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“Out of the Realm of Superstition”: Chesnutt’s “Dave’s Neckliss” and the Curse of Ham

Charles W. Chesnutt published “Dave’s Neckliss” in the October 1889 *Atlantic Monthly*, the fourth of his “Uncle Julius” tales of antebellum Southern plantation life. Narrated like its predecessors by Uncle Julius to his white employers, John and Annie, it involves a slave (the title’s Dave) falsely accused of stealing a ham, and punished by his master by being made to wear the stolen ham on a chain around his neck. When the punishment is lifted and the ham removed, Dave apparently loses his mind, first creating and wearing a symbolic ham, then announcing that he himself is becoming a ham, and finally hanging himself in a smokehouse among the other hams. Chesnutt frames this strange story, as usual, as one of Uncle Julius’ strategically self-interested entertainments for John and Annie. In this case, the old man’s narrative wins him the couple’s Sunday ham (or its leftovers): the day after hearing the story, Annie admits to her husband that “I couldn’t have eaten any more of that ham, and so I gave it to Julius.”¹

“Dave’s Neckliss” stands out among the Uncle Julius stories for a number of reasons, as readers have noted. It doesn’t involve magic or conjuring, which is perhaps one reason for its omission from *The Conjure Woman* in 1899: in William Andrews’ words, it “approaches the idea of a slave’s metamorphosis [into a thing] from a subjective, psychological standpoint.”² Rather than simply repeating an old tale, Uncle Julius himself plays an active role as the discoverer of Dave’s hanging body. The violent cruelty of slavery—at least partly concealed in earlier Uncle Julius stories—is unmistakable and immediate in “Dave’s Neckliss.” And Chesnutt himself saw the story as different, perhaps the last of the Uncle Julius series, when he sent

it to Albion Tourgée in a well-known letter of September 1889, announcing that

I think I have about used up the old Negro who serves as mouthpiece, and I shall drop him in future stories, as well as much of the dialect. . . . I tried in this story to get out of the realm of superstition into the region of feeling and passion—with what degree of success the story itself can testify.³

All of this has led most critics to treat “Dave’s Neckliss” as an important pivot or transitional moment in Chesnutt’s early career, as he considered abandoning the plantation genre, with its sentimentalized stereotypes of blackness and the old South, in favor of fictional vehicles less oblique, more suited to a frontal assault on white prejudice and racial inequality.⁴

In what follows we want to add one more observation to the catalogue of ways in which “Dave’s Neckliss” represented an important departure for Chesnutt. “Dave’s Neckliss” appears to us to be not only a vigorous, outraged, and particularly clear condemnation of slavery and its psychological effects, and not only a subtly manipulative performance of blackness for white readers, as Eric Sundquist, Henry B. Wonham, and others have argued in different ways.⁵ It is also a fully developed satirical allegory, Swiftean in its clarity and anger, in which Chesnutt engaged the relations of Christianity to race and racism, dramatizing through an elaborated pun the “curse of Ham”: the centerpiece of a scripturally-based thesis that lent biblical authority to antebellum white slaveholding, but that in the second half of the nineteenth century was also increasingly appropriated by African American churches and church leaders as a mark of God’s covenant with American blacks.

Noah’s Curse and Dave’s Punishment

What was the curse of Ham (also known as “Noah’s curse” and the “curse of Canaan”)? The story is told in Genesis 9:18–27, where Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, leave the ark following the flood (evidently with their families) and go forth to repopulate the earth. Noah

planted a vineyard:

And he drank of the wine, and was drunken, and he was uncovered within his tent.

And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without.

And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father’s nakedness.

