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Animality against Humanism in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* and *The Marrow of Tradition*

Charles Chesnutt'ın The Conjure Woman *ve* The Marrow of Tradition'*ında Hümanizme Karşı Hayvan*

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Abstract

The fiction of Charles Chesnutt may be easily read and analyzed through his own Enlightenment humanist political lens. However, despite his politics, Chesnutt's use of animality in *The Conjure Woman* and *The Marrow of Tradition* opens an unexpected space of critique towards humanist perspectives and strategies as he addresses racial injustice in the United States in the early 20th century. Given recent critiques of the racial and special construction of the human, animalizing comparisons in literature may be understood in a new light, working to challenge typical humanist understandings of racial degradation and "dehumanization." I argue that Chesnutt's fictional use of animality poses such a challenge, prompting a recognition of and response to white material interests, rather than ineffective humanist ideals.

Keywords

humanism in literature, African American literature, animal rights, Charles Chesnutt, racial violence

Öz

Charles Chesnutt'ın kurmaca edebiyatı, hiç sorgulanmadan onun aydınlanmacı-hümanist politik görüşleri çerçevesinde değerlendirilip analiz edilebilir. Chesnutt'un bu politik görüşlere sahip olmasına karşın onun *The Conjure Woman* ve *The Marrow of Tradition* eserleri 20. yüzyıl ABD'sindeki ırksal adaletsizliği ele alır ve bu sırada hayvan mefhumunun kitaptaki kullanımı hümanist bakış açılarına ve stratejilere karşı beklenmedik bir eleştiri alanının kapısını aralar. İnsanların kendi ırklarını ve kişiliklerini değerlendirmelerine yönelik son zamanlarda yapılan tenkitler göz önüne alındığında onun bu eseri, günümüzdeki literatürde öne çıkan beyaz olmayanları aşağılayan "insanlık-dışı" aydınlanmacı-hümanist tipik anlayışları açık bir şekilde sorgulayan hayvan-odaklı telakkiler ışığında yeni bir perspektifle değerlendirilebilir. Bu açıdan makalemde, Chesnutt'ın eserlerinde hayvanların kurgusal kullanımı ile etkisini yitirmiş aydınlanmacı-hümanist ideallerden ziyade beyaz ırkın somut çıkarlarını ortaya koyan ve bunlara yanıt verilmesini teşvik eden bir meydan okuma zeminini ortaya koyduğunu iddia ediyorum.

Anahtar Kelimeler

edebiyatta humanism, Afro-Amerikan edebiyatı, hayvan hakları, Charles Chesnutt, ırksal şiddet

Introduction

The concept of dehumanization, often grounded in "associations between humans and nonhuman animals," has frequently been understood as integral to the institution of slavery in the United States, serving as a foundation for hierarchizing the white human above the "bestial" African.[1] For example, Phillip Atiba Goff et al. emphasize the history of comparisons between African Americans and apes based on racist claims of evolutionary similarity.[2] David Livingstone Smith also notes how slaves in the United States were frequently described as "belonging to a lower species of animal," a comparison still present in more recent descriptions of African Americans as "*superpredators*" (emphasis in original).[3] Despite these examples, the framework of animal-based dehumanization has also been frequently misapplied in analyzing the creation and perpetuation of racist ideas and institutions. As Jeannine DeLombard notes, prominent proponents of racial inequality, such as physician Samuel Cartwright and biologist Louis Agassiz, "operated primarily through the exploitative recognition, rather than denial, of black humanity."[4] Furthermore, as Zakiyyah Jackson argues in *Becoming Human*, the typical category of the human, as defined through Enlightenment thought, is a racial and special construction often utilized to "bestialize" blackness while maintaining its categorical inclusion in the human species. By working outside this construction, Jackson reconsiders the "disparagement of the nonhuman and 'the animal'" and poses a fundamental challenge to humanist conceptions of racial equality through full species inclusion.[5] While comparisons to nonhuman animals have undoubtedly fueled racial stereotypes of violence, and discriminatory behavior, like the ape comparison noted by Goff et al., recent scholarship reveals that it is mistaken to equate these comparisons with a total removal

1 David Livingstone Smith, *On Inhumanity: Dehumanization and How to Resist It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 14-5; Akwasi Owusu-Bempah, "Race and policing in historical context: Dehumanization and the policing of Black people in the 21st century," *Theoretical Criminology* 21, no. 1 (2017): 27; Phillip Atiba Goff et al., "Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization, and Contemporary Consequences," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94, no. 2 (2008): 293.

2 Goff et al., "Not Yet Human", 292-293.

3 Smith, *On Inhumanity*, 15.

4 Jeannine Marie DeLombard, "Debunking Dehumanization," *American Literary History* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2018), 805.

5 Zakiyyah Jackson, "Introduction," in *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York University Press, 2020) 1, 3.

from the human species.[6] A reconsideration of species hierarchization also opens the possibility for an animality that is not automatically understood as a degradation of the human.

