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# **The Ethics of Storytelling:**

## **Charles W. Chesnutt's Tales of History**

**Michio Arimitsu**

### **Introduction: The Production of a Usable Past**

Born to middle-class free mulatto parents in antebellum Cleveland, Ohio, Charles W. Chesnutt (1858–1932) grew up to be an ambitious but struggling young man who was forced to begin his career as a student-teacher at the precocious age of fourteen when his family's financial decline reached a point where it was no longer possible for them to pay for his education. While Chesnutt was successful as an educator, he was nevertheless frustrated at the lack of opportunities for a black man in the post-bellum South. The rather counter-intuitive way out of his disgruntled life in what Mark Twaine called as the gilded age was going to be paved by literature. He had no doubt that "the only thing I can do without capital, under my present circumstances, except teach" (qtd. in Brodhead 190) was to write a fiction.

Even though monetary gain and social success were first and foremost on his mind, literature promised Chesnutt something loftier and more altruistic. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has noted, when a large percentage of the black population in the country lacked capital or education to climb up the social ladder, Chesnutt earnestly believed that literature would play symbolic as well as pragmatic roles for African Americans:

[The African American ought] to prepare himself for recognition and equality, and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it—to accustom the public mind to the idea: to lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling. (qtd. in Gates 116)

In short, literature would serve as a vehicle for uplifting the African Americans, many of whom had just been freed from the yoke of slavery.

For Chesnutt, literature had another mission in the aftermath of the Civil War. The scope of the racist reactionary ideology in the postbellum era was truly deep and far-reaching, encompassing the social, economic, and cultural spheres. For instance, the backlash took the form of the deliberate intensification and proliferation of racial stereotypes. On stages across the U.S., blackface minstrels produced and circulated racist images of plantation “darkies,” while the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908) propagated “the plantation mythology of kind masters and contented slaves” (Sundquist 273). At the same time, these decades saw the creation of a new economic regime in the South. Clearly a less inhumane mode of economic exploitation than slavery, sharecropping nevertheless hardly ever meant economic independence for ex-slaves. Needless to say, the most graphic and violent manifestation of the racist ideology’s resurgence in this era, of course, was lynching. The physical as well as psychological attempt at restoring the antebellum racial order left thousands of innocent black people brutalized, mutilated, burned, or mercilessly hung from trees.<sup>1</sup> The pernicious repression and violence brought about by these racist performances, narratives, economic arrangements, and rituals culminated in 1896, when the Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* case legalized segregation.

These blatantly revisionist discourses and brutally racist practices

sought to reinforce the antebellum racial hierarchy, to dissimulate the antagonism between (ex-) slaves and (former) masters on plantations, and to deface from the pages of history the internal fracture of white America that led to the Civil War. For Chesnutt, the pedagogical and reformatory value of literature lay precisely in its power to challenge and demythologize such regressive and de-historicizing narratives and actions, and to bring about the real unification of the nation torn apart by slavery and devastated by the Civil War.

### 1. *The Wife of His Youth*:

#### The Abandoned Son and the Unforgettable Past

“The Sheriff’s Children,” a short story collected in *The Wife of His Youth* and *Other Stories of the Color Line* (November, 1899; hereafter *TWHY*), best illustrates Chesnutt’s belief in the pedagogical and ethical values of storytelling. The text at first seems to adhere to the plantation myth’s temporal articulation of the Civil War as nothing less than a radical departure from the past:

The war is the one historical event that overshadows all others. It is the era from which all local chronicles are dated, —births, deaths, marriages, storms, freshets. No description of the life of any Southern community would be perfect that failed to emphasize the all pervading influence of the great conflict. (131)

As becomes clear in the course of the story, however, Chesnutt is in fact less concerned with the apparent disjunction caused by the War than with the long-lasting impact of the unredeemed past and the unceasing racial violence. In other words, despite this apparent statement to the contrary, his story purports to tell what the new South tirelessly seeks to erase from its

official history at its foundational moment, namely, the memory of slavery.