And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him.
And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.
And he said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.
God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. (Genesis 9: 20–27 KJV)

This narrative has not surprisingly been the subject of extensive and colorful Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions. For our purposes, and for Chesnutt's (regardless of the specific nature of Ham's offense against his father, or of just why the curse landed on the grandson rather than the son, or of how Ham's name and posterity became associated with dark skin), the story and its historical interpretations provided two important origin paradigms, fundamental to nineteenth-century American Christian thinking. First, it offered a clear, divinely ordained taxonomy for all humanity, which arranged itself in three categories, as descendants of Japheth, Shem, or Ham. With European expansion and the evolution of racialized thought, these became respectively the European, the Asian, and the African; the white, the yellow (or red), and the black; or, in some specific American configurations, the Anglo-Saxon, the Jew, and the Negro.⁶ Second, the story of Noah's curse defined those three groups in their relations to one another: and to the line of Ham and Canaan it assigned the fetters of servitude as a God-given destiny.

The ways in which the curse of Ham thus provided an important Christian prop to antebellum pro-slavery thought are generally well known, and we won't rehearse them here.⁷ Put simply, slave owners could and did claim divine intention for the servile status of their slaves. We will shortly sketch the less well known and quite different uses to which Ham and the Hamitic origin-stories were put following the Civil War and Reconstruction. For now, though, we want simply to emphasize the degree to which Ham's name and curse, and the identification of black Americans as the "children of Ham," were familiar cultural currency in the South and all of the United States, the most visible markers of a pervasive, deeply American nineteenth-century Christian discourse concerning racial identity, slavery, and society. Ministers, theologians, scientists, politicians, reformers, and amateur anthropologists repeatedly deployed Ham as a starting point for understanding the obvious difference, historical and physical, of the Negro, or, more broadly, for defining racial and cultural identity. Chesnutt had made central use of the Ham curse in an earlier satirical short story of 1886, "The Fall of Adam," in which a literal-minded character calls it the "cuss o' Caanyun" and questions how "cussin'" could have ever produced blackness.⁸ He would refer to Ham

again briefly in 1901, in *The Marrow of Tradition*, where a minor character imagines coming racial catastrophe: "I may haf ter be anudder Ham, an' sta't de cullud race all over ag'in'." ⁹ And for most readers of "Dave's Neckliss," the associations of blackness, bondage, and ham (or Ham) would have been quick and inevitable.

The simplest dimension of the political allegory of "Dave's Neckliss" is thus hardly subtle, although most of the story's scholarly readers, with the exception of Eric Sundquist, have drawn no connection between Dave's bizarre punishment and the historical myth of Ham. ¹⁰ In fact, Chesnutt's technique seems heavy-handed and on first reading cartoon-like: the "curse of Ham," slavery itself as sanctioned by Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition, is simply represented as a collar, a chain, and a wire net sack enclosing a heavy ham, all swung from the neck of an innocent black man. There may be ways in which the narrative faintly echoes more specific aspects of the Genesis story; for example, Dave's apparent initiating offense, whether it's understood as his alleged theft of ham or as his desire for Dilsey (which spurs his rival Wiley to the false accusation), may have something punning to do with the carnal knowledge that medieval commentators regularly discerned in Ham's illicit view of Noah's nakedness. But the image's main function is not to evoke with precision the narrative complexity of the biblical story of Noah's curse; rather, it is to open an interrogation of that story's continued workings in the nineteenth century. And it begins to do so by using the familiar, but still striking technique of the rebus or pictograph.

We will note here in passing that this device, an important element of allegory, satire, and many jokes, was used by Chesnutt from early in his career. In "The Fall of Adam," for example, the semi-literate preacher Elder Gainey understands Adam's fall as a literal tripping over the sun, at the end of a headlong flight across the cosmos from an angry "Lawd wid a big hick'ry in 'is han.'" ¹¹ And, although here and elsewhere in the early work the use of the rebus was at least partly comical, when he published "The Goophered Grapevine" in the *Atlantic* and began the Uncle Julius series in 1887, Chesnutt had come to understand it as a potent tool in his critique of slavery: pictorialization—as the formal mechanism of conjure—became the governing trope of the plantation stories. Slaves were to their owners commodities *like* grapevines, or lumber, or mules (in the three Uncle Julius stories that preceded "Dave's Neckliss"); through conjure's transformation they *became* those things, literal representations of their functions as possessions.

