

Article

“Befo’ de Wah”: Sounding Out Ill-Legibility in Charles W. Chesnutt’s *Conjure Stories*

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Abstract: In 1969, blues guitarist Earl Hooker released *Two Bugs and a Roach*, solidifying him as a pioneer of the wah-wah technique. Before the wah-wah pedal, however, there was Charles W. Chesnutt’s *Conjure Stories*, a collection of frame narratives that recollect plantation life “befo’ de wah”. In this essay, I insist the slide, slip, and compressions of Hooker’s wah-wah voicings find resonance in Chesnutt’s own linguistic play, through which the sonics of Julius’ sociolect texture the text towards speculative spellings, grammars, and meanings that query the logics of white, Enlightenment rationality and its hegemonic conceptions of space, time, value, and subjecthood. In listening to the tales’ resonances with the “wah”, I suggest Chesnutt articulates the “ill-legibility” of plantation existence and its echoes into and out from the present, as evidenced by Hooker’s own disproportionate susceptibility to and lifelong struggle with tuberculosis. In doing so, Julius’ storytelling makes legible modes of survival that attune to how Black bodies persist via the (un)sound logics of illness, slavery, and sonority. Overall, I argue Chesnutt amplifies modes of existence that emerge from the distinct spatio-temporality of the plantation, thus re-forming with and through the ills of slavery and persisting against rational legibility, capital production, and normativity.

Keywords: Charles W. Chesnutt; Earl Hooker; black literature and culture; sound studies; sonic speculation; illness; listening; multimodal



Citation: MacDonald, Cameron.
2022. “Befo’ de Wah”: Sounding Out
Ill-Legibility in Charles W. Chesnutt’s
Conjure Stories. *Humanities* 11: 137.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/h11060137>

Received: 13 September 2022

Accepted: 24 October 2022

Published: 31 October 2022

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“I hate to see a bug and a roach [crawl] like that with me, got so much soul like/Yeah, but that bug kill ya, man . . . You guys don’t know what kind of bug that was/What you mean, ‘what kind of bug’? That’s Soul Bug there, brother!/Yeah, and he’ll take your soul too!”

—Earl Hooker ft. Andrew “Big Voice” Odom, “Two Bugs and a Roach” (1969)

“A fever makes you acutely sensitive—to light, to shadow, to the unsubstantial, to chimera. You feel everything. Things happening miles away, things yet to happen at distances. Your ears hurt with sound”.

—Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2011)

1. Intro: Wah Wah Blues

After nearly a year in the Illinois State TB Hospital following a severe tuberculosis attack, slide guitarist and “master of the wah-wah technique” (Danchin 2001, p. 268) Earl Hooker released *Two Bugs and a Roach* (1969) and, against doctor’s orders, began playing live again. On the album’s title track, Hooker and fellow Chicago blues songwriter Andrew “Big Voice” Odom initiate an *a cappella* call-and-response regarding Hooker’s whereabouts, who relays that he was over at the sanitarium on “1919 West Taylor”, trying to “get rid of them two bugs and that roach I had” (Hooker 1969).¹ While Hooker is thought to be referring to his illness—TB or “Two Bugs”—Odom draws upon an alternative meaning: the Soul Bug, or the very musical notation that Hooker “hits” his bug with to kill it. As the riff kicks in, the very definition of bug slides along this axis, punctuated by Hooker’s own slides along the surfaces of his double-necked axe. By the second verse, the distinction

between the two bugs is indistinguishable, as Hooker calls back: “that bug is soul, too!” But as he notes after the third turnaround, the bug that is soul is also the bug that kills: “that bug kill ya, man”. It is only at the end of the track that Hooker corrects the confusion with Odom: “that’s that thing they call a TB bug. He was a monster . . . Ow! Kill that bug”. The guitar cuts; the drums stumble out; the piano plays its final trill; the track is snuffed out with Odom’s “sho’nuff”. And all of this before the next track, “Wah Wah Blues”, an instrumental textured with the slow, tonal flux and voice-like talk of Hooker’s pedal, speaking back as and through the technics and technologies of the blues. As Hooker improvises as bug, soul, monster, guitar, and otherwise, he performs what Fred Moten may describe as the “black and blur” of entangled gathering, of not-in-between, of consenting to being more and less than one being (Moten 2017, pp. 226–29).² More or less than anything, Hooker reminds that being ill is the cure that kills; it is the killing towards becoming other than what *one* is.