Set in an isolated rural town in North Carolina, “The Sheriff’s Children” revolves around Tom, a mulatto boy imprisoned for allegedly murdering a former Confederate soldier. In prison, Tom is reunited with his white father, who has become the sheriff of the county. Tom criticizes his father for having sold him and his mother (the sheriff’s slave mistress at the time) to a speculator in a desperate measure to settle a debt: “What father’s duty have you ever performed for me? [...] *You sold me* to the rice swamps” (143; emphasis original). As the title implies, the poignant story relentlessly contrasts the misery of the black son with the untroubled life of the sheriff’s other child, a fair-skinned daughter. At the end of the story, the father repents of his actions in the past, but learns the lesson too late to make amends to the son he once abandoned. By the time he reaches the jail, Tom has committed suicide for fear of being executed in public or of being lynched to death by an angry mob.

By first drawing the reader’s attention to the much exaggerated disjunction caused by the War (“the era from which all local chronicles are dated”) and then, by disputing the periodization with the sheriff’s forgotten family history, the tragedy highlights the arbitrary construction of the new South’s history. The past that haunts the sheriff in the figure of his forgotten son dramatically compels the sheriff as well as the reader to recognize the enormous cost for the conscious suppression, if not the unconscious repression, of the memory of what it was like to live in a slave society. In this particular story, the opportunity for redemption is tragically lost, as Tom’s suicide literally *kills* the sheriff’s last chance to be reconciled with the past. Despite, or rather because of, its gloomy ending, the tragedy reminds the reader of how important it is to see the continuity rather than disjunction between the antebellum and postbellum eras, if one desires to move beyond the past.

In contrast to the affliction that befalls Tom and his father, the past evoked by the plantation myth is characterized exclusively by nostalgia. Such stories as told by Harris's Uncle Remus retroactively seek to *produce* the racial harmony on plantations as the *reproduction* of the "authentic" Southern life, as if such amicable racial relations had actually existed in reality. According to such a revisionist historical view, the vile oppression of newly freed African Americans in the postbellum period would be justified as the "natural" result of the disruption of otherwise benevolently paternal relations that the master and the slaves supposedly had enjoyed before the War. It is precisely this "harmony" that Chesnutt's short stories determinedly defy by interrogating the myth's presuppositions and the false conclusions drawn from them. In this and other stories, Chesnutt insists that if the South wants to make a truly new beginning, the Southerners, both ex-slaves and former masters, must deal with their past rather than turn away from it.

## 2. Conjure Tales: Performance and History

Like an x-ray, Chesnutt's stories penetrate into the ideological backbones of the de-historicizing narratives that conceal the differences of race and gender (as well as of class and region) in the construction of racist, male-centered, bourgeois national history. As the French political philosopher Claude Lefort has remarked on the ideological function of a dominant discourse, "social division and temporality are two aspects of the same institution" (196; emphasis original). Chesnutt's critique of racism is a marvelous illustration of Lefort's point. The postbellum black writer's radical critique of slavery in the past and racism in the present requires the questioning of the temporality that the reactionary, racist historiography articulates, disseminates, and "naturalizes" through the discursive deployment of the disjunction between the antebellum and the postbellum South.<sup>2</sup>

In his stories of the color line, collected in *TWHY*, Chesnutt repeatedly stages dramatic encounters of the antebellum past with the postbellum present, each embodied by specific characters. For instance, the repressed past returns, as we have seen, as a white sheriff's mulatto son, or as Mr. Ryder's deserted wife in "The Wife of His Youth," a "very black" old lady who "looked like a bit of the old plantation life" (105). In "Her Virginia Mammy," the unknown past returns as a black mother who conceals her true identity so that her mulatto daughter will be able to marry a rich white man.

Originally published in 1887, "The Goophered Grapevine," like other conjure tales collected in *The Conjure Woman* (March, 1899), situates the antebellum past within the temporal frame of the postbellum present. If Chesnutt thematically stages the past's return to the present in the tales of the color line, he formally superimposes the past on the present in the narrative structure of his conjure tales.

Hoping that relatively temperate weather of the region will improve his wife's health, the narrator, a white Northerner named John, moves to North Carolina after the War. The white couple plans to buy a vineyard, and it is during their search for fertile land that the two first meet an elderly African American gardener named Uncle Julius:

I [John] led the way back to the yard, where a pine log, lying under a spreading elm, afforded a shady though somewhat hard seat. One end of the log was already occupied by a venerable-looking colored man. He held on his knees a hat full of grapes, over which he was smacking his lips with great gust, and a pile of grapeskins near him indicated that *the performance was no new thing*. We approached him at an angle from the rear, and were close to him before he perceived us. (8; italics added)

Although Julius does not apparently know the approach of the strangers, John curiously refers to the black man's seemingly "natural" consumption of grapes as a "performance." To be sure, whether the "performance" is enacted consciously or not seems to matter little here, as the term "performance" in this context is used to mean the ludicrously exaggerated quality of Julius's manner.