Like grapevines, lumber, and mules, Dave's ham—which becomes his represented self—is also a commodity, a thing owned, consumed, and susceptible to theft, and in this respect Chesnutt was on familiar ground in "Dave's Neckliss" as an anti-slavery story. But something else is going on as well. The

ham's specific *religious* valence in a sense extends the tale's political reach, centrally implicating the discourse of Southern white Christianity in slavery. Other minor narrative details support such a focused religious interpretation: for example, Julius tells the story to John and Annie on a quiet Sunday afternoon, when "our two women-servants had gone to a camp-meeting," and Chesnutt further links their Sunday ham to Christianity immediately and ostentatiously, as a feast (under Julius' longing gaze) "that would have appealed strongly to the appetite of any hungry Christian" (721).

Moreover and more importantly, of course, the core narrative itself of Dave's punishment explicitly involves Christian knowledge and authority in ways completely foreign to the first three conjure stories, "The Goophered Grapevine," "Po' Sandy," and "The Conjuror's Revenge."¹² Dave's distinguishing characteristic, what sets him apart from Chesnutt's other slave protagonists, is exactly his biblical literacy: taught to read the Bible by a "free nigger boy" (723), Dave preaches to his fellow slaves. And he does so with the blessing of their owner, because what he preaches—the core of his scriptural knowledge—is simply obedience and servitude: "I l'arns fer ter love de Lawd en ter 'bey my marster," he tells Mars Dugal (723). Dave's Christian literacy, far from threatening the edifice of slavery, confirms it, reinforcing with an attractive fairy tale its brutal efficiency:

"So Dave 'mence' ter preach, en done de han's on de plantation a heap er good, en most on 'em lef' off dey wicked ways, en 'mence' ter love ter hear 'bout God, en religion, en de Bible; en dey done dey wuk better, en did n' gib de oberseah but mighty little trouble fer ter manage 'em." (724)

Not liberation at all, but the rationalization of one's chains: Chesnutt here presents a sardonic historical diagnosis not too far from that of his contemporary Nietzsche. And when the fairy tale fails—when human desire (for ham or for Dilsey) tears the veil of Christian submissiveness—another face of religion, the invidious racism of Noah's curse itself, binds Dave's black body, its blackness the inescapably visible mark of its ordained and essential servitude, in more literal shackles. "It wuz de las' thing he seed at night, en de fus' thing he seed in de mawnin'," Julius says of the ham. "W'eneber he met a stranger, de ham would be de fus' thing de stranger would see" (728).

Turning to (a) Ham: Chesnutt's Historical Moment

To this point we have argued simply that in "Dave's Neckliss," in addition to pointing up slavery's inhumanity (as he had done in the earlier, perhaps gentler Uncle Julius tales), Chesnutt alludes in an obvious way to a well-known Old Testament story, and that he does so in order to underscore with some

bitterness the way in which Christianity, a generation or more in the past, had offered ideological sustenance to a slave-based culture. But it's important also to acknowledge that Chesnutt invariably understood his literary-political project in terms of his historical *present*, that he wrote not so much to attack slavery itself (which was, after all, twenty years gone by the mid-1880s) as to further the continuing cause of black equality in American society. As early as 1880 he had confided in his journal that "If I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high holy purpose," to undo that "unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation. . . . I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people, and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it."¹³ As a result, Chesnutt wrote always as a vigorous partisan in the specific social and legal confusion that followed Reconstruction, responding with an insistent, uncompromising affirmative to what he called, in an unpublished political essay that occupied him across the early months of 1889, "the Negro question which addresses itself to the white people of the United States *at the present moment*. . . . 'Shall the Negro . . . individually, enjoy equally with the white man, individually, the full measure of an American citizen's public rights?'"¹⁴

