerry and white characters; it positions black resistance as not limited to literacy and assimilation.

Interestingly, Chesnutt not only works with black dialect, but also represents white dialect in the novel: “[Jerry] could hear the major...use the word ‘negro’ and...‘the damned niggers,’ while the general’s [Carteret’s] suave tones now and then pronounced the word ‘niggro’—a sort of compromise between the etymology and the vernacular,” (Chesnutt 36). Here, importantly, the narrator steps in and acknowledges vernacular differences between McBane and Carteret. The respelling of “Negro” and “nigger”—or rather, the creation of a new word based on the two—functions to showcase not only differences in dialect between Carteret
and McBane, but also their attempts to distance themselves from blackness. McBane and Carteret distance themselves from blackness through their categorization, naming, terming, and damnation of it. Carteret, specifically, attempts to gloss over his role in white supremacist agendas; while “McBane’s deep voice was quite audible…when he referred to ‘the damned niggers,” Carteret’s “suave tones every now and then pronounced the word ‘niggro’” (36). Here, while McBane’s gruff voice is more audible than Carteret’s soft one, Carteret works to distance himself from his own racial prejudices, all the while still distancing himself from blacks. The word “niggro” highlights this attempt at othering and failure to effectively define blackness. “Niggro” breaks up the words “Negro” and “nigger” linguistically. This is important in the context; McBane and Carteret are having a conversation about squelching “nigger domination” (37). Their conversation is replete with stereotypes about blackness; Carteret and McBane see blacks as contaminants, and will not even shake hands with Jerry, and also believe that Jerry will steal money from them (37). Here, both Carteret and McBane struggle to define blackness outside of their assumptions about it (blacks are thieves, inferior, contaminating). “Niggro,” then, blends “Negro” and “nigger,” which ultimately challenges the fixedness of their meanings. All of the words are references to blackness but do not capture black experiences. The fluctuation in terminology in an attempt to grasp blackness, then, works outside of merely conveying dialect difference.

Finseth analyzes how The Marrow of Tradition evokes a social “code” in its linguistic system/hierarchies,

The printed and spoken words of American culture fundamentally inform the characters’ understanding of themselves and others as “racial” beings, and serve directly to uphold certain patterns of race relations. Metaphorically, the rigid
racial codes of the South are a piece with the logocentrism Chesnutt ascribes to white society; both depend on a severely restricted range of interpretation, on a locking together of signifiers and signifieds by which the words and concepts of “white” and “negro” for example, are made to seem concrete, immutable, transcendent (2).

In other words, “white” and “negro” are static, fixed definitions in the white world. However, Chesnutt complicates that and continually tries to “understand his society’s use of words, to get beneath the surface of racial signs, to expose the role of language in perpetuating oppression, and to demystify the mechanisms of society by which language is disseminated and naturalized” (3). In other words, Chesnutt complicates the fixedness of meaning behind social hierarchies, largely organized and maintained by language. However, Finseth misses how Chesnutt effectively strips all three of these terms of their pejorative meanings through signifying off of the word “nigro.” For one, Carteret is the butt of the joke, here; Chesnutt, through depicting this linguistic mistake and struggle for pronunciation, destabilizes Carteret as a superior figure by having him act as a caricature in this scene. His struggle to express the pejorative delegitimizes his racism; in effect, he grasps for a pejorative that does not exist. In the same breath, Chesnutt conflates, then physically breaks the two terms on the page; he deconstructs white language and white definitions of blackness as he conveys dialect difference between McBane and Carteret. By questioning the legitimacy of these terms, particularly when coming out of white mouths, Chesnutt can not only dismantle stereotypes about blackness, but forge his own definitions of it.

In the same way that Chesnutt questions white definitions of blackness, Chesnutt also questions definitions of whiteness through his respellings; specifically, Chesnutt challenges whiteness through the use of eye dialect in his depiction of Jerry’s speech. As noted in Chapter
white writers of dialect fiction have used eye dialect as a way to project black stereotypes, develop caricatures of blackness, and otherwise marginalize blacks. Eye dialect, in this context, is the respelling or alteration of a word to convey a dialect difference when the pronunciation of the word is not actually different (Malin). Chesnutt employs eye dialect in order to dismantle whiteness as well as blackness. One example of this is, again, in Chesnutt’s representation of Jerry’s speech. After McBane’s toast to “White Supremacy everywhere,” Jerry makes another aside,

