

Work of the Witness: An inspection of the role of a witness in power negotiation

Performance, and in particular, storytelling is a powerful device that allows participants to explore alternative possibilities to their own realities. Keith Byerman proposes that performance allows the subversion and disorientation of socially constructed values such as power “in part by suggesting that the fixed identity, like the system that produces it, is only one among several possibilities” (5). Charles Chesnutt’s *Conjure Tales*, provides a unique lens through which to view the power dynamic between a socially created “powerful” and “powerless” by suggesting that rather than a binary assignment, power is shared. He presents Uncle Julius as the performer who, through his performative discourse of tale-telling, subverts and negotiates his own power dynamic with John, the economic witness. Through his performance, Uncle Julius attempts to “create a distance from certainty” (Byerman 5) in order to disorient John’s binary view of their relationship. While Uncle Julius’s role as a performer is central to “The Goophered Grapevine,” I argue that John’s role as a witness must also be heavily considered in the conversation of power. I believe that it is the relationship between the performer and the witness that establishes the space in which power dynamics can be negotiated. Thus, without John, no such space may exist and Uncle Julius will not succeed in his task of power dynamic subversion. As, what I will call, the economic witness, John presents Uncle Julius with the opportunity to claim power in their relationship by allowing him to guide his (John’s) understanding of power away from the binary. Uncle Julius, in turn utilizes this space to present John with a tale that works to subvert his views and values of society and power.

1. John’s notions of literal and embedded value

Chesnutt paints John as the economically driven, logical, educated white Northerner, who can only see the market value of the world. Upon arriving in Patesville, John simply describes the town in terms of its economic constructions: “[t]here was red brick markethouse in the public square, with a tall tower, which held a four-faced clock that struck the hours, and pealed out a curfew at nine o’clock” (Chesnutt 2). This description fits succinctly with John’s view of the world. The markethouse in the public square calls to the reader’s mind, images of markets where money and goods are exchanged. The clock tower has four faces, an indication that time, a socially constructed value, is ruling everyone in all directions. Indeed, the clock even dictates strict curfews. Everything in John’s view of this world is neat, orderly, and most importantly holds economic value. As Byerman notes, “John instinctively believes that everything is a potential commodity and that all commodities should be exploited” (7). John, approvingly, denotes Patesville as “a commercial emporium” (Chesnutt 2).

In his initial description of the town, John does not even consider its citizens, as they are less important to his economically-driven mindset than the commodities and constructions that will dictate how much economic value he may derive from the town. We know that John acknowledges his lack of

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deeper sight as he says that he “learned later on that underneath its somnolent exterior the deeper currents of life — love and hatred, joy and despair, ambition and avarice, faith and friendship — flowed not less steadily than in livelier latitudes” (Chesnutt 2). In acknowledging his initially skewed view of the town, John presents to us as readers, an invitation to learn to look deeper than the surface value of what is being presented to us. John describes this deeper level of social understanding as the emotions and attributes that are uniquely human, there are no economic values assigned to love and hate nor faith and friendship. We may liken this “economic performance” of the town to that of the performance of Uncle Julius’s tale, through which John must learn to look beyond what Uncle Julius is presenting to him literally and understand the deeper social workings.

Even upon meeting Uncle Julius, John first appraises the economic value of Uncle Julius. He observes that “he was a tall man, and though slightly bowed by the weight of years, apparently quite vigorous” (Chesnutt 4). Here, John merely appraises the physical quality and value of Uncle Julius. Again, John alludes to the fact that in the future, he does eventually learn to see past this economic evaluation of the world. In observing Uncle Julius, he notes that “[t]here was a shrewdness in his eyes, too, which was not altogether African, and which as we afterwards learned from experience, was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character” (4).

2. Behind John’s binary view of power

Through John and Uncle Julius, Chesnutt presents two opposing versions of a power relationship. As the economic witness, John arrives in the performative space with a binary view of power: one person has power and the other does not. Because he is always looking for the value of things, for John, the assignment of power is indicative of the social and economic value of the person. Thus, John assigns himself as the powerful and Uncle Julius as the powerless. Reasonably, he assumes that he holds power over Uncle Julius because he is a wealthy white man and because Uncle Julius relies on him economically. In opposition to John’s binary view of power, Chesnutt presents a more blurred version of power that spills over the boundaries of socially constructed value. Uncle Julius understands that John has socially created power, as he is a white man, but as a performer, he also knows that he himself has power within this relationship. Uncle Julius’s power stems from his understanding of the incomplete ownership of power which John fails to recognize.