Re-contextualizing "Dave's Neckliss" in the specific history of the post-slavery and post-Reconstruction struggle for black equality allows us to understand more fully how and why Dave claims and internalizes his punishment, his Ham-identity, and to hear in his story not only Chesnutt's condemnation of the white racist uses of Noah's curse, but also his anxiety over black Americans' own acts of cultural/political self-definition at the end of the nineteenth century. For in the years following the Civil War, as African Americans struggled to discover a functional human identity in a culture that had permitted them none, leaders of black Christian churches (the vital, influential centers of black community, as Chesnutt knew well) turned increasingly to embrace the thesis of Negro or African Hamitic descent: apparently to claim for themselves, that is, the very "cursed" racial status that had been used a generation earlier to justify their enslavement.

The black re-reading of Ham's story, an affirmative reading in which to be a "child of Ham" might be a blessing rather than a curse, has a complicated and not always consistent history. It had begun to emerge before Emancipation, as black Christian scholars, preachers, and evangelists sought a significant genealogy and role for dark-skinned people in divine history. Hamitic descent provided such a genealogy, for although Ham's posterity (or Canaan's) might have been cursed by Noah, it remained nonetheless of the lineage of Adam and thus ultimately of God. Moreover, Ham's children, like their more favored cousins, were open to the possibilities of New Testament salvation. As Gayraud Wilmore puts it, the revisionist interpreters of

Genesis 9 “sought . . . to reverse the significance of the passage by emphasizing the previous fulfillment of Noah’s malediction and the fact that the regenerative and elevating power of the gospel superseded the judgment of the Old Testament.”¹⁵ The dark races *had* been cursed, *had* been enslaved as Noah prophesied; but now, in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the redemptive dispensations of Christian history, they might also be the vehicles of God’s glorious will, His latest chosen people. Thus from the 1860s to the turn of the century, in a stream of sermons, reports, pamphlets, and books, black religious leaders explored one or another version of this positive Hamitic thesis, often drawing upon the prophetic promise of Psalms 68: 31—“Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God”—as a sign that the future of Christianity lay with Ham’s children themselves.¹⁶ Black theology’s enthusiastic Hamitic identification crested perhaps in the 1880s and 1890s. Theophus Smith quotes the Haitian African Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop James T. Holly in 1884: “This crowning work of the will of God is reserved for the millennial phase of Christianity, when Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands directly unto God. . . . [The Semitic and Japhetic races] alike await the forthcoming ministry of the Hamitic race.”¹⁷ In 1895 Bishop James Walker Hood of the A.M.E. Zion Church understood the emergence of the “Negro Church” in America as “the harbinger of the rising glory of the sons of Ham . . . the first fruit of the countless millions of that race who shall be found in the army with banners in the millennial glory of the Christian Church.”¹⁸ And D. Keith Naylor describes how in 1893 A.M.E. Bishop Benjamin Arnett stood before the World’s Parliament of Religions at the Chicago World’s Fair (in “The White City,” as the Exposition’s site was called) and announced that African Americans had arrived to claim a rightful place in the assembly of God’s people: “I greet the children of Shem, I greet the children of Japhet, and I want you to understand that Ham is here.”¹⁹

“Ham is here”: a triumphant and defiant gesture, a reclaiming and turning against itself of one of slavery’s central images. But as Sylvester Johnson, the most thorough and skeptical modern historian of Hamitic identification, has observed, it was a proclamation that entangled blacks of the late-nineteenth century in a destructive paradox. At some level, Johnson argues, affiliation with Ham created a sort of cultural schizophrenia, since the Hamitic myth had produced and elaborated for Judeo-Christianity over centuries the figure of the outcast, the heathen other *par excellence*.

For Negroes, the only way into [the narrative of God’s people] was through Ham . . . Ham was the portal of entry into a world in which Negroes were historical folk. . . .