In literary criticism, scholars like Jackson and Samantha Pergadia analyze texts that fundamentally challenge the dehumanization framework and the constructed human concept upon which it is based. In particular, Pergadia critiques the existing epistemological gap between animal studies and critical race theory. The former, she notes, "often reproduces an analogy used to demean and degrade" black humans, while the latter typically fails to challenge a "naturalized association between degradation and animality" which tacitly positions non-human animals as unworthy of moral consideration.[7] In her critique of the racial and special concept of the human, Pergadia analyzes *Beloved* and *The Oxherding Tales*, two novels that, she claims, address the conditions of enslaved humans without reaffirming a reductive understanding of the human above the animal.[8]

While, according to Pergadia, "posthuman" contemporary works like *Beloved* seek explicitly "to move beyond Enlightenment humanism and renegotiate the boundaries between animal, human, and machine," it may be tempting to disregard the work of earlier antiracist writers, like Charles Chesnutt, as reductively humanist. Chesnutt, an advocate for racial upliftment and full inclusion in the U.S. Constitution's "ideal of human liberty" at the turn of the 20th century, may indeed be read uncritically as such.[9] In particular, his notable use of animalizing metaphors in works like *The Conjure Woman* and *The Marrow of Tradition* may risk being read through the typical lens of dehumanization, presumably serving to distance the African American human above and away from the animal. However, I argue that these two works complicate the relationship between human and animal, subverting the assumption of animality as inferior and thus necessarily degrading to the human. Specifically, his use of animal metaphors in these works fundamentally challenges the Enlightenment category of the human by illustrating the limitations of humanist strategies in combatting racist oppression and violence and tactically expanding possibilities of resistance.

This is not to say that Charles Chesnutt's work is exceptional on this front among late 19th-/early 20th-century African American writers – others similarly presumed to tacitly support humanist political ends in their works may certainly be important to revisit in this context as well. However, this article focuses specifically on *The*

6 Goff et al., "Not Yet Human," 304-5.

7 Samantha Pergadia, "Like an Animal: Genres of the Nonhuman in the Neo-Slave Novel," *African American Review* 51, no. 4 (2018), 289-90.

8 Pergadia, "Like an Animal," 291.

9 Pergadia, "Like an Animal," 291; Charles Chesnutt, "Race Prejudice; Its Causes and Its Cure," Charles Chesnutt Archive, https://chesnuttarchive.org/Works/Essays/race.html: Charles Chesnutt.

Conjure Woman and *The Marrow of Tradition* because they directly comment on the human via the animal. In the former, animalization of the human appears literally as a means of resistance to the injustices of slavery. In the latter, this resistant animalization occurs metaphorically in response to white supremacist terror. Through the animalizing stories of Julius and the militant resistance of Josh Green, these two texts may be considered, in their own limited capacity, as supplements to more contemporary works like *Beloved* in their challenge to the racial and special human subject.

Of course, Chesnutt's use of animality does not provide a single, determinate program for resisting racial hierarchies and violence; in both texts, characters' victories are provisional and often accompanied with uncertainty and tragedy. However, this animality does point to the tactical importance of considering material interests exterior to humanist appeals. As Barbara and Karen Fields identify in *Racecraft*, the ideological construction of race in the United States was facilitated by practical concerns for economic production and political stability; they note that slavery as an institution preceded the modern concept of race in the states.[10] This is not to reduce race to a mere component of class, but to suggest that undermining or altering material interests may provide more effective alternatives compared to appeals based on a shared, equal humanity. In *The Conjure Woman*, Julius tells stories of enslaved people who use these alternatives to improve their lives, and he follows their lead through his own manipulative storytelling. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, the well-educated, petit-bourgeois Dr. Miller's class position supports his humanism; he sees himself as superior to the working-class Josh Green. As Green's disillusionment with humanism and "bestial" desire for militant action places him directly at tactical odds with the relatively genteel Dr. Miller, the latter's class position ultimately blinds him to the true dangers of white supremacist terrorism and, in his failure to grasp its full material consequences, prevents him from supporting Green. In both texts, Chesnutt's use of animality directs the focus toward these consequences and provides possibilities for altering them outside of ineffective humanist appeals.

The Construction of the Human

In order to revisit Chesnutt beyond humanism, one must closely examine the racial and special construction of the human his fiction complicates. It is well known that Enlightenment philosophers have defined their conception of the rational human subject as a species above other forms of animal life. As David Nibert identifies, non-human animals were considered "low in a natural hierarchy of living beings"

10 Karen Fields and Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012), 124-31.

by foundational thinkers like Immanuel Kant and René Descartes. This hierarchy, based on human intellect as the measuring stick of conscious existence, has excluded non-human animals from consideration as individuals worthy of rights.[11]

However, this anthropocentric hierarchical distinction has not defined the "human" solely in terms of species. Jackson notes that "Eurocentric humanism needs blackness as a prop in order to erect whiteness: to define its own limits and to designate humanity as an achievement as well as to give form to the category of 'the animal.'"[12] Categorically, Jackson argues, the Enlightenment conception of the human (as the uniquely "moral/rational/political" being atop the hierarchy of life) functioned to support the European project of colonial exploitation, terror, and oppression, which has been inextricably bound up in racialized sex and sexuality.[13] For example, the character of Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, she claims, serves as a figure of blackness that is not merely "dehumanized," but is "constitutive to 'the animal' as a general term."[14] Jackson also notes Hegel's concept of both humans and non-human animals in Africa as "ahistorical" and thus inferior to the Enlightenment subject, rendering a particular race of human as closer to animality without denying a shared taxonomic unit.[15] DeLombard concurs, asserting that "status hierarchy rather than species membership" is more apt as the criteria for moral inclusion.[16] In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson attempts to comparatively hierarchize white and black humans based on physical characteristics. He claims a sexual proximity between orangutans and black women, and argues that black humans' supposed lack of reflective capabilities makes them closer to non-human animals.[17] This is notably not a denial of humanity outright, but a claim that racial difference rendered some humans less than worthy of full political consideration as Enlightenment subjects.