Dere’s somethin’ up, sho’s you bawn! ‘No nigger damnation!’ Anybody’d ‘low dey wuz all gwine ter heaven; but I knows better! W’en a passel er w’ite folks gits ter talkin’ bout de niggers lack dem in yander, it’s mo’ lackly dey’re gwine ter ketch somethin’ e’se dan heaven! I got ter keep my eyes open an’ keep up wid w’ats happenin.’ (Chesnutt 39)

In this scene, Chesnutt not only calls attention to white supremacy with his capitalization of the words “White” and “Supremacy,” but when Chesnutt respells white as “w’ite” when Jerry pronounces it. This respelling is significant because the resulting word sounds the same as “white.” That is, there is no dialect difference between Jerry’s and other characters’ pronunciations of white. Rather, what results is a physical break in the word “white” through the use of an apostrophe. This literal break in the word challenges whiteness on the page, especially as it follows the capitalized, imposing, and threatening phrase “White Supremacy.” Here, not only are McBane and Jerry performing racial roles, but the words themselves perform roles on the page. “White Supremacy,” as a phrase, is big, capitalized, imposing, and reinforces McBane’s whiteness. The word “w’ite” is short, barely noticeable, signals a difference in dialect, and reinforces Jerry’s blackness. Here, the words perform both literally on the page and
metaphorically as signifiers for racial “difference.” The word “w’ite” can be seen as eye dialect, and therefore a minstrel exaggeration of black speech, but it can also be seen as another guise under which Jerry (and subsequently Chesnutt) can linguistically wreak havoc on whiteness. The respelling of “w’ite” obliterates, interrupts, and challenges “White Supremacy” on the page with the addition of the apostrophe, which physically breaks the word, and the decapitalization. Chesnutt puts “white” into Jerry’s mouth and he spits it out different, broken, and challenged. Through linguistically breaking up “white,” Chesnutt shows that whiteness (and white supremacy) are not static or fixed entities.

The phrase “White Supremacy” also signifies dually in its performance. Although it seems strong, threatening, and imposing physically, as it is capitalized, repeated, and isolated on the page, and “w’ite” is limited to a paragraph that reads clumsily because of the dialect, Chesnutt also challenges “White Supremacy.” Chesnutt shows that “White Supremacy” is performance, and only performance—a temporary exertion of power using appearances. The mouthpieces behind “White Supremacy” (as a phrase) are Carteret and McBane, and the one who repeats it, “‘White Supremacy everywhere!’” McBane, is particularly violent, usually the one who calls for lynching (38). McBane also, as Jerry describes him, “looks at a nigger lack he could jes’ eat ‘im alive” (38). McBane is imposing and threatening. Further, as Gorman points out, McBane’s racial identity is not actually static (Gorman 11). Gorman points to the scene in the train in which McBane navigates between the white and colored train cars, and explains that although this ability reinforces his white privilege, it also demonstrates McBane’s “uncertain claim of racial superiority” (11). McBane is also perfectly “as comfortable and at home in the colored car as he is in the whites only car” (11). While this can indicate McBane’s comfort because of his white privilege, Gorman argues that “his comfort amidst African
Americans...could seriously damage his already sullied reputation” (11). In other words, McBane’s uncertainty around his claim to racial superiority challenges his static identity as superior as white. McBane’s racial “superiority” then, is only performance, similar to the phrase “White Supremacy.” The fact that McBane, a big, imposing, repugnant figure, utters the phrase equalizes him with the phrase—at once, they are both equally big, imposing, and repugnant. However, the threat to the fixedness of “White Supremacy” and McBane’s power is ever-present. Here, the instability of language and other signing systems, like the body, mirror the turmoil surrounding racial identities in the antebellum United States.

While the train scene provides a window into McBane’s general repulsiveness, the train scene also functions to linguistically challenge white supremacy through Chesnutt’s attention to posted signs that indicate segregated train cars. The sign for the white car is “neatly framed and hung at the end of the car, containing the legend ‘White’ in letters about a foot long, painted in white upon a dark background” (Chesnutt 54). Here, again, the word “White” is capitalized, imposing, overtaking the “dark background” with its color and size. The colored car, however, “was conspicuously labeled at either end with large cards, similar to those in the other car, except they bore the word ‘Colored’ in black letters upon a white background” (56). Here, the word “Colored” functions similarly to “White” in the literal sense—it overtakes its background, commands the viewers’ attention (especially with the multiplicity of signs in the car), and threatens. However, metaphorically, the two signs carry different implications. In the case of the white car, whiteness is reinforced by the sign; the sign is neat, it speaks to white privilege, and it’s only necessary to have one sign—whites know their “place,” and the word “White” on the placard reinforces their feelings of superiority. However, the “Colored” placard functions to not only remind blacks of their place (physically and metaphorically), but also to highlight the threat
of black resistance to whites. The threat of whiteness to blackness is subtle; the white letters overtake the “dark” background (54). That is, the “blackness” is implicitly acknowledged through the adjective “dark” (54). The threat of blackness to whiteness, however, is clearer, as the font is “black upon a white background” (56). Here, the threat to whiteness is explicit; each color is acknowledged with its respective, specific color. Black directly imposes on and threatens white, as symbolized by this placard. Whites very clearly see this threat, and use it to keep blacks in their place. The presence, as well as the color scheme, of multiple signs in the car speaks to the frantic urge to keep blackness out of the white sphere. While the “White” placard reinforces white supremacy, the “Colored” placard threatens it. Chesnutt’s description, that is, of the placard reflects some of the racial anxieties of Reconstruction, and also reflects the oppression of blacks by whites.