It is due to John’s economic rationale of the world that he can only see the power dynamic between himself and Uncle Julius as a binary rather than a shared ownership. Because John’s understanding of value is purely economic, he believes that his society has already assigned a value to him (based on the color of his skin and his economic wealth), and that he has no need to consider other alternative values or power dynamics. We can see his instinctive willingness to not question socially created values of people and constructions and thus not consider alternative values in the very first

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sentence of the novel. John says, “[s]ome years ago my wife was in poor health, and our family doctor, in whose skill and honesty I had implicit confidence, advised a change of climate” (Chesnutt 1). Because his family doctor is socially recognized as not only an educated but valuable part of society, John does not hesitate to accept his verdict on his wife’s condition. John has “implicit confidence” in this doctor, that is, he believes what he says without question because society has already allotted the doctor some value. Since John is economically driven, he takes what society has allotted as the doctor’s value as the true and only possible value. The same occurs when John encounters his and Uncle Julius’s power relationship. John sees only that Uncle Julius is a poor black man while he himself is a prosperous white man, and in searching for economic value of their relationship, he finds that society has already assigned power in the binary with Uncle Julius as the powerless and himself as the powerful and thus cannot see any alternative power dynamics.

3. Uncle Julius appeals to John the economic witness

Thus far, we have seen how John is economically driven and how his value-driven rationale has led to his binary view of power. It is Uncle Julius who understands the incomplete ownership of power in their relationship and he uses this knowledge to craft his discourse, his tale. But how will John interpret his tale? If we think about the literal social value of Uncle Julius’s tale in “The Goophered Grapevine” as John might evaluate it, we might see that Uncle Julius is simply making up a story in order to convince John not to buy the vineyard. John conjectures that the fact that Uncle Julius profited from the untended vineyard “doubtless[ly], accounted for his advice to me not to buy the vineyard, though whether it inspired the goopher story I am unable to state” (Chesnutt 13). Here, as he has done with the town and Uncle Julius, John simply evaluates the tale for its economic value. Since he hopes to make profits from working the vineyard, he cannot see how Uncle Julius’s story could function other than to prevent his economic benefit and promote that of Uncle Julius. He is “doubtless” that money is the main reason for Uncle Julius’s story. Yet, we know that John eventually looks beyond his economic evaluations of the world and learns to see the “deeper currents of life” (Chesnutt 2). So it is likely that Uncle Julius’s tale, functioning within a performative space with this economic witness, helps change John’s system of evaluation and negotiates values from which he derives his and Uncle Julius’s power dynamic.

It is in the space created by this relationship, between the socially powerful economic witness and seemingly powerless performer that true disorientation and negotiation of power dynamics can occur. Uncle Julius, it seems is fighting an uphill battle. If he is a “powerless” man, how is he to convince the “powerful” John that there exist alternate versions of their power dynamic and in particular that he (Uncle Julius) will share in John’s power? As Saidiya Hartman states, “[a]cts of resistance exist within the context of relations of domination and are not external to them, they acquire their character from these relations, and vice versa” (8). Uncle Julius’s performance is occurring within the context created by

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John's economic evaluations of the world. In order to successfully negotiate the power dynamic, Uncle Julius must appeal to John the economist and craft his discourse, his tale, in a way that John will recognize and understand. John in turn must acknowledge Uncle Julius's performance and be open to ideas of change and subversion.