To understand what is really at stake in this passage, however, one must pay closer attention to a change in Julius's behavior upon the white couple's arrival: "He went on eating the grapes, but did not seem to enjoy himself quite so well as he had apparently done before he became aware of our presence" (8). An obvious interpretation of the change would be that Julius feels uncomfortable or ashamed—or, so John seems to think—to be eating the way he is while being exposed to the white couple's "civilized" gaze. John thinks that the black man more or less knows that his "natural" /"uncultivated" manner of eating is improper. That is why, so the logic goes, he enjoys the grapes less after being spotted.

An alternative interpretation of Julius's change would be that the old man somehow anticipated the white couple's arrival and enacted the "performance" for them. Julius eats the grapes in the stereotypically exaggerated way that white people expect of a black man, because he somehow wants them to mistake the "performance" for something spontaneously enacted.

John's choice of the term "performance" seems to suggest that there is actually something artificial about Julius's stereotypical behavior. Unlike his wife Annie, who is represented as more sympathetic and gullible, John wants to present himself as shrewd, and is generally skeptical of what black people do. Ironically, that skepticism belies his repressed knowledge that stereotypes are just what they are, stereotypes, and that there may be



an ulterior motive when black people deliberately enact the racial stereotypes.

The term “performance” thus complicates the understanding of Julius’s true intentions. In order to know whether Julius is simply “performing” *as* an uncultivated “darkie” (in what John thinks of as his “naturally theatrical/exaggerated” manner) or deliberately “performing” *like* a “darkie” (with an ulterior motive John cannot fathom at this point), it is necessary to determine Julius’s intention. However, the narrative and linguistic complexity of the passage defies the reader’s claim on the one and only “correct” interpretation, making it difficult—in fact, impossible—for us to know his intention, that is, what really distinguishes Julius’s “natural” behavior from his “performance.” In fact, here and elsewhere, Chesnutt emphatically blurs, rather than clarifies, the distinction between the two, foregrounding the (in)determinacy of Julius’s intention as a central issue.

To take another scene as an example, when John asks Julius about the quality of the vineyard, the old man tells him about an ominous spell cast on the grapes. Before the old man goes further into his story, however, John interjects: “At first the current of his memory—or imagination—seemed somewhat sluggish; but as his embarrassment wore off, his language flowed more freely, and the story acquired perspective and coherence” (9). As this passage makes clear, John is not sure whether Julius is simply recounting a real incident in the past or making up a story. Fascinated, John again observes a curious change in Julius’s expression: “As he became more and more absorbed in the narrative, his eyes assumed a dreamy expression, and he seemed to lose sight of his auditors, and to be living over again in monologue his life on the plantation” (9). The reader will quickly learn—less ambivalently than in the earlier scene—that Julius in fact never loses sight of John and Annie. The truth is quite the opposite. The “dreamy expression” of Julius’s eyes turns out to be the quintessen-

tially subversive black mask. In the conclusion of the text, John and Annie are made to learn that Julius's real intention in relating the cautionary tale of the cursed vine was to dissuade the couple from buying the vineyard so that he would be able to continue his residence there and lay an exclusive claim on the grapes.

This scene, then, increases the possibility that Julius, far from being lost in a faraway dreamland, is very much grounded by his daily needs and actively calculating the effects of his "performance." The brilliance of his story attests to the art of storytelling that he has mastered and deliberately deploys as a viable means of survival. In this particular case, however, this survival strategy does not work so well, as John ends up *buying* the vineyard, and not Julius's cautionary tale.

Even if the story thus confirms Julius's cunningness by revealing his ulterior motive, the revelation is not *the* ultimate moral of the story. As we shall see, the dialectic between the tale and the tale-within-the-tale refuses such a reductive reading that interprets the story as if it were only about the discovery of Julius as a sly trickster figure. At least for Chesnutt, if not for Julius himself, Julius's storytelling has the ethical and instructive values that are as important as the food and shelter that it enables the old man to acquire.