Put otherwise: I want to suggest Hooker’s virtuosic praxis, his inaccurate replications³ via improvisation, and his “wah-wah sonorities” (Danchin 2001, p. 268) as punctuated by illness offer an ontological frame for attuning to the ways that sonic play amplifies the warp, slide, and blur of Black survival with-in and with-out the limits of white, Enlightenment rationality and its hegemonic conceptions of space, time, value, and subjecthood. More specifically, I wish to explore the possibility that these sonorities can be heard before the techno-musical invention of the wah-wah guitar pedal, and particularly in Charles W. Chesnutt’s *Conjure Stories* (Chesnutt [1899] 2012)⁴, a collection of frame narratives told by ex-slave Julius McAdoo that recollect plantation life “befo’ de wah” broke out.⁵ Of course, Chesnutt, writing his first conjure stories during a period when sound recording technologies were in their infancy, could never have imagined the effects pedal that would come to be known as the Cry Baby. And yet neither did Hooker, who initiated the human-voicing technique in the fifties using the tone control on his guitar (Danchin 2001, p. 268), well before the technological object caught up to his aesthetic mode. In pairing Hooker’s and Chesnutt’s explorations in sound, this article thus continues the work of tracing the “echoes of slavery” that Jennifer Lynn Stoeber identifies in the relationship between the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ and Chesnutt’s artistic projects; as she notes, their respective “sonic interventions into race, sound, and American identity” pose a critique to the ways “white Northern liberal elites” would mishear or tune out Black sonic expression (Stoeber 2016, pp. 134–37). Instead of juxtaposing white listening against Black expression, however, I aim to track the sound of what Anna Thomas describes as the *Conjure Stories*’ “ontological plurality, where the ‘conjure cosmology’ of African-derived spiritualism is robustly co-present with the plantation economy of dominant Western hierarchies” (Thomas 2020, p. 105).⁶ By anachronistically coupling Hooker and Chesnutt to do so, my deliberate, speculative “mishearings” find methodological kinship with Alexander G. Weheliye’s approach in *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, in which he locates in the structure of W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) practices akin to DJ mixing (Weheliye 2005, pp. 73–105). However, instead of embedding the “grooves of history” in the mix, I insist Chesnutt warps historicity, bends the sonic color line,⁷ and distorts narrative form through temporal and tonal compressions that find resonance with the sonic manipulations of the wah-wah pedal.

By homing in on Chesnutt’s phono-graphic slippage, I not only attune to the *Conjure Stories*’ wah-wah sonorities but explore how Chesnutt’s linguistic technics resonate with what I will come to expand upon as the “ill-legibility” of plantation existence and its ongoing echoes, making legible modes of survival that disrupt the ways enslaved bodies persist via the logics of illness and sound. As such, I argue the slide, slip, and compressions of tonal registers in Chesnutt’s stories enacts itself via Julius’ recollections of the before and after of the Civil War or “de wah”, which repetitiously “breaks out” like a virus, marking the diasporic spread and dispersal of both Black bodies and the totalizing forces of Northern, liberal rationality. If, as Frederick Douglass notes, the prejudice enacted by the color line is a product of a “diseased imagination” beyond reason (Douglass 1881,

p. 567), then perhaps, as Sylvia Wynter may suggest, to embody in flesh-and-blood as and with this imagination can “provide an opening onto the gaining of such knowledge *outside* the limits of our present culture’s self-conception” (Wynter 1995, p. 48), putting the very logics of Man at dis-ease. To evoke Darieck Scott, this is to propose that in the very imagining of Black bodies by Man as animal, object, disease—as *abject*, being both excess to and less-than oneself—a counterintuitive power, ability, or freedom may be discovered “at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call *identity, body, race, nation* seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary” (Scott 2010, p. 9). In other words, if Blackness is the abject Other in the logics of Man, how do the inaccurate replications of these logics as tended to by sound recognize breaks in its boundaries—breaks that wound and sicken an Enlightenment worldview, and offer an aperture towards escape, a loophole of retreat? By attuning to Chesnutt’s stories with the technics of Hooker’s playing, I aim to trace an (un)sound lineage of Black cultural production that acknowledges how, as Weheliye notes, the tactics of “mechanical and electric iterability” are not just critical for listening to the auditory dimensions of Black history and writing, but create the very *possibility* of hearing Black artistic and technological innovation riff with, against, and *as* Western modernity, and vice versa (Weheliye 2005, pp. 45, 80–82). In sum, I argue that Chesnutt, through the transforming, contagious traces embedded in the sonics of language, amplifies the logics of existence that emerge in the distinctly southern spatio-temporality of the plantation: re-forming and bending with and through its atrocities; persisting “vigorously against the grain” (Scott 2010, p. 13) of rational legibility, capital production, and normative structures of being in the world; hurting one’s ears in the strain towards the feverish vulnerability of being otherwise.