Because Uncle Julius understands more of the scope of his and John's relationship, he is able to utilize devices that he knows that John will recognize to show John a disoriented view of power. When Mars Dugal' is unable to keep his slaves from eating his grapes, he turns to Aunt Peggy, a "cunjuh 'oman", to help him keep control. Already, Uncle Julius is showing the push and pull of power between a master and slaves as Mars Dugal' could never catch any of the slaves eating the grapes. Not only does Uncle Julius expose the intricate workings of power, he does it with economic description. He knows that John can relate to Mars Dugal' who is losing money due to the loss of his grapes, but he is also showing John that the *cause* of Mars Dugal's economic stress is due to the influence and actions of slaves who are supposed to be "powerless" over their master. Uncle Julius continues to weave economic exchange as a means of communicating his lesson to John throughout his tale. He shows John Mars Dugal' and Aunt Peggy's economic exchange to help Mars Dugal' gain back his power over his slaves. Uncle Julius describes Mars Dugal' takes a basket of chicken, pound cake, and wine over and "[h]e tuk de basket in, en had a long talk wid Aun' Peggy" (6). After this exchange, when Aunt Peggy is hired to goopher the grapevines. John, being driven by profit, understands that Mars Dugal' was "paying" Aunt Peggy to help his profits. This part of the tale should not stand out as abnormal to John since it is reasonable in his reality that a master, a man with power over others, uses economic exchange to maintain his profit.

Uncle Julius also presents a similar economic exchange, but offers a subverted notion of power between master and slave. Once the grapevines have been goophered, it is dangerous for people to eat them, but Henry, a new slave bought by Mars Dugal' does not know this and he eats some of the grapes. When he is eventually told about the goopher, Henry, like Mars Dugal', goes to Aunt Peggy for help. Henry, like Mars Dugal', brings something to exchange for help, "he tuk de ham ober to Aun' Peggy's" (8). Because of their equal economic exchange, Aunt Peggy helps Henry avoid the goopher's effects. In fact, Uncle Julius recalls that "bein' ez he fotch her de ham, she fix' it so he kin eat all the suppernon' he want" (8). To John, this trade should make sense as Henry did something valuable for Aunt Peggy did something of value for him in return. But what should jar John's economic, binary view of power, is that Henry is a slave, and so he should not have the power to "eat all the scuppernon' he want", and yet, Aunt Peggy allows him to do this because he brought her a ham. This transaction mirrors exactly Mars Dugal's transaction with Aunt Peggy, where Mars Dugal' unable to fully exert his normal social power over his slaves, must turn to Aunt Peggy for help.

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Aunt Peggy, then becomes an interesting device by which Uncle Julius delivers his arguments for the subversion of John's binary view of power. She is a "cunjuh 'oman", she has magical power, and for our intents, that is as good as the opposite of John's logical economic values. Aunt Peggy clearly dictates her own values for people in no accordance with any social ideologies as she helps both the "powerful" and the "powerless". In John's reality, it is society who allots specific groups of people power, but in Uncle Julius's world it is Aunt Peggy. She gives Mars Dugal' back his power over his slaves by performing her goopher but she also gives Henry power to resist the power of his master, embodied in the goopher's dangerous effects, thus giving him legitimate power. Uncle Julius knows (especially since he has just met John), that John may not see this message of the shared power between master and slave, so he gives Henry physical power, a sign of value that John will understand. Uncle Julius recalls that Henry "got so biggity dat Mars jackson, de oberseah, ha' ter th'eaten ter whip 'im, ef he did n' stop cuttin' up his dido en behave hisse'f" (9). Henry grows so vigorous and strong from Aunt Peggy's goopher remedy, that he has to be physically threatened by his overseer to behave. It should be clear to John now, that although he is a slave, Henry does hold some allotment of power.

Uncle Julius highlights the push and pull of power that he sees in the world through his performance. It is the very goopher that helps Mars Dugal' exercise power and control over his slaves that allows Henry to become physically powerful. We can translate the work of Uncle Julius's tale to his and John's relationship. John is an economic witness, and because he is present to engage in a relationship with Uncle Julius, Uncle Julius is able to derive even more power in their power dynamic as he eventually guides John to see alternative values in the world. As "The Goophered Grapevine" is just the beginning of a whole slew of tales attempting to create spaces of power dynamics subversion, we know that John still has a lot to learn from Uncle Julius. But without his witness, without John, Uncle Julius would be unable to engage in a negotiation of power. By his mere presence, by his ability to listen and react, John helps establish the power that Uncle Julius (and Chesnutt) is trying to create. Both participants of this performance, whether they know it or not, are working to reach a new understanding of their power dynamic and how the sharing of power governs their relationship.

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Works Cited

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