This scene introduces Josh Green, a black militant character whose father was killed by the Ku Klux Klan. Green further complicates the “signing system” of the novel (Giles and Lally 266). Finseth sees the scene as an erasure of the color line, as the black and white text are reminiscent of the color line, but are only visible against their respective backgrounds (Finseth 13). This, to Finseth, “denaturalizes racial separateness and white superiority,” because “removed from their immediate context, the words ‘white’ and ‘colored’ would not be visible, would literally not exist” (13). Finseth’s analysis is interesting and compelling, but does not address Chesnutt’s complex ways of storying, reading, and demonstrating black resistance to white supremacy. Josh Green not only represents militant black resistance, but also shows alternate ways of reading, knowing, and knowledge-making.

Green, like Jerry, Sandy, and Jane, is illiterate and speaks in dialect. In numerous conversations with Miller, Miller attempts to squelch Green’s militancy. Miller acts as a
benevolent parent to Green, but Green subverts this paternalism by educating Miller about the Ku Klux Klan. Green asks, his speech marked by dialect, “Does you remember the Ku Klux?” (Chesnutt 111). Miller, speaking in paternalistic, standard English, responds, “Yes, but I was a child at the time, and recollect very little about them. It is a page of history which most people are glad to forget” (111). Green then relays his experiences with the Ku Klux Klan to Miller:

“Yas, suh; I was a chile, too, but I wuz right in it, an’ so I ‘members mo’ erbout it ‘n you does. My mammy an’ daddy lived ‘bout ten miles f’m here, up de river. One night a crowd er w’ite men come ter ou’ house an’ tuck my daddy out an’ shot ‘im ter death, an’ skeered my mammy so she ain’ be’n herse’f f’m dat day ter dis. I wa’n’t mo’ ‘n ten years ole at de time, an’ w’en my mammy seed de w’ite men comin’, she tol’ me ter run. I hid in de bushes an’ seen de whole hing, an’ it wuz branded on my mem’ry, suh, like a red-hot iron bran’s de skin…” (Chesnutt 111)

After Green indicates that the Ku Klux Klan killed his father and traumatized his mother, the omniscient narrator of The Marrow of Tradition steps back in:

[Miller] realized, too, for a moment, the continuity of life, how inseparably the present is worn with the past, how certainly the future will be but the outcome of the present. He had supposed this old wound healed...he knew the timeworn explanation that the Ku-Klux movement, in the main, was merely an ebullition of boyish spirits, begun to amuse young white men by playing upon the fears and superstitions of ignorant negroes. Here, however, was its tragic side,—the old wound still bleeding, the fruit of one tragedy, the seed of another. (Chesnutt 111-112)
In this passage, it is not traditional literacy which transmits knowledge, and ultimately, truth; rather, an illiterate character enlightens a literate character through orality. Prior to this conversation, Miller dismissed Green’s militancy and willingly forgot the history and consequences of the Ku Klux Klan. As Miller works to de-legitimize Green’s militant feelings and resistance, Green not only justifies his militancy, but demonstrates alternate ways of knowing. Green effectively reads this experience; he indicates that he “hid in de bushes an’ seen de whole thing, an’ it wuz branded on my mem’ry, suh, like a red-hot iron bran’ de skin” (111). The shooting of his father and the experience of witnessing it, rather than words, push Green’s resistance to white supremacy. While Miller is educated traditionally and literate, Miller forgets important historical narratives, choosing to believe that resistance means assimilation by white means. Green, on the other hand, reads his experience—it is branded on his memory—and relays the implications of that experience to Miller. Green educates Miller, who, after hearing Green’s history, realizes a more realistic version of history. Rather than dismiss the Ku Klux Klan as unimportant, Miller, at least momentarily, must face the horrors that white supremacy presents. Here, Green forges meaning from his experience; in effect, he reads it, interprets it, understands it, and teaches it to Miller. Miller, as a result, sees a more realistic picture of history as well as alternate ways of knowledge-making and resisting dominant racial structures.