2. “Behind—Within, and Through”: The Sound of Chesnutt’s Ill-Legibility

While Chesnutt’s *Conjure Stories* are anything but sound, sound nevertheless resonates throughout. Indeed, as Houston A. Baker Jr. highlights, it is *sound* that conjures these stories:

What moves through Chesnutt’s collection is the sound of a southern black culture that knew it had to *re-form* a slave world created by the West’s willful transformation of Africans into chattel. Conjure’s spirit work moves behind—within, and through—the mask of minstrelsy to ensure survival, to operate changes, to acquire necessary resources for continuance, and to cure a sick world. (Baker 1987, p. 47)

For Baker Jr., sound operates at a “low, signifying, and effective register” (Baker 1987, p. 45), which not only incites the transformative powers of conjuring novel forms, but which is also linked to what Chesnutt described as his “duty” to preserve the sound of African ancestors and the phonics of their descendants from the Antebellum South. Yet, instead of considering this collection as a series of “dialect stories”, Chesnutt is careful to distinguish that it is not a *dialect* that he strives to emulate.⁸ As Chesnutt writes to Walter Hines Page on 20 May 1898: “[T]here is no such thing as a Negro dialect, that what we call by that name is the *attempt to express*, with such a degree of phonetic correctness as to *suggest the sound*, English pronounced as an ignorant old southern Negro would be supposed to speak it” (McElrath and Leitz 1997, p. 105; emphasis mine). What is being preserved is not so much an anthropological “thing” or form that can be objectified and replicated, but rather the “attempt to express” that emerges phonetically as sound. As Baker Jr. astutely notes, sound for Chesnutt is “no . . . thing”, and thus holds the ability to transform the “definitions of ‘form’ as fixed and comprehensible ‘thing’” (Baker 1987, p. 44).

However, while Baker Jr. suggests sound punctuates the *fluidity* of form (Baker 1987, p. 47), it is worth attempting to trace its elusive contours. Figured as Uncle Julius’ “spirit work” that travels along the “sweet airs that resonates with the transformative power of *conjure*” (Baker 1987, pp. 43–44), sound dissolves all that is solid as “thing” and melts into air, suggesting a more particulate, microscopic penetration of form that is closely aligned with how Jean-Luc Nancy describes the sonorous: as “having to do with participation,

sharing, or contagion" (Nancy 2007, p. 10). To listen to the sound of the *Conjure Stories* as such is thus to attend to the particulate, finite, and inaccurate replications of southern phonetics and the ways it "participates", "shares", and transgresses temporal, spatial, and linguistic bounds. For example, attuning to Julius' stories of "before the war" necessitates an attendance to the minute, surface-level distinctions between this interpretive rewriting and the way it is typographically written on the page: as "befo' de wah" or "w'en de wah broke out". This slight vacillation in tonality registers an onomatopoeic temporality that carves out space for an unexpected echo from the future—namely, the techno-musical invention of the wah-wah. Whether it be Chesnutt's attempts to capture the elusivity of dialect, Hooker's experimental play with voicing, or Jimi Hendrix's popularization of the technique on "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)" (Hendrix 1968), such wah-wah sonorities are conjured to transform their instrument—page, guitar, or otherwise—with the im/material spirit of sound. This connection to the "wah" may appear fairly surface, but this is precisely the ways to register sound's radical dispersal across time and space: subjected to the agencies of all that is outside, sound penetrates at the level of skin, touch, and orifice, altering the world and the flesh-and-blood that registers its sounding. Such temporal play is made most evident in Chesnutt's use of the framing narrative, in which the present situations the Northern narrator John and his wife Annie face—whether it be constructing a kitchen from wood on the McAdoo property or eating slices of ham—are uncannily echoed in Julius' retellings of the past, which conjure happenings that are perhaps too close in resemblance to be "true" by any rational means. Rather, like the wah-wah pedal's manipulation of the guitar's tonal voicing, the stories glide along a vector of "truthiness", registering frequencies that put the past and present not in opposition, but in what Weheliye may describe as an "ever-so-slight vacillation" that "gestures toward a conceptual galaxy" (Weheliye 2014, p. 111), re-forming into something other and elsewhere to the temporal structures of Man. For Julius, the "conceptual galaxy" generated by his storytelling is created in order to reshape John and Annie's decisions in a manner that benefits his material well-being, however minutely. As such, the past does not just echo out to the present, but the present echoes into the past.