The obvious difficulty, however, was that Ham represented the antithesis of being people of God. Claiming Hamitic identity meant accepting the significations of deviance and sin that were encoded upon Ham and Ham's descendants.²⁰

And in practice this meant for some black American Christians participating in Christianity's disparagement (and literal oppression) of "heathen," including unconverted black Africans; and it meant internalizing a white mythology that condemned one's own unregenerate African-ness, one's inextricably entwined associations with those "significations of deviance and sin." It might mean, in short, adopting as one's own a profound cultural rage against blackness itself.

This, then, was the historical moment in which Chesnutt created the allegory of "Dave's Neckliss." We believe that for him, as for Johnson, black Christianity's enthusiasm for Ham must have seemed at best problematic, a severely compromised ticket of entry into American society. At worst, it would have seemed to Chesnutt not merely paradoxical but potentially suicidal: in the very moment of liberty, a voluntary re-assumption of superstition's chains. Such a re-assumption is of course the central plot device of "Dave's Neckliss"; freed from his literal fetters, Dave enters into a kind of totemic relationship with his absent ham, replete with images of religious ritual:

"But de ham had be'n on his neck so long dat Dave had sorter got use' ter it. . . . fine'ly he up'n tuk'n tied a lighterd-knot ter a string, en hid it under de flo' er his cabin, en w'en nobody wuz n' lookin' he'd take it out en hang it roun' his neck, en go off in de woods en holler en sing; en he allus tied it roun' his neck w'en he went ter sleep." (729)

The ritual culminates in full identification—"Did yer knowed I wuz turnin' ter a ham, Julius?" (730)—and finally Dave's suicide in the smokehouse, couched punningly by Julius, as Wonham has noted,²¹ as an attempt at "kyo" or cure: as if some resolution were possible to the intolerable paradox of ham- (or Ham-) identification:

"Den I knowed how it all happen'. Dave had kep' on gittin' wusser en wusser in his mine, 'tel he des got ter b'lievin' he wuz all done turnt ter a ham; en den he had gone en built a fier, en tied a rope roun' his neck, des lack de ham wuz tied, en had hung hisse'f up in de smoke-'ouse fer ter kyo." (732)

"Ham is here," too, at the end of a rope. Dave's tragedy offers a caustic cautionary alternative to the enthusiasms of Bishops Holly, Hood, Arnett, and others who would assume for American blacks the outcast identity of Ham.

The Color Line and Fables of Restriction

Chesnutt was still a young writer in 1889. He turned thirty-one that June, between the appearance of “The Conjuror’s Revenge” and “Dave’s Neckliss,” and he was rapidly bringing into focus the methods and subject matter that would inform his mature productions of the next fifteen years. His humanitarian political project—the critique of the “unjust spirit of caste”—demanded now that he move beyond simple humor and local color, the genres that had admitted him to popular and then to highbrow periodical publication. And he began to recognize with some clarity that his realest subject matter could not be, as he had thought it might in 1880, simply the ways of black folk, the “many things about the Colored people which are peculiar, to some extent, to them, and which are interesting to any thoughtful observer.”²² Rather, it would be the “color line” itself, the obscure line of demarcation across an intricate web of legal and traditional fictions (of which the curse of Ham was only one) that created human beings as white or black, empowering the one, brutalizing the other. And it would be the tragedies, ironies, and occasional acts of humanity that occurred along the color line.

We can see Chesnutt’s emerging analytical interest in restrictive or even fatal fables of identity in much of his writing of 1889: in “Dave’s Neckliss,” as we have argued here, but also in the roughly contemporaneous story “The Sheriff’s Children,” the first of those collected in 1899 in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, a “tragic incident,” he told Tourgée in the letter from which we have quoted, “not of slavery exactly, but showing the fruits of slavery.”²³ In a May *Independent* essay, “What is a White Man?,” he had examined states’ “black laws,” mapping the very “line which separated freedom and opportunity from slavery or hopeless degradation.”²⁴ Also in May he published a bizarre comical anecdote in *Puck*, “A Fatal Restriction,” in which a German immigrant, disconsolate at his discovery in the Constitution that only natural-born citizens may be U. S. President, hangs himself with the American flag.²⁵ What these productions of 1889 have in common is a fascination with the systematization or classification of human identity itself, through the formative narratives of law, politics, religion, science—and with the cultural prison-house that these narratives produced.