In order to see these aspects of the story, the reader must dis-identify with the white couple and leave the interpretive positions they occupy. Once the reader takes a critical distance from the white couple, it will be clear that Julius is represented as a witness—it does not matter much whether he himself is conscious of this or not—who narrates an oral history of the injustice and cruelty of slavery. In other words, even if his intention remains enigmatically inaccessible to the reader, Julius nevertheless ends up playing the role of an educator whose stories are edifying without being patronizingly didactic.

Now, let us look at Julius's tale-within-a-tale. The life on the antebellum Southern plantations represented here is as fabulous as that of the plantation myth; still, it is by no means the world in which slaves and masters live in harmony. The plot revolves around an avaricious white plantation owner, Mars Dugal', and Henry, a slave who becomes an innocent victim of a deadly spell that a conjure woman cast upon the master's grapevines as a protection against thieves. Upon realizing Henry's innocence, the conjure woman tries to undo the spell with a counter-spell. Henry survives, but his life is now inextricably linked to the growth and waning of the grapevines. In spring, he "got young ag'in, en so soopl en libely dat none er de young niggers on de plantation could n' jump, ner dance, ner hoe ez much cotton ez Henry. But in de fall er de year his grapes 'mence ter straighten out, en his j'int's ter git stiff, en his ha'r drap off, en de rheumatiz begin ter wrestle wid 'im" (13). As soon as his master finds out about this curious phenomenon, he turns it into a cruel and yet highly lucrative business. In spring when the slave grows young, the master sells Henry to another slave-holder, and buys him back in the fall when he grows old and his price goes down. Far from being a benevolent paternal figure, the master exploits Henry's misfortune. What is particularly poignant about this story is the fact that Henry's seasonal transformation does not really transform his status: from the beginning to the end, he is a chattel slave who can be sold and bought at the master's whim. Even though Henry quickly becomes an accomplice in his master's shady business, for "he know he gwine ter be tuk good keer uv de nex' winter, w'en Mars Dugal' buy him back" (15), "Good keer" only prolongs his suffering. At the end of the day, he fails to see that he is valuable to the master only as a commodity.

A few years after the shady business begins, a confidence man from the North comes to the plantation to disrupt this putatively Arcadian peace

between the master and the slave. Duped by the yankee's lie, Dugal' loses both Henry and the grapevines. The fraud makes the master furious to the point of participating in the Civil War to seek revenge on the Northerners. This account explicitly trivializes the regional tension between the North and the South that led to the War. The real importance of this caricature, however, has to do with a critique of the implicit exclusion of African Americans from the national debate over slavery, as if they were merely passive observers of a white intra-racial conflict.

In Julius's tale, the slaves are represented as anything but the helpless objects, or chattels without agency. For instance, Julius casually refers to a slave who runs away from the master: "Now it happen dat one er de niggers on de nex' plantation, one er ole Mars Henry Brayboy's niggers, had runned away de day befo', en tuk ter de swamp" (11). It is of utmost importance that Julius makes nothing out of this and continues his story, as if it were *needless to say*—though he actually does say it—that slaves ran away all the time. In another instance, Julius mentions a slave child who "runned away fum de quarters one day, en got in de scuppernon's, en died de nex' week" (11). On the surface, this scene is an illustration of the spell's mighty power; on another level, however, it imperceptibly and almost unconsciously—as Chesnutt would have liked to say—registers the miserable conditions from which this slave child had desperately sought refuge.

In this as well as in the other conjure tales, Julius coaxes his listeners from the North to sympathize with the slaves' suffering. John and Annie, however, rarely get the point of Julius's tales, and repeatedly fail to acknowledge his tales as the testament of a surviving ex-slave. To them, Julius is little more than a sly entertainer, who gets what little he gets by telling stories of the past. In a way, John's characterization of Julius's "performance" could not be more appropriate: John and Annie can only hear

Julius's story about the past as a "monologue," for they cannot not or will not understand the multiple meanings of his stories; even on the rare occasions when they do sympathize with Julius, they—John more than Annie—quickly choose to reduce his stories to mere entertainment. Because they cannot really hear the complexity of Julius's messages, his performance is reductively perceived as something of a "monologue."