John Reilly posits Josh Green as the novel’s “hero against the grain” (Reilly 37). Green is uneducated, impulsive, and violent, but through him, Chesnutt shows that challenging white supremacy is more complex than becoming educated or assimilating through peaceful means, and even that violence might not necessarily be in direct opposition to education or assimilation. Although Green dies Green is an important character in the book, as he demonstrates a more complex perspective of black experiences during Reconstruction:
We are inclined to polarize ideas of "accommodation" and "self-determination," just as today "integration" is frequently described as opposed to "Black Power." Ideas are not as simple as slogans, however. An active mind contains a complex of subtly graded inclinations and conceptions which are continuously modifying and canceling each other, conflicting and reorganizing themselves. At the beginning of the twentieth century Negroes were by no means lined up in columns thoughtlessly following along behind their champions. Most Negroes tried to think through their fate in their own ways. *The Marrow of Tradition* is Chesnutt's effort to make order and sense out of the experience (Reilly 37).

Here, Reilly speaks to the complexities facing Chesnutt during this time period; he insists that Chesnutt wrestled with means through which to achieve equality. Resistance was not limited to the binary peaceful resistance vs. violence, but rather, a complex maze around and between the two, the utilization of both, the confusion circulating around them. Chesnutt, then, is not “lining up” behind pioneers of peaceful resistance and assimilation into white ways. Rather, Chesnutt uses Green to highlight how peaceful resistance might not always work. While on the surface, it seems as if Chesnutt identifies more with literate, peaceful, and even biracial characters, by highlighting the social and linguistic violence imposed upon characters such as Josh Green, Chesnutt not only justifies Green’s resistance to white supremacy, but also uses him as a type of resistance to white supremacy. Chesnutt reveals Green as a character with legitimate ways of knowing outside of conventional, white education. Green legitimizes the reading of experiences as literacy through his education of the literate character, Miller. Chesnutt, then, legitimizes militant resistance as well as other types of literacy, such as orality or experiential literacy.

Ultimately, violence is not limited to Green, McBane, lynching, or the riot. In other
words, violence in the novel is not only social and physical. Chesnutt’s questioning of the “power of the pen” evidences that. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, the pen is both damaging and empowering, which evidences Chesnutt’s internal struggle over how to achieve civil rights. One example of this lies in the presence of legal documents in the text, to which Reilly alludes (33). The suppression of legal documents that would “work to benefit” blacks is important because it shows that legal documents can be used to exert power. In the text, white language—the white press, legal documents, and legislation—oppress black characters. Importantly, both the existence and absence of language oppresses, in the case of the legal documents (the proof of marriage between Janet’s parents, Delamere’s will). The legal documents have the opportunity to benefit blacks, but are destroyed, which shows a limit to the power that legal documents can exert during Reconstruction, as they work dually to enforce white supremacy. When present, they enforce supremacy by reinforcing paternalism and white superiority, when absent, they also oppress. While the whites who compose the legal documents advocate for uplifting blacks the very notion that whites must uplift blacks demonstrates white supremacy and undermines Southern “gentility.” Here, whites exert power over black fates through the composition and destroying of documents; in other words, whites participate in linguistic violence through this process.

However, Chesnutt again complicates white power (and ultimately, the idea that language/literacy equals power) in that white Carterets become dependent on Miller, a literate black character, to save Theodore, their newborn child. In the end, it is Miller, not the whites, and not Green, who Chesnutt affords power to in controlling the fate of Carteret’s son. However, this prioritization of the literate, peaceful black man in the end of the novel does not discount the
work Chesnutt does earlier to depict types of violence on a linguistic and thematic level. Rather, the end evokes that there is no single, right way to resist racist structures.