Such temporal manipulation notably occurs around the receptor of sound: in Julius' technics of storytelling, fleshy "ears" transform into the temporal sustain of "years". For instance, in "Po' Sandy", Tenie tells Sandy she can turn him into a tree, but he won't have "no mouf ner years" (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 17). Similarly, when the Guinea conjure man in "The Conjuror's Revenge" begins to transform Primus back from mule to human, Julius notes how Primus "'mence' ter turn back ter a man,—fust his years, den de res' er his head" (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 30). In both instances, it is the moment of conjure that compresses the material and temporal at the locus of the ear, as well as the stretch of years between the pre-war events told by Julius and the post-war, listening ears of John and Annie. Perhaps we can call this, à la Hendrix, a "sweet time",⁹ a temporality that recalls what Weheliye notes as the "sugary textures . . . of freedom" that recline in the "hunger for survival" (Weheliye 2014, p. 114). This sweet time is registered by Julius' own reclined posture as he eats the grapes that inflect his telling of "The Goophered Grapevine" (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 5). Julius' lengthened intonation of "Po' Sandy" that touches a "responsive chord" in John's and Annie's hearts (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 15) similarly attunes to this temporal sweetness; or, more devastatingly, sweet time is there when the viscosity of Sandy's sappy lifeforce runs out of his limbs in the sawmill, his "quare soun's" resonating across the McAdoo property for years after (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, pp. 20–21). In these moments, Chesnutt demonstrates how acts of listening are always already warped, thus requiring alternative modes of attending to sonic expressions. The *Conjure Stories'* conceptual galaxy, in its slow, viscous temporality, makes matter not through its rational truth-telling or stable, linguistic legibility, but because it imagines, affects, and fleshes out the violences of racial capitalism in (un)sound ways.

Yet, entangled in the "sweet airs" and "sweet time" of sound is also, as Nancy highlights, the illness-inducing and ill-defined notion of "contagion". Aligning sound with

sickness in the context of the *Conjure Stories*' plantation and Post-Reconstruction eras finds notable resonance with Douglass' conception of the color line resulting from a "diseased imagination", as mentioned above. As Douglass further expands:

Of all the races and varieties of men which have suffered from this feeling [of prejudice], the colored people of this country have endured most. . . . They are negroes—and that is enough, in the eye of this unreasoning prejudice, to justify indignity and violence. In nearly every department of American life they are confronted by this insidious influence. It fills the air. (Douglass 1881, p. 568)

For Douglass, the abolition of slavery does not completely eradicate its indignities and violences; rather, prejudice melts into¹⁰ and "fills the air" with insidious, deadly consequence, re-forming the ways racial violence is distributed and justified. Attending to the airs of sound is thus to also attend to these reverberations of prejudice, or what Rob Nixon describes as slow violence, by giving "figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time" (Nixon 2011, p. 10). In other words, sound takes form not through reconstruction, but by the very atrophy of "form" via its own incessant sustain and mutation.

Indeed, while Chesnut's frame narrative technique and Julius' playful integration of past and present challenge hegemonic conceptions of linear, progressive time, such compressions also accelerate the illnesses and injuries of Chesnut's characters. As Stephen Knadler underscores, the acceleration of conjure's effects sounds out the "slow accretive time of contamination" that resonates from the plantation and out into the future in the form of "subtle and naturalized constraints placed on African Americans" (Knadler 2019, pp. 83–84). The acceleration of illness occurs in several ways, whether it is the bouts of seasonal rheumatism Henry endures in "The Goophered Grapevine" (Chesnut [1899] 2012, p. 10), or the drastic changes in health the characters face. For example, in "The Conjuror's Revenge", the conjure man is poisoned while transfiguring Primus, becoming "weaker en weaker all de time" (Chesnut [1899] 2012, p. 30), while in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny", the eponymous character's dream about the death of little Mose prompts her "mo'nin' en groanin'" and the quick decline of her health (Chesnut [1899] 2012, p. 109). Moreover, it is not just John's and Annie's listening ears that frame the *Conjure Stories*, but also the latter's illness: in the very first sentence of this collection, John notes that Annie's "poor health" and need for a "change in climate" is what necessitated their move from Ohio to North Carolina (Chesnut [1899] 2012, p. 3). The liberal narratives of democratic progress, slow inclusion, and rationality that John and Annie come to represent are thus filtered and warped by the sounds and sicknesses of the characters via Chesnut's wah-wah temporality, which conjures a world within an alternative cosmic system that does not subscribe to their worldview: where "de yeath stan'in' still all de time, en . . . de sun gwine roun' it" (Chesnut [1899] 2012, p. 31); where Man's mastery is displaced to "Mars",¹¹ where inertia of the plantation meets the accelerated passings of the sun, opening other temporal columns to warp through via the miniscule, fleshy movements of language.

In attuning to the ways sonority and illness are entangled behind, within, and through the *Conjure Stories*, that which resists linguistic legibility finds resonance in what I propose as its "ill-legibility", via which the penetrations of wound, illness, and warps of Julius' sociolect recognize the plantation's diseased logics as its very apertures and breaks that put such logics at dis-ease. To improvise with Moten, this is to channel both the "hole", or otherness inscribed as illegibility, with the "whole", or contagious excesses of language, as "whole", understood as a matter "of amplification, of sound" whose "incompleteness is always also