Although Julius's storytelling may well be subversive, his "performance" on the whole remains ambivalent. It is true that John and Annie almost always misread Julius's stories, and that Julius often gets what he wants. However, the reader cannot but realize the fact that the old man's voice is accessible only through John's retelling of it. The subversive black voice is always subjected to the white narrator's control. Of course, let us not forget that the very limitation imposed upon the black voice in these stories is itself enacted by an African American author's writing. By ventriloquizing the very white narration that constrains the black voice, Chesnutt deconstructs the literary convention that was then pervasive in the white-authored texts about black people's lives.

### 3. The Withering of the Family Tree

Most of the tales-within-the tales collected in *The Conjure Woman* end in more than one tragic death.<sup>3</sup> The extremely high rate of violent deaths in these tales is as ominous as the almost complete absence of African American children. Indeed, "Sis' Beck's Pickaninny" is the only tale that features a child in a major role. The absence of children in the other tales casts a gloomy shadow over the plantation life, for it implies that slaves have no heir to tell the history of their oppression, to inherit their culture, or to rebuild their community when they finally win their freedom.

An owner of racehorses in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" crudely explains why children, in particular babies, are absent in most of the conjure

tales. When a slaveholder begs to trade a female slave and her baby for a racehorse, the owner of the horse agrees to take the slave but not her baby: “‘No,’ sezee, ‘I’s much erbleedzd, but I doan raise niggers; I raises hosses, en I doan wanter be both’rin’ wid no nigger babies. Nemmine de baby. I’ll keep da ‘oman so busy she’ll fergit de baby; fer niggers is made ter wuk, ne dey ain’ got no time fer sich foolis’-ness ez babies” (61).

It would be misleading to make a sweeping generalization about the composition of slave families or about how slaves spent their time with their families, for plantations were run differently, depending on their size, location, and the character of the slave-holder. Nevertheless, as Frederick Douglass attests in his *Narrative*, it is not too difficult to imagine that slave parents had a hard time performing their parental duties.<sup>4</sup>

The separation of slave children from their parents raises a serious problem about the passing of cultural heritage and collective memory. For Chesnutt, the figure of a tree symbolizes an important but endangered link between the past and the future of the race. In “Po’ Sandy,” Annie asks her husband to build an extra kitchen in the backyard. Julius, now having become their coachman, drives the couple to a sawmill in the town so that they can buy logs necessary for the new building. When the old man hears the sound of the saw cutting into a pine log, he blurts out “in a lugubrious tone and with a perceptible shudder,” “Ugh! But dat des do cuddle my blood!” (20). When asked what the problem is, Julius replies, “I ain’ nervous; but dat saw, a-cuttin’ en grindin’ thoo dat stick er timber, en moanin’, en groanin,’ en sweekin’, kyars my ‘memb’ance back ter ole times, en ‘min’s me er po’ Sandy” (20). Thus begins Julius’s telling of another tragedy.

Sandy was such a “monstu’us good” (21) slave that his master’s children all want her as a wedding present when they get married. To avoid a family feud, the master decides to let his children take turns having

Sandy. The enslaved Sandy's tragedy is that, while the white master's family prospers, he is prevented from having a stable household:

One time w'en Sandy wuz lent out ez yushal, a spekilater come erlong wid a lot er niggers, en Mars Marrabo swap' Sandy's wife off fer a noo 'oman. W'en Sandy come back, Mars Marrabo gin 'im a dollar, en 'lowed he wuz monst'us sorry fer ter break up de fambly, but de spekilater had gin 'im big boot, en times wuz hard en money skase, en so he wuz bleedst ter make de trade. (21)

The callous master is "sorry" to have sold Sandy's wife, and compensates Sandy for the loss with a dollar.

Sandy soon falls in love with Tenie, the woman the master traded for his wife, and the two of them live together for a while. Their happiness does not last long, however, as the master decides to send Sandy away to work for his uncle. Sandy's love for Tenie is so strong that "he would n' 'a' mine comin' ten er fifteen mile at night ter see Tenie" (22). To his dismay, Sandy learns that the master's uncle lives more than forty miles away. Dejected, he says to his beloved, "I can't eben keep a wife: my yuther ole 'oman wuz sol' away widout my gettin' a chance fer ter tell her good-by; en now I got ter go off en leab you, Tenie, en I dunno whe'r I'm eber gwine ter see you ag'in er no. I wisht I wuz a tree, er a stump, er a rock, er sump'n w'at could stay on de plantation fer a w'ile" (22). Tenie confesses to her lover that she actually has a power to turn him into a tree if he so wishes. Sandy agrees and is turned into a pine tree.