Sundquist notes that “Chesnutt reached back into the decayed world of antebellum law to find the origins of modern racism; but he also reached into the vibrant world of slave culture to find the origins of modern African American cultural resistance to racism” (273). Chesnutt interweaves several forms of resistance—from indirect, seemingly subservient resistance to militant resistance—into his works in order to undermine white supremacy. Chesnutt, although resisting white narratives, also innovated within American realism by adding dual signing systems to his representations of dialect. Chesnutt’s weaving of multiple types of speaking, reading, and signaling shows the complexities of achieving equality and the challenges that Reconstruction posed while reversing minstrel tropes and creating authentic, multivocal and multilingual realisms.
CONCLUSIONS

The United States’ popular culture, as well as its legislation, has long played a significant role in stereotyping blackness and attempting to establish whites as superior to blacks. As I have shown in this project, both social and legal spheres in the United States pushed (and continue to push) damaging stereotypes about blackness, but importantly, black resistance—in minstrel shows, literature, and other facets of popular culture—has not only existed, but has actively refuted these stereotypes and white supremacist ideals. Black resistance undercuts the dominant, white narratives that work to establish blacks as subhuman. Black resistance forges alternate definitions of blackness and ultimately brings black multivocality into the homogenous, hegemonic, and dehumanizing narrative of blackness that whites push. It is crucial that we examine not only the efforts that created such narratives, but also efforts to resist, dismantle, and refute them.

When first approaching Charles Chesnutt’s works, it is easy to dismiss his portrayal of black speech as embracing or perpetuating black stereotypes; at the very least, it is easy to claim that Chesnutt used dialect representations to pander to white desire to see them. To do so, however, misses a significant contribution not only to the revision of dominant white narratives, but also to black culture, realism, and American literature. While scholars, importantly, examine Chesnutt’s thematic work in *The Conjure Tales* and *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt’s work with dialect, particularly the dual signification in his dialect respellings, has gone largely—with the exception of a select few—unexamined. Previous focus on Chesnutt, even when addressing his use of dialect, misses crucial racial critiques of racism contained within the dialect representations that work to undercut minstrel tropes. In addition to addressing racist power structures in the plots of his work, Charles Chesnutt actively participated in *linguistic* resistance
to narratives of blackness perpetuated by plantation fiction, blackface minstrelsy, and ultimately, whites.

Plantation fiction and blackface minstrelsy worked to establish racial hierarchies through plot, paternalism, caricatures of blackness, and exaggerations of black speech. Such exaggerations of black speech stereotyped blacks as ignorant. Chesnutt, however, made important contributions in depicting black speech. As I have shown in this project, Chesnutt did not participate in plantation fiction, nor did he simply revise it; rather, Chesnutt used a familiar genre—dialect literature—to represent dialect in new ways and dually signify meaning. By doing so, Chesnutt subtly shifts readers’ focus away from educational differences between whites and blacks. In other words, Chesnutt does not perpetuate stereotypes that render blacks as ignorant through his depiction of black speech. Rather than highlight black and white educational differences, Chesnutt participates in active resistance of white supremacy, reveals more realistic black experiences, and sets his work apart from white writing conventions. In effect, Chesnutt commits a kind of linguistic violence on dialect representations around him—in plantation fiction and blackface minstrelsy—he cuts it open, deconstructs it, questions it, reorganizes it, signifies upon it. Chesnutt, challenged, reformed, and ultimately changed the recycled, exaggerated black speech depicted by blackface minstrelsy and plantation writers that excused race-based violence and racial prejudices through portraying blacks as subhuman. In this way, Chesnutt linguistically resisted and overcame the language of white supremacy and at the same time, through the dialect, revealed new ways of signifying and undercutting racism.

It is important to not only notice, but analyze the ways Chesnutt uses dialect in his texts because it acts in conjunction with a larger system of black resistance to dominant white narratives and stereotypes of blackness. If Chesnutt’s employment of dialect in his works is
written off as embracing or worse, perpetuating, stereotypes of black ignorance, we miss a significant contribution of his work in legitimizing different ways of knowing, resisting, and speaking.

In studying Charles Chesnutt, I am most often asked how Chesnutt’s work is still relevant. Chesnutt wrote chiefly in the early 1900s and the Civil Rights movement has been successful in achieving fairer legislation and more accurate representations of blackness in popular culture. However, racist structures, as well as active black resistance to those structures, still thrive in today’s United States. Whites continue to stigmatize black speech and label speakers of it as ignorant, angry, thugs, or otherwise lesser-than. Hip-hop, a genre instrumental in dual signification, is either written off as vulgar and unintelligent or whites appropriate it. Similar to plantation fiction, whites today capitalize on their interpretations of black speech through incorporating their versions of it into music (white rap). However, black hip-hop artists continue to refute these representations in song lyrics and otherwise. It is important to analyze not only how racism became and remains systematized, but also such efforts against it (and in the process, not overlooking linguistic resistance efforts). Chesnutt, black minstrel and music performers, filmmakers, and other 20th century writers and performers helped pave the way for breaking minstrel stereotypes through linguistic dual signing systems. In analyzing the multifunctionality of black speech representations, we can better understand and analyze black resistance efforts to white supremacy today.
WORKS CITED