Ironically, this imposed inferior status bound within and by the "human" distinction also undergirds an exclusion of the black human from environmental causes. Kimberly Ruffin notes that "[l]ong-standing environmental micro and macroaggressions that reinforce oppression have left African Americans simultaneously separated

11 David Nibert, *Animal Rights/Human Rights: Entanglements of Oppression and Liberation* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 203-4.

12 Jackson, "Introduction," 4, 26.

13 Jackson, "Introduction," 13-4.

14 Jackson, "Introduction," 14.

15 Jackson, "Introduction," 25.

16 DeLombard, "Debunking Dehumanization," 805.

17 Thomas Jefferson, "Laws," in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston: Lilly and Wait, 1832), 145-6.

from prime nonhuman natural resources and characterized as animalistic subhumans."[18] Thus, according to Ruffin, African Americans' relatively low participation in mainstream environmentalist efforts is not the result of cultural "apathy," as some scholars have claimed, but the product of racial bias and systemic exclusion.[19] When considered "below" the Enlightenment subject yet not entirely nonhuman, African Americans can be treated both as a natural Other yet denied authority on nature.

Still, Ruffin notes that ecological movements based outside of Western dichotomies have succeeded in engaging black activists. Organizations like People for Community Recovery understand political and social issues historically faced by African Americans, including "displacement, genocide,…enslavement and the subsequent racial disparities," within an environment that is not artificially divided into human-interior and natural-exterior worlds.[20] By rejecting the terms of the white hierarchized human, these ecological efforts are better equipped to understand and communicate about life beyond racialized categories of being and subjectivity, "*overlapping experience of relationships among humans and among humans and nonhuman nature*" (emphasis in original).[21] Similarly, as Nibert contends in *Animal Rights/Human Rights*, "speciesism, like racism, sexism, and classism, results from and supports oppressive social arrangements."[22] Any attempt to properly address any of these "-isms," then, must also contest the historically constructed Enlightenment human which artificially alienates the individual as that which ontologically transcends its social and material environment. Otherwise, a continued appeal through humanism will fail to address this racialized construction. As Saidiya Hartman identifies, humanist discourses mobilized for racial equity have also "acted to tether, bind, and oppress."[23]

Complicating Chesnutt's Humanism

One may certainly be tempted to categorize Charles Chesnutt as exclusively part of this humanist discourse. Chesnutt's political perspective on race was fundamentally grounded in the legal equality of all humans at the turn of the 20th century, as Jim Crow laws, designed to maintain racial segregation predominately in the U.S. South,

18 Kimberly N. Ruffin, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (thens: University of Georgia Press), 5.

19 Ruffin, *Black on Earth*, 5.

20 Ruffin, *Black on Earth*, 7-9.

21 Ruffin, *Black on Earth*, 18.

22 Nibert, *Animal Rights/Human Rights*, 10.

23 Saidiya Hartman, "Introduction," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in 19th Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

continued to stifle efforts at racial equality.[24] Instead of arguing for black separatism or a radical upheaval of the legal system, Chesnutt pointed repeatedly to the proper implementation of the U.S. Constitution's human rights as the ultimate source of progressive racial justice.[25] His focus on education emphasized a universal human capacity to "share, according to personal capacity and development, in all the inheritances of humanity."[26] Given both his own educational opportunities and the substantive legal reforms he followed closely throughout his life, it is certainly understandable that Chesnutt would act as a "veritable poster child for Northern uplift ideology."[27]

This humanist stance is also evident in Chesnutt's relationships with W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. In a letter to Du Bois, he affirms the central importance of enforcing Constitutional amendments and appealing to white intellectuals: "What the Negro needs more than anything else is a medium through which he can present his case to thinking white people, who after all are the arbiters of our destiny."[28] Indeed, Joseph McElrath and Robert Leitz place Chesnutt's work within Du Bois's concept of the "Talented Tenth" (a class of African Americans uniquely able to uplift their race through higher education and leadership).[29] Du Bois, in fact, gave high praise to *The Marrow of Tradition* as a sociological work.[30] While Chesnutt championed Du Bois's advocacy for African American intellectual production, he also did not consider himself entirely at odds with Booker T. Washington's alternative approach to racial upliftment. Rather, Chesnutt saw his fiction as a worthy supplement to Washington's political work, even as he criticized his focus on the "practical

24 Charles A. Gallagher, and Cameron D. Lippard. "Jim Crow Laws," *Race and Racism in the United States: An Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2014), 634-5.

25 Charles Chesnutt, "Race Prejudice": Charles Chesnutt, "The Disenfranchisement of the Negro," in *The Marrow of Tradition: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 240.