Such stories—myths of origin like the curse of Ham or Adam’s fall, legal fictions like the “black laws,” scientific fables like the racist determinism satirized in the 1900 Uncle Julius story “A Victim of Heredity”—were all finally for Chesnutt the discourse of the “realm of superstition” that he proposed to abandon in the letter to Tourgée in 1889. In “Dave’s Neckliss”

he was writing instead—or trying to write—in the “region of feeling and passion”: a more abstract, austere place, the terrain of his admired Voltaire,²⁶ of Swift, or of Twain, where passion rose fiercely from a clear-eyed perception of injustice and human folly. In taking this stance, one skeptical step back from the delusions that he knew supported most human social experience, Chesnutt was in effect beginning to renounce the ethno-category of race itself. By 1903 he could write to Booker T. Washington, angrily contesting Washington’s willingness to countenance myths of African/Negro inferiority and to compromise on black voting rights:

The question with which, in principle, we have to deal, is not the question of the Negro race; what the black race has or has not been able to do in Africa should no more enter into the discussion of the Negro’s rights as a citizen, than what the Irish have not done in Ireland should be the basis of their citizenship here. We are directly concerned with the interests of some millions of American citizens of more or less mixed descent, whose rights are fixed by the Constitution and laws of the United States; nor am I ready yet to accept the doctrine that those constitutional rights are mere waste paper.²⁷

The renunciation of racial myth was perhaps not without cost for Chesnutt, who was in 1903 near the end of his publishing career, although not his “crusade” for justice. His vision of a superstition-free democracy of rational individuals, liberated from the narrative burdens of history (African, Irish, or otherwise), was not only impossibly removed from the reality of most black Americans’ experience at the end of the nineteenth century, as American society descended from the promise of Reconstruction into Jim Crow. One suspects (and the marginal, quietly disappointed characters of his later fictions, the mixed-race dwellers along the color line, bear this observation out) that it also necessitated for Chesnutt a condition of cultural singularity and loneliness—as, ruthlessly denying himself the consolations of community mythologies or “superstitions,” he struggled to focus what he believed to be post-racial eyes on a grotesquely, unjustly racialized world.

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Notes

1. Charles W. Chesnutt, “Dave’s Neckliss,” in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, and Essays*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Library of America, 2002), p. 733. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

2. William Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980), p. 65.

3. Chesnutt, “To Be an Author”: *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt 1889–1905*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Robert C. Leitz III (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), p. 44.

4. Andrews suggests that in 1889 Chesnutt “began to experience a personal conflict between dwelling on contemporary racial problems with ‘feeling and passion’ in his early essays of 1889, and retreating to the ‘realm of superstition’ in his conjure fiction” (p. 22). McElrath and Leitz, in their introduction to the 1889–1905 letters, see “Dave’s Neckliss” as an uneasy last production of the “congenial, witty, and ingratiating storyteller” of the earlier conjure tales, who was to give way to the “angry polemicist” of the later career (Chesnutt, “*To Be an Author*,” pp. 21–22). For Andrews, McElrath, and Leitz, Chesnutt’s other writings of 1889, some of which we discuss in this essay, point to his desire for more overtly politicized fictional forms. Richard Brodhead in his *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993) similarly associates the power of “Dave’s Neckliss” with Chesnutt’s increasingly uncomfortable recognition of the moral compromises involved in creating the Uncle Julius persona for white readers, finally “serving the agenda not of dismantling prejudice but of feeding an appetite for consumable otherness” (p. 206).

5. Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1993), pp. 378–83; Henry B. Wonham, *Charles W. Chesnutt: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1998), pp. 44–47.

6. See, for example, Sylvester Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 123.

7. For important recent accounts of the Ham story, its historical vicissitudes and interpretive inconsistencies, and its importance for American slavery and race thinking, see David Goldenberg’s *The Curse of Ham* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003) and Stephen Haynes’s *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002). Sollors has also usefully traced the curse in relation to cultural attitudes toward miscegenation in his *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).

8. Chesnutt, “The Fall of Adam,” in *The Short Fiction of Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Sylvia Lyons Render (Washington, D.C.: Howard Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 178–79.

9. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, and Essays*, p. 495.

10. In an argument focusing on Chesnutt’s adoption and subversive use of conventional white stereotypes of blackness and black behavior (such as an uncontrollable taste for chickens, watermelon, and ham), Sundquist has noted the punning use of “ham”: “the ‘ham’ evokes the proslavery argument that African Americans were the descendents of Ham, condemned to be the progenitor of servants” (p. 382). Wonham also cites Sundquist’s identification of the allusion in his chapter about Chesnutt’s treatment of the psychological consequences of slavery (p. 45); his reading, like ours, suggests that Chesnutt is concerned with the post-Emancipation aftermath of slavery as well as with slavery itself.

11. Chesnutt, “The Fall of Adam,” p. 181.

12. Religion makes no appearance at all in “The Goophered Grapevine,” and almost none in “Po’ Sandy,” in whose conclusion the worlds of African superstition and Christian rationality are explicitly, if ironically, separated: “Uncle Julius says that ghosts never disturb religious worship,” says Annie of the final use of the transformed Sandy-as-lumber in the meeting house of the Sandy Run Colored Baptist Church (“Po’ Sandy,” in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, and Essays*, p. 29). In “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” however, first published in June 1889, some four months before “Dave’s Neckliss,” Christianity plays a small but problematic role. Like “Dave’s Neckliss,” its frame narrative occurs on a quiet Sunday afternoon, with John and Annie bored after church and Uncle Julius in his Sunday best. The conjure man of the title finds religion midway through the story at a “camp-meetin’,” trades in his vengeful African magic for a Christian guilty conscience,

and leaves his victim Primus suspended chimerically at the tale's end, part man, part mule ("The Conjuror's Revenge," in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, and Essays*, pp. 52, 55).

13. Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Richard Brodhead (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 139–40).

14. Chesnutt, "An Inside View of the Negro Question," in *Essays and Speeches*, ed. McElrath, Leitz, and Jesse S. Crisler (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), p. 58 (italics added).

15. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), p. 146.

16. The process of black Christian Hamitic identification in the second half of the century was thus inextricably bound to Ethiopianism, the vigorous evangelical movement to recover heathen Africa for Christ.

17. Quoted in Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), p. 237.

18. Quoted in Wilmore, p. 146.

19. Quoted in D. Keith Naylor, "The Black Presence at the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893," *Religion*, 26 (July 1996), 253.

20. Johnson, p. 52.

21. Wonham, p. 45.

22. Chesnutt, *Journals*, p. 126.

23. Chesnutt, "To Be an Author," p. 44.

24. Chesnutt, "What is a White Man?," in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, and Essays*, p. 838.

25. Chesnutt, "A Fatal Restriction," *Puck*, 1 May 1889, p. 166. Both "A Fatal Restriction" and "Dave's Neckliss" concern limitations on identity that derive from foundational "sacred texts": the Constitution and the Old Testament. Their similarities are sometimes striking, as in the suicide's discovery:

We broke the door open. Suspended from the gas fixture in the middle of the room was all that was left of Fritz. He had torn an American flag into strips, and made a rope to hang himself with. On the table lay a copy of the Constitution, open at the passage which had pained him so.

26. Chesnutt, *Journals*, pp. 89–91.

27. Chesnutt, "To Be an Author," p. 186.