The story ends in tragedy when the master cuts down the tree to build a new kitchen in his house. When the kitchen is complete, a rumor spreads among slaves that the new building is haunted: "Dey could hear sump'n moanin' en groanin' 'bout de kitchen in de night-time en w'en de

win' would blow dey could hear sump'n a-hollerin' en sweekin' lack it wuz in great pain en sufferin'" (27). Tenie is the only person who is not afraid of the haunted kitchen, for she knows that it is Sandy that visits the place. Even after the master demolishes the kitchen to build a new school house, Tenie returns nightly to meet Sandy. Julius explains the cause of her death years later: "Dere didn' 'pear ter be nuffin pertickler de matter wid her,—she had des grieve' herse'f ter def fer Sandy" (27). In this story, the ominous fate of Sandy, who is transformed into the "moanin' en groanin'" tree, is starkly contrasted with the auspiciousness of the growth of the master's family. The latter grows as the master's children get married and prosper. The irony is reinforced further when one realizes that the body of Sandy, who could never have children of his own, is used to build a school for white children.

If the tale-within-the-tale seems to leave no room for hope, its desolate prospect is redeemed by the frame story. When Julius tells this story to the white couple, he and some other congregations happen to have parted ways with the other members of the church, named after Sandy. While John is away on business, the old man asks Annie for a permission to use the old school house for their services. Having obtained new logs for the kitchen, Annie—unlike her skeptic husband—readily grants him the wish. When Julius transforms the building once used for the education of white children into a place of worship for African American church-goers, he performs a kind of mourning ritual by literally re-appropriating Sandy's body while making it sacred.

### Conclusion: The Re-invention of the Past and the Recognition of the Forgotten Ties

The self-consciously mediated texts collected in *The Conjure Woman* enable the reader to participate in the interpretation of the narrative ambiva-



lences, and to navigate the semantic field of indeterminacy that lies in the murky boundary between performance and “natural” behavior, or the one between imagination and memory. In these tales, the past is not something that is spontaneously recollected any more than Julius’s actions are represented as “natural”; suspended as it is among multiple interpretive positions—those of John, Annie, Julius, slaves, and Chesnutt himself—that are contested by one another, these stories demonstrate that any account of the past is a product of competing discourses in the present and that an act of remembering must be understood as a fundamentally political and ethical act.

No less concerned with the representation of the past, the tales of the color line in *TWHY* bring to light the arbitrary origin of the discursive construction of racial identities, on the one hand, and of the ideologically-loaded articulation of such temporalities as the antebellum and the postbellum, on the other.

In *The House behind Cedars* (1900) and *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Chesnutt abandoned the complex narrative structure of the conjure tales, but continued to pursue his ethical and pedagogical mission by telling the stories of the past as they relate to the present and the future. He further explored the theme of race-blurring, first explored in the tales of the color line.

Throughout his career as a writer, Chesnutt dedicated himself to the moral education of his readers, both black and white, through a number of entertaining as well as instructive stories about the impact of slavery and the reality of racial discrimination in the U.S. Just as a nation’s past informs its present and future, Chesnutt’s early career as a teacher in the postbellum South set the terms of his later career as a writer.

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- 1 Between 1882 and 1968, at least 4,743 cases of lynching were reported, 72 percent of whose victims were African Americans. The number of black victims skyrocketed after the Civil War; and surged again as Reconstruction ended and the backlash of white supremacists began in 1877. In 1882, 50 African Americans were lynched. The number nearly tripled, and reached 140 a year in the mid-1890s. Although this type of mob violence steadily declined since then, the last recorded lynch-

ing of an African American took place as late as in 1946. See Patterson 172–232.

- 2 As Lefort argues, whenever a dominant discourse articulates a social space—a racist and patriarchal society in this instance—it never fails to produce a history, a usable past, for the purpose of perpetuating and “naturalizing” that very division. The dominant discourse names the beginning and the end of history while concealing the historical conditions of its own production.
- 3 “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny” and “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare” are exceptions to the rule.
- 4 “I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life” (16).