26 Chesnutt, "Race Prejudice," 240.

27 David Hollingshead, "Nonhuman Liability: Charles Chesnutt, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and the Racial Discourses of Tort Law", *American Literary Realism* 50, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 96.

28 Charles Chesnutt, *Letter from Chas. W. Chesnutt to W.E.B. Du Bois, June 27, 1903*, Letter, From Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, *W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, 1803-1999*, https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b002-i029.

29 McElrath, Joseph R., and Robert C. Leitz, eds, *"To Be an Author": Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 12.

30 McElrath and Leitz, *"To Be an Author"*, 174.

arts" and gradual suffrage.[31] While his work as a novelist and essayist aligned him with Du Bois's perspective, he evidently also considered Washington valuable in achieving his ultimate goal: shared, equal human consideration under law for all races. Given this perspective, it is clear that Chesnutt's belief in equal access to the "inheritances of humanity" through legal reform, social upliftment, and appeals to white audiences does not fundamentally challenge the racial and special construction of the human subject, instead reaffirming a liberal commitment to be fully seen and understood within the given constituency of the human.

Still, other scholars have found strong potential beyond humanist premises in Chesnutt's work. David Hollingshead notes the writer's elaborations on nonhuman liability in tort law as a means of challenging strictly humanist readings of his texts.[32] Similarly, Joshua Lam identifies unique possibilities in Chesnutt's use of "objects," in which the resistance of minerals, plants, nonhuman animals, and enslaved humans decenters the Enlightenment subject as the sole source of agency.[33] Mary Kuhn also demonstrates how *The Conjure Woman* expands political consideration beyond the realm of the social human, noting how "the brutality against men and trees connects the field and the forest" in the American South, particularly in the production of resources like turpentine outside of cultivated plantations.[34] Although Chesnutt's essays indicate an interest in addressing race through liberal humanist means of advancement, his fiction still evidently broadens the scope of political thought and action beyond this limited framework. Like Lam, I see this broadening occur through a human interaction with nonhuman agents, although my focus is specifically on nonhuman animals, which Lam tends to conflate with other "natural" objects.[35]

To be clear, Charles Chesnutt's use of animal metaphors does not entirely upend his anthropocentrism; in both *The Conjure Woman* and *The Marrow of Tradition*, animality is still ultimately used to comment on and criticize specifically human conditions. However, this focus on human lives is constructed alongside, rather than "above," nonhuman animal experiences, thus undermining the terms on which a racial and special hierarchy is constructed and political action is theorized. In doing

31 Chesnutt, "Race Prejudice"; Charles Chesnutt, "Selected Letters," in *The Marrow of Tradition: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 204.

32 Hollingshead, "Nonhuman Liability," 113.

33 Joshua Lam, "Black Objects: Animation and Objectification in Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Tales," *College Literature* 45, no. 3 (2018), 370-1.

34 Mary Kuhn, "Chesnutt, Turpentine, and the Political Ecology of White Supremacy," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 136, no. 1 (2021), 40-1.

35 Lam, "Black Objects," 376.

so, I engage with scholars like Lam and Hollingshead who attempt to read beyond the "humanist essentialism" typically assumed in his work.[36]

An Explicitly Reactive Approach

Before embarking on this analysis, there is one more theoretical point worth addressing on animality. In concurrence with Jackson's critical approach in *Becoming Human*, as well as Nibert's sociological perspective, I agree that the outright rejection of a liberal humanist framework is necessary to fundamentally challenge the system of oppression and exploitation supported by the Enlightenment notion of the human. However, I diverge from Jackson's unwillingness to establish a specific ethical scope regarding the treatment of nonhuman animals. Jackson states:

> I am less interested in finding a universal posture toward humanism in the form of a prescription on how we should be (human) or treat animals. That would run the risk of simply inverting the paradigmatic universal subject, obscuring the particular situatedness of my subject(s) by reproducing the normative logic of imperial humanism, one that equates an idealized Western subjectivity with universal law and universal law with justice. And, as we have seen, law may obscure ethics and justice because laws always point to a specific lived, historical, and embodied subjectivity—one that is not universally shared.[37]

Jackson is certainly correct that a universal law is not necessary to take ethical action, and it is crucial to acknowledge the epistemological and material consequences that the applications of such a law may have in practice. However, one may distinguish between the prescription of a universal law and a practical demand to completely reject the legally-sanctioned treatment of nonhuman animals. In other words, a purely reactive universal demand can (and must) still be raised in literary criticism, and it cannot be cleanly separated from Jackson's intended "unsettling of foundational authority."[38]

To further elaborate, I cautiously point to the argument raised by Gary Francione, an unapologetically liberal humanist animal rights scholar, in his *Introduction to Animal Rights*. Legally, Francione argues, no animal should be treated as property due to their moral status as sentient individuals. Furthermore, in an extension of his "humane treatment principle," he argues that there is no reasonable situation (beyond emergencies, which the subtitle of his book, *Your Child or the Dog?*, mockingly addresses) in which it is necessary to subject an animal, human or nonhuman, to harm; uses of other animals by humans for food, clothing, medicine, entertainment,

36 Hollingshead, "Nonhuman Liability," 113.

37 Jackson, "Introduction," 44.

38 Jackson, "Introduction," 44.

or any other purpose is unjustified if moral consideration towards the individual sentient animal, human or nonhuman, is taken seriously.[39]

