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“For Some Occult Reason”: Romanticizing Slavery in “Po’ Sandy”

Confederate flags, civil war reenactments, and southern-style architecture all define the romanticizing of slavery that has been occurring for over a hundred years. This slavery glamorizing is present in Charles W. Chesnutt’s short story “Po’ Sandy.” The 1899 slave narrative focuses on a slave, named Uncle Julius, who tells the story of a man named Sandy who asked his conjure wife to turn him into a tree to keep him on his master’s plantation. The story begins when a couple who moved to the South planned to make a backyard kitchen out of an old schoolhouse on the land. Storyteller Julius wanted to make a church out of the schoolhouse, so he told the tale of a man who was turned into a tree and then accidentally chopped into wood to make an outside kitchen, which then became a schoolhouse. The characters in “Po’ Sandy” romanticize slavery in their own ways -- from John refusing to believe the hardships, to his wife Annie dreaming of building a plantation-style kitchen. This glamorizing is not a thing of the past because people still glorify slavery in different forms of southern pride. The romanticizing of slavery in Charles W. Chesnutt’s “Po’ Sandy” relates to current events through the romanticizing of Old South aesthetics, the attempted arrogation of southern culture, the appropriation of minority culture, and the selective remembrance of history.

To begin, the character Annie in “Po’ Sandy” has an unwavering desire to build a kitchen separate from her home. In the story John says, “(F)or some occult reason my wife wanted a kitchen in the backyard, apart from the dwelling-house, after the usual Southern fashion” (Chesnutt 14). That “fashion” Annie wanted was the style many kitchens used on Old South plantations. In these plantations, kitchens were separate from the home in case the slaves set it on

fire. J. B. Calvert in “The Myth of the Antebellum South” said the Old South was “a land of prosperous plantations and happy Negroes, large white houses with window glass, cultured people who could read and write music and literature, and a stable economy based on cotton.” This false image is what people romanticized and still want to recreate. The Old South was the *slave* South and romanticized slavery above all else. Annie’s kitchen embodies that idea. The “occult” kitchen is one of the reasons why Annie is *conjured*, like the characters in Uncle Julius’ tales, to believe that to embody the New South, she must use the Old South’s structures to repeat the plantation -- an architectural form of southern racism (Worden, “Birth in the Briar Patch” 5). In this, “Po’ Sandy” uses architecture as a version of slavery. This idea of romanticizing southern aesthetics planted into Annie’s mind emphasizes how she picks-and-chooses what she likes about southern history. She was not a part of southern history. She didn’t like the slavery, but she liked the architecture because it interested her.

The idea of Annie romanticizing slavery with a separate kitchen compares to things that people currently do to give homage to their version of the Old South. An example of this would be the current debate about racism in the Confederate flag. People recently have been using the flag to honor their ancestors with the motto “Heritage, Not Hate,” although the flag was flown by soldiers who were fighting to keep slavery. The connection between the flag and “Po’ Sandy” stresses the kitchen being a symbol for slavery, even though slavery was abolished at the time. Margaret D. Bauer said, “In ‘Po’ Sandy,’ Chesnutt illuminates clearly how a symbol of the Old South -- whether it be a kitchen built off of the main house, as in Chesnutt’s story, or a Confederate flag -- cannot be separated from the history of slavery and just represent the romantic side of the time period or southern pride” (71). Annie’s kitchen is reminiscent of the horrors that slaves, that Julius at one point, had to face on the plantation. Another way that

people show their “Southern pride” is through Civil War reenactments. In these, people dress as Union and Confederate soldiers and recreate actual Civil War battles. The mock fights attempt to commemorate the fallen soldiers while replicating history, but may look nice but actually do the opposite of giving homage to history. This relates to “Po’ Sandy” because replicating history is just what Annie wanted to do. Annie bends her image of the Old South to her will while ignoring the hardships of slavery, just as Confederate soldier reenactors portray the Confederacy’s victorious moments in battle. They willingly choose not to think about *why* the southern soldiers were fighting, just as Annie ignores why the backyard kitchens were created: for the purpose of slavery. Another thing about reenactments is the fact that the people who attend them are the ones who romanticize slavery ideals. Most African Americans are not willing to recreate the part of the war where slaves accompanied their masters to battle, carrying their master’s weapons, blankets, cooking supplies, and more (Lafantasia, Glenn W.). It’s also probably not very common for African Americans to watch the war reenactments, nor create southern-style architectural homes. The bad parts of the War should not and eventually cannot be ignored. In “Po’ Sandy,” Julius reminds Annie that the background to her dream kitchen also cannot be forgotten.

Annie’s wishes for an antebellum-style home is paired with John’s goal to make money in the South. John was a carpetbagger -- he moved from the North to benefit from the post-Civil War South. His northerner mentality is why he doesn’t quite understand the logic behind slavery. This is evident in John’s ignorance to why Annie wanted the kitchen, like when Chesnutt writes that John says it was “for some occult reason” (14). John is more concerned with how much it will cost for the kitchen to be built, hence why he wanted to use the wood from the old schoolhouse. John’s ideal image of the New South is a land of monetary opportunity. He chooses

not to care about what it took for the South to be the land it is, just like how Old South slave owners refused to acknowledge what they put their slaves through and only cared about whether their slaves were making them money. This ties into how John wanted to milk the land, just as slave owners wanted to have their workers milk the land for them – emphasizing how John desires to appropriate southern culture in his own way. John's character closely resembles that of the slave owner in Julius' story. The owner did not care if Sandy was his best slave -- he still sold Sandy's wife. As Julius put it, "de spekilater had gin 'em big boot, en times wuz hard en money skase, en so he was bleedst to make de trade" (Chesnutt 16). The slave owner was motivated by the money, even though his money was most likely not scarce at the time he sold Sandy's wife. This relates to how John's will is bent by money, which can be shown at the end of the story when Chesnutt writes that John is called on business and leaves Annie alone for several days (23). John may relate to the slave owners in this aspect because he does not care how rudely he treats Annie when he wants to make money, just like how slave owners did not care for how brutally they treated their slaves. John takes the South as an element of his own use through his desire for money.

John's ignorance of reality can be related to many instances where people choose not to believe in things that do not pertain to them. An example of this would be how fraternities at southern universities hold Confederate ball dances and refuse to see they are attempting to arrogate southern culture by taking from history only what benefits them, blatantly ignoring the brutality of the Civil War. Writer Akhil R. Amar drew attention to how Confederate symbols "exclude large numbers of citizens, most notably blacks. The metaphoric exclusion implicit in these symbols is made concrete in the physical exclusion associated with (almost invariably) all-white affairs such as Confederate balls" (qtd. in Bauer 82). These fraternity members openly

ignore the race that suffered while southern soldiers enjoyed lavish dances and make the Old South Confederate dances into their own amusement, much like how the soldiers at the time ignored how harshly they treated their slaves because what the slaves went through did not affect them. This presents the question of whether the ball dances help continue romanticizing the Old South and whether having a mentality like John's supports segregations. Kevin Thornton argued that "flags and monuments [and Confederate balls] were deliberate, daily reminders that the kind of history that mattered -- public history -- happened only to white people" (qtd. in Bauer 83). These people ignore things that don't appeal to them -- that don't appeal to white people -- in favor of their own pleasure, just like how in "Po' Sandy," John declared the story of Po' Sandy as false when he asked Annie, "Are you seriously considering the possibility of a man's being turned into a tree?" (Chesnutt 23). John's personality represents those who are ignorant of the truth and glamorize their own version of reality, refusing to change their mindsets.

Julius also plays a role in the romanticizing of slavery in "Po' Sandy." Although his story stresses the brutality of slave treatment, Julius mimics slave characters created by whites. He talks in slave dialect and his stories are reminiscent of the Old South. Julius' character copies those that are meant to comfort the white population into thinking that slavery was not *so* bad, which helps draw the reader to Julius a comfort source. Julius, though, attempts to eradicate that idea. The main purpose of his Sandy story is to deromanticize slavery and get rid of that mindset, but elements of the tale still have undertones of slavery glamorizing. At the beginning of "Po' Sandy," as John was listening to the sound of cutting wood at the mill, Julius opens the door to tell the story of po' Sandy by saying, "(D)at saw, a-cuttin' en grindin' thoo dat stick er timber, en moanin', en groanin', en sweekin', kyars my 'memb'ance back ter ole times, en 'min's me er po' Sandy" (Chesnutt 15). These "ole times" are considered to be both when Sandy's wife was

separated from him so his master could get a few extra dollars and when po' Sandy wanted to become a tree to be rooted to his plantation life. Julius' story may have shown how slave masters were willing to separate Sandy from his loved ones, but the story still fails to recognize the fact that Julius would have rather stayed on the plantation as a tree, only changing back into himself at nighttime, than run away with Tenie in the first place – before anything bad could happen. Julius' character is complex in that he was a former slave, but he still is used as an element of slavery romanticizing.

Julius was meant to be like the black characters created by whites that glamorize the slavery to which they were forced to participate. With the story, Julius achieves both personal and political gain. He tells the tale to John and Annie to both educate them about slavery and to get Annie to let him use the old schoolhouse as a church. As Jeannette S. White said in “Baring Slavery's Darkest Secrets,” “[After telling the story,] personally, Julius triumphs again, for after Annie decides she no longer wants a kitchen, he asks permission to use the haunted house as a meeting place for his church” (93). It's not clear whether Julius' personal gain is the main reason he told the story, but John seems to think so when Chesnutt writes him saying to Annie, though not cruelly, “I hope you did n't let the old rascal have it” (23). The impact of Julius' attempt to deromanticize slavery is affected by his type of character. This idea can be related to the idea of cultural appropriation because the white person who created the slave character does not understand how awful they are attempting to portray another race and what they went through. Cultural appropriation is especially present in the whitewashing of characters. Caucasian characters are often casted in movies that are meant to be for minority roles. A recent example of this would be the 2017 movie “Ghost in the Shell.” The movie is based on a Manga series, but the main character is played by Scarlet Johansson. Many people wonder why the producers

didn't cast someone with the right ethnicity, but Hollywood often casts Caucasians to appeal to that group and make more money (Trinh). It's very difficult for a white character to portray a minority because they cannot say they lived as one for even a minute. A white author most often cannot accurately depict a black character that faced slavery because they did not live as slaves and they do not understand what it was like. Although Julius was created by a black author, the type of character he was created to be puts restraints on the power of his story through its purposeful appropriation of black characters. Julius is, in a way, a character created to draw attention to how black characters written by whites often appropriate black culture.