To be clear, Francione's attempt to extend liberal humanism to "elevate" animals to moral and legal consideration is highly limited and inadequate – it entirely fails to address the problematic construction of the human that Jackson crucially critiques, and theorizes animal rights as a simple extension of the project of the Enlightenment. It also reductively universalizes the issue, broadly assuming that, in the 21st century, there exists no human society that cannot avoid relying on animal products for survival. Francione would do well to acknowledge the economic forces at play that often impose an unavoidable reliance on animal products for survival.[40] Still, while the liberal humanist assumptions on which his argument rests must be reconsidered, Francione's conclusion remains useful in that it acknowledges the agency humans have in restraining our own capacity to cause harm.[41] Whether understood in the context of universal rights or merely as respect for another being's sentience, Francione's basic argument, that all animals ought *not* be treated as property, is a strictly reactive claim. I argue that this can be understood radically as a response to law, rather than the proactive imposition of another. Similarly, it would be unethical to take a knowingly ambivalent stance on human property status on the grounds that to take a position would reaffirm "the normative logic of imperial humanism." This is not to say that any practice of this resistance is always ethical, nor that any harm it may produce is negligible and worthwhile; for example, Jackson rightly notes the detrimentally racist and imperialist implementation of stricter poaching laws intended to protect great apes.[42] However, this is to say that one should not conflate a political goal of reactive resistance with a proactive prescription of universal human conduct. To treat the property status of animals with ambivalence is to tacitly accept it as one of many possible valid ways of living.

It is necessary to make this firm argument against the property status of animals prior to analyzing texts, like Chesnutt's, where the use of animal metaphors may be easily read in the typical, and possibly intended, context of "dehumanization." Instead, beginning from the standpoint that the property status of animals is unjust allows these metaphors to work beyond the scope of a conventional reading, broadening their interpretive possibilities for antiracist resistance to the reductive human concept Jackson criticizes. In works like *Beloved*, analyzed by both Jackson and

39 Gary L. Francione, *Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or the Dog?* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 31.

40 Nibert, *Animal Rights/Human Rights*, 133-5.

41 This is not to say that humans are exceptional in this agency – merely that humans do have this capacity to restrain themselves and intentionally influence the behavior other humans.

42 Jackson, "Introduction," 15-6.

Pergadia, the text provides clearer challenges to the human concept, and thus an explicit framework of resistance may not be as crucial. In analyzing the subtleties of Chesnutt's work, however, I believe it is a necessary starting point.

Ambiguously Fictive Animality in *The Conjure Woman*

In *The Conjure Woman*, a collection of short stories first published together in 1899, Chesnutt constructs a frame narrative centered on a wealthy white couple, John and Annie, who move to Patesville, North Carolina to start a vineyard soon after the Civil War. Upon their arrival, they discover a suitable plot of land and a local man, Julius, whom they first encounter eating grapes on the property. Julius, who becomes the couple's coachman once they purchase the property, serves as the narrator for stories about Patesville prior to the abolition of slavery. These stories typically consist of an enslaved African appealing to a conjurer to help them solve a problem usually caused by their white slaveowner. The conjurer's methods often involve placing a curse, or "goopher," on someone or something, or temporarily transforming a person into a different type of being or material. When Julius finishes his story, the narrator, John, expresses his disbelief in the conjurer's magic, noting that the story is likely being used as a means of influencing the couple to act (or not act) in a particular way. While Julius's stories are never formally verified for the reader, they are also never disproven, leaving their ultimate truth value up to the reader.

In "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," Julius tells the story of an enslaved African, Becky, who is separated from her young son, Mose, when her slaveowner trades her away for a racehorse, Lightning Bug. Nancy, Becky's sister, hires a local conjure woman to help reunite Becky with her son. First, the conjure woman transforms Mose temporarily into a hummingbird, and later a mockingbird, allowing him to fly south and visit his mother as she works. Although Mose cannot communicate with his mother, she still appears to feel his presence during these visits: "Fus' she 'lowed it wuz a hummin'-bird; den she thought it sounded lack her little Mose croonin' on her breas' way back yander on de ole plantation. En she des 'magine' it wuz her little Mose, en it made her feel bettah, en she went on 'bout her wuk pearter 'n she'd done sence she'd be'n down dere."[43] When Mose leaves, Becky dreams of spending time with him in human form, providing her with a few days of relief from the grief of familial separation.[44] In this instance of animal transformation, Becky understands this presence as metaphorical: she thinks of the hummingbird and mockingbird as mere reminders of her son, rather than his literal, corporeal being humming around her or perching on her shoulder. Despite this, the great relief she feels as a result of his visits indicates a

43 Charles Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926), 147.

44 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 148.

sense of genuine, if only temporary and unrecognizable, connection with Mose in his bird form. In other words, her metaphorical understanding of Mose through the nonhuman animal body is a far more direct interaction with her son than she perceives.

However, Nancy finds that this method of visitation is inadequate, and she realizes that it is difficult to continue paying the conjure woman for her services. Seeking a more permanent solution, she works with the conjure woman to help bring Becky back to her son. The conjure woman enlists a hornet to sting the knees of Lightning Bug, causing them to swell to the point of alarm to the slaveowner. She then uses dreams to convince Becky that Mose has died and sends a sparrow south to deliver her a bag of roots. This succeeds in convincing Becky that she has been cursed to die, leading her condition to worsen. These two actions by the conjure woman and her animal helpers convince the respective slave owners to renege on their original trade, both believing that they had gotten the short end of the bargain in the apparently rapid decline in their new "property's" health. This successfully returns Becky to her son.[45]

The conjure woman's use of animals to manipulate the perceived economic value of Becky and Lightning Bug is an effective means of working outside typical methods of appeal based on human empathy or morality. Becky's slaveowner notes that he "did n' keer ter take de mammies' way fum dey chillun w'iles de chillun wuz little," and that he does not like to make trouble for anyone, even the humans he uses as property.[46] This is not a case of "dehumanization," in which the slaveowner sees the enslaved human as an inferior animal. Even as he explicitly recognizes Becky and Moses' humanity and considers them worthy of moral consideration, he still decides to go through with the trade. Nancy and the conjure woman correctly see that appeals to humanist sense and moral reason are useless here, and instead decide to manipulate his perceived financial interests. This form of resistance, which literally operates through the uniquely nonhuman capacity of the hornet to poison and the sparrow to fly, rejects human reason as the superior means of achieving a particular end in the face of injustice. Furthermore, the economic equivalence drawn between Lightning Bug and Becky is not a simple reduction of the human to the degraded status of livestock. While Becky's legal status as property makes the separation happen in the first place, it also provides the mechanism by which her own physical decline, resulting in her incapacity to labor, allows her to return. Lam identifies this propertied resistance in *The Conjure Woman* as a limited yet uniquely "provocative passivity" made possible by (in)action outside typical human agency.[47]

Just like the characters in stories like "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," Julius also uses alternative methods as a means of manipulating white interests to serve his own ends, rather than making ineffective appeals in rationalist discourse. Although he tells these

45 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 149-56.

46 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 141-142.

47 Lam, "Black Objects," 380-1.

stories in the post-slavery South, he still recognizes the utility of acting outside of a humanist framework to resist continued racial inequity. Indeed, Julius's stories often prove to be effective in achieving his desired ends, even if only in limited ways; while John vehemently resists any notion that Julius's stories may be true, Annie's behavior usually changes as a result. For example, in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," Julius tells the story of a cruel slaveowner who, through a reversal of fate, learns to treat his slaves more mercifully. When he concludes this story with a lesson, Julius does not point to universal human equality or other higher morals to drive home his point. Instead, like the conjure woman, he simply points to financial interests, noting that cruel white people suffer bad dreams and are less likely to prosper than kinder ones.[48] Consequently, Annie decides to give Julius's grandson another chance at employment.[49]

Moreover, Julius's stories do not always have an explicit lesson. This is apparent in "The Conjurer's Revenge," where Annie complains that his story is "nonsense" because it has no moral.[50] However, Annie is fundamentally mistaken in the purposelessness of the story; in fact, it has a very precise purpose that remains unseen by the white audience. By telling stories that are, notably, far more entertaining to the couple than the books of philosophy John attempts to enjoy, Julius is able to achieve a desired end under the guise of mere amusement.[51] Although Julius insists that his stories are true, his personal understanding of truth is at odds with scientific provability. Julius notes that, because he has no reason to dispute them, his stories are truer than the notion that the Earth revolves around the sun (a fact he can easily deny by watching the sun move across the sky).[52] While Chesnutt appears to use this to humorously play on the limits of Julius's experiential wisdom, it crucially exposes a direct methodological difference between Julius's concept of truth and John's strictly rationalist perspective. For Julius, the value of truth in his stories come less in their provability and more in their utility. Thus, by using entertainment as a means of communicating to and maneuvering white interests, Chesnutt recognizes where Enlightenment reason becomes less useful than alternative forms of indirect persuasion.

In "Hot-Footed Hannibal," the final story in the published collection, Chesnutt leaves his otherwise-skeptical narrator with reason to believe that nonhuman animals may be involved in helping Julius achieve his ends. When approaching a fork in the road in their coach, Julius finds that he cannot convince the couple to take the path he would prefer them to take. However, after they travel down their chosen path, the horse drawing the coach refuses to walk any further, despite Julius's apparent

48 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 100.

49 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 102.

50 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 127.

51 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 163.

52 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 128.

efforts to make the horse continue. Julius then tells John and Annie a story about a woman who apparently haunts the surrounding area. Ultimately, the refusal of the horse to move requires them to turn back and take the other path, resulting in an otherwise impossible reconciliatory meeting between their daughter and her suitor. John later speculates that Julius had crafted a deal with the suitor to ensure that the meeting would happen, and thus planned all along to make them proceed down the correct path.[53] Then, in the final line of the story, John notes that the horse "was never known to balk again."[54] This line suggests a possible inversion of John's rational assumption that conjure magic is not real; if the horse only ever happened to stop at the most opportune moment for Julius, then it implies the horse was somehow in on Julius's plan. However, this also confirms John's other assumption: that Julius only tells his stories to steer the couple towards a particular course of action. If both of these implications are true, barring coincidence, both the actual reality of conjure magic and Julius's opportunism are real in *The Conjure Woman.* Consequently, the horse's perfectly-timed (in)action upends a tempting rationalist reading that situates the reader alongside John in his skepticism of Julius. Instead, it suggests an intuitive possibility without directly confirming it, further frustrating the reader's desire for verification. Like Julius, Chesnutt's use of an entertaining twist provokes its reader to think outside of a strictly liberal humanist framework which exalts human reason above and beyond less "rational" modes of understanding and meaning-making. This challenge is conducted through the evident agency of the nonhuman animal, whose implied similarity to Julius neither "dehumanizes" the man nor anthropomorphizes the horse.

Redeeming the "Mere Animal Dislike of Restraint" in *The Marrow of Tradition*

In *The Marrow of Tradition*, published two years after *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt provides a similar, though less obvious use of animality to comment on race in the American South. *Marrow* centers on the events of the Wilmington massacre of 1898, a violent white supremacist insurrection that targeted newly-elected government officials, black-owned businesses, and black citizens.[55] Chesnutt's fictionalization of the event portrays two opposing viewpoints on the necessary response to the white terror as it occurs – these viewpoints are respectively communicated by Dr. Miller, a well-educated black doctor, and Josh Green, a working-class black man. Although

53 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 199-228.

54 Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 229.

55 John DeSantis, "Wilmington, N.C., Revisits a Bloody 1898 Day and Reflects," *New York Times*, June 4, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/04/us/04wilmington.html.

Miller's humanist perspective remains dominant through his position as a narrator, Chesnutt provides evidence to suggest that Green's perspective is more effective at addressing the crisis in the moment. Crucially, Chesnutt's use of animal metaphors to refer to Green indicates the relative efficacy of acting outside the realm of typical humanist tactics in a life-or-death situation. Like Julius in *The Conjure Woman*, Green's proximity to animality is revealed to be a positive, even necessary means of resistance, rather than a simple "degradation" of the black human.

Chesnutt first describes Josh Green through Dr. Miller's narration as he rides the train south to the town of Wellington.[56] At a train station, Miller sees Green "crawling" to a water trough to drink, where he places his head in the water and shakes himself off "like a wet dog."[57] As an observer from his train car, Miller immediately characterizes Green as a nonhuman animal. Then, Miller notices an actual dog brought aboard the train and wonders if it will stay in the white car with its owner. When the dog is led to the baggage car, Miller is relieved of a "queer sensation" arising from the possibility of the dog being treated to better accommodations than him in his separate, "Colored" train car.[58] Miller's relief comes about from a sense that he still ranks above the dog, who has been categorized as property, in the human hierarchy. Alongside the description of Green as a "wet dog," this suggests that the thirsty man may also be less than deserving of a human seat on the train. Miller also indicates irritation towards other black travelers in his train car, noting their "obvious shortcomings" and his offense at their jocularity.[59] He also contextualizes their behavior in a progressive humanist understanding of black upliftment after a "slow emergence" from slavery.[60] This condescension towards his fellow passengers thus also reflects poorly on the equally "unrefined" Green, further indicating Miller's assumed sense of superiority. While the comparison to a "wet dog" should not be read as inherently negative, Miller's hierarchical humanist understanding categorizes it as such.

When the massacre begins in Wellington, Josh Green is again placed in the position of a domestic animal through simile. As he attempts to convince Dr. Miller that a direct militant response is necessary, one of his followers asserts that they refuse to be "'shot down like dogs'" or "'stuck like pigs in a pen.'"[61] Unlike Miller's observations on the train, this animalizing language reflects an urgent sense of entrapment and helplessness experienced by the black citizens of Wellington without explicitly

56 Wellington is Chesnutt's fictionalized version of Wilmington.

57 Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition: The Complete Text*, in *The Marrow of Tradition: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 39.

58 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 40.

59 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 40-1.

60 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 41.

61 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 176.

commenting on whether dogs *should* be shot down or pigs *should* be stuck in a pen. This language emphasizes that all black citizens, regardless of social status or comportment, are denied the freedom and safety allowed only through tentative, mutable inclusion in the category of the human.

In this context, Miller's continued refusal to lead or assist the militant crowd is also a refusal to strategize beyond his hierarchized humanist framework. Miller states, "At such a time, in the white man's eyes, a negro's courage would be mere desperation; his love of liberty, a mere animal dislike of restraint. Every finer human instinct would be interpreted in terms of savagery."[62] To Miller, it is indeed humanlike to fight back with dignity, but he believes that the misinterpretation of this reaction will have the opposite "dehumanizing" effect. In Miller's humanist framework, being excluded from the category of human is simply too grave of a short- and long-term consequence for the black citizens.

Yet, as Miller attempts to find his family amid the massacre, his status does little to protect him from the white men patrolling the streets. Even an apologetic white neighbor still stops and searches the doctor, claiming that he is only following orders: "'It ain't men like you that we're after, but the vicious and criminal class.'"[63] Much like the "sympathetic" slaveowner in the "Aunt Becky's Pickaninny," this white man's recognition of black humanity does not stop him from upholding his own interests in white supremacy, and only Miller's class position protects him from greater danger. While Miller's attempt at peace may prevent more harmful violence against him, it fails to protect his innocent child, who is killed by a "stray bullet" in the massacre.[64] The delays Miller faces in his indignant compliance leaves his child exposed to the indiscriminate danger of the white mob. This is not to say that the child would have lived had Miller joined Green's party, but it is to say that Miller's avoidance of anything associated with the "animal" or "savage" is ineffective in preventing this tragedy. His own faith that "[t]he white people of Wellington were not savages; or at least their temporary reversion to savagery would not go as far as to include violence to delicate women and children," is also notably disproven.[65] Any belief in the protection of a shared humanity above "savagery" is difficult to square with his innocent child's death.

For Josh Green, by contrast, the stakes are simply too high to worry about public perception – he recognizes that white people will still terrorize black citizens regardless of how perfectly "human" they act. After all, Green recognizes among their ranks an enemy who only selectively plays by the rules of humanism: Captain McBane. While the other white men responsible for provoking the massacre attempt

62 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 176.

63 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 172.

64 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 190.

65 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 175.

to justify their racism with supposedly benevolent motives, McBane rejects "mere pretense," noting that he wants to oppress and attack black people simply because he can.[66] Having witnessed his father's lynching at the hands of McBane, Green is able to understand the Captain's unrelenting violence more directly than Dr. Miller, and he lacks any status or means that would exempt him from the "'vicious and criminal class.'" Furthermore, McBane is characterized as a dangerous "tamed tiger" during the massacre.[67] This animal comparison places McBane more explicitly outside of a humanist framework, in contrast to Major Carteret, whose attempt to quell the mob through appeals "'to our city, to our state, to our civilization'" is entirely fruitless.[68] In short, Green recognizes that McBane's "taming" within civil human society does nothing to prevent him from indulging in direct racist violence. Green recognizes that this "bestial" force cannot be faced on the level of the ideological power structure which both masks and catalyzes its violence – instead, it can only be faced with an equally brute force. Thus, the façade of humanity is stripped entirely from the massacre as both McBane's white terrorists and Green's black defenders are characterized as "brute beasts."[69] While Green's resistance is largely unsuccessful, Green himself achieves his life's singular purpose: avenging his father.[70] By killing the irredeemable "tamed tiger," the "wet dog" has also prevented McBane from further inevitable acts of violence against black people.

Although Dr. Miller understands animality as a condition to be avoided in opposition to supposed full humanity, Josh Green correctly understands that adhering to this hierarchical dichotomy will do nothing to protect them, and is thus less constrained in his direct response. While both characters face tragedy as a result of the massacre, the death of Miller's child is devastatingly purposeless and involuntary compared to Green's successful suicide charge. The relative inefficacy of Miller's stance poses a fundamental challenge to his politics. The rhetorical use of animality in this context directs this challenge specifically at the humanist premises underlying the difference between Miller's and Green's strategies. In short, Green reveals that there is nothing "mere" about an "animal dislike of restraint."

Still, this should not be misread as a total equivalence between animality and retaliatory violence. In one instance, Dr. Miller observes a dog acting uncharacteristically quiet and hiding behind a woodpile as the massacre unfolds. This image is directly juxtaposed with Mrs. Butler, a black woman, taking cover behind her wooden blinds. By mirroring the actions of the dog in her own home, Mrs. Butler protects herself, and she also works to protect the lives of Dr. Miller's wife and child by hiding them

66 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 52.

67 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 181.

68 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 182.

69 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 183.

70 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 184.

as well.[71] The shared act of taking shelter by the dog and Mrs. Butler indicate other forms of action that still rightfully mistrust a façade of shared humanity and lawfulness. Animality in *The Marrow of Tradition* thus opens a subtle space of critique that reveals alternative, if still limited, possibilities of resistance in dire circumstances.

Conclusion

The assertion that "no human should be treated like an animal" is based on a conception of dehumanization which upholds a narrowly racial and special construction of the human above the animal.[72] While there are many undeniable examples of this construction weaponized against African Americans via comparisons to animals, humanists have only resisted the comparison itself while uncritically upholding the notion that animality is necessarily a degraded exclusion from the human. Recently, scholars like DeLombard, Pergadia, Ruffin, and Jackson have critically re-examined this Enlightenment concept of the human and questioned the prevalent narrative of racial dehumanization. Their recent critiques are particularly useful in examining contemporary literature from the 1980s onward, where Pergadia identifies a "post-human" move to look beyond the Enlightenment human and "unravel an inherited anthropocentrism."[73] However, I argue that one may also apply this approach further back in the African American literary tradition. An antiracist and antispeciesist critique of the human prompts a new reading of supposedly "humanist" works by writers, like Chesnutt, from over a century ago, shedding new analytical light on their work and its subversive potential.

Despite Charles Chesnutt's own political views, his fiction begins to reveal both the limits of a humanist ideology and the strategic possibilities that exist beyond it. In Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, animality effectively manipulates the interests of both the slaveowner and postbellum landowner, while in *The Marrow of Tradition*, the animal metaphor demonstrates the limits of humanist appeals and illustrates the tactical necessity of directly confronting white supremacist terror with force.

71 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 174-5.

72 Pergadia, "Like an Animal," 290.

73 Pergadia, "Like an Animal," 291.

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