Annie and John's interpretations of Julius' tale factor into the relationship between the characters in the story and people of the present. John says early in "Po' Sandy" that Annie enjoys hearing stories of plantation life (Chesnutt 15). After the tale, Annie shows that she has gained some understanding of the hardships of slavery, and this is emphasized when Chesnutt writes Annie saying, "What a system it was ... under which such things were possible!" (23). These "things" may have been the brutal events Julius brought into the story -- like the gruesome chopping of Sandy into planks of wood -- or even the idea of a slave turning into a tree to stay enslaved to a plantation with the ones he loves. Later that night, Annie wakes up and says she does not want the new kitchen to be built with the lumber from the schoolhouse (23). Annie understands that slavery was brutal, but she still does not truly understand the parts of the South that don't affect her, hence why she brought the conversation back to her kitchen she wants built. Annie doesn't truly believe that Sandy's lumber is haunted, but she decides not to use the wood, just in case. "Annie's rejection of the haunted lumber is really an expression of resistance" (Wonham, Henry. B, "Charles W. Chesnutt: A Study" 22). This resistance was Annie keeping herself away from fully understanding the dehumanizing in slavery. This relates back to how a

lot of people don't understand things that don't affect them – sometimes selectively choosing not to – like when people cannot fathom how horrible events occurred and willing choose not to think about them or acknowledge them. There are also still people that, like Annie, don't fully understand slavery and therefore bend their image of it to suit them. Annie, though, may be beginning to comprehend that slavery was a bad thing, but attempting to preserve the Old South plantation through architecture means she is attempting to romanticize slavery. Annie is selectively remembering the part of history that suits her, which does nothing to support those who were involved in brutal slavery, though. A prime example of this selective remembrance would be how many people do not think much about the genocide of Jews when talking about World War II. They think about the glorious victory, but the Holocaust is often too gruesome for them to reflect upon. As writers Maria Paula Nascimento Araújo and Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos said about the Holocaust, “Since excess is beyond the individuals imaginative and representational capabilities, since it has no limits and is beyond representation, it speaks for itself” (qtd.). This ties back into slavery. Since it speaks for itself, often there is not a need to talk about what happened. This is a bad mindset because as people consider slavery as a part of history that does not define humanity, but the only way for the human race to move on would be if these events were not selectively set aside.

On the other hand, John did not see the story as a mini wake-up call like Annie. He refused to believe it, asking if Annie really believes a man can be turned into a tree. John then says, “You would n't for a moment allow yourself ... to be influenced by that absurdly impossible yarn which Julius was spinning to-day?” (Chesnutt 23). This goes back to how John represents a person who is ignorant of reality. As White says, “John views the tales as yarns, meant to showcase the ‘oriental cat of the Negro’s imagination’” (94). John’s glamorized image

of slavery would be ruined if he believed Julius' story, or even was able to fully comprehend the things Julius said about the treatment of the slaves. John has never had to face the ugliness of the slave system, so, to him, Julius' story had to be fabricated. This again ties with how people who currently romanticize slavery in the forms of Confederate balls and Civil War reenactments do not attempt to either depict or recognize what really happened in the Old South and how terrible it was. John refused to fully acknowledge the events that happened in antebellum time by ignoring the brutality of slavery and was therefore selectively remembering history.

To conclude, through the romanticizing of Old South aesthetics, the attempted arrogation of southern culture, the appropriation of minority culture, and the selective remembrance of history, the romanticizing of slavery in Charles W. Chesnutt's "Po' Sandy" relates to current events. Annie's kitchen connects to the ideas of racism through architecture and relates to the ideas of the Confederate flag and Civil War reenactments that ignore the presence of slaves in the Old South. John's carpetbagger intentions represent the desire to steal Old South culture through how his desire for money mirrors that of Old South slave owners. John's ignorance and wish to take monetary benefit from history matches that of people who host Confederate ball dances, although they are excluding African Americans from "preserving" this history. Julius' role as storyteller serves to tell of the brutality of slavery, while he still forgot to deromanticize certain things, which connects to the purposeful cultural appropriation that occurs in characters. Annie and John's interpretations of Julius' story show how they selectively remember Old South history. Annie struggles to understand slavery, while John refuses to let it ruin his perfect picture of the Old South – much like how some people still cannot comprehend disastrous events. In "Po' Sandy," Chesnutt works to deconstruct myths about slavery while drawing attention to how evident romanticizing of slavery can be. Audiences can then make connections to things that are

going on now. The timeless relationships to slavery glamorizing allow the 1899 story to stay relevant 118 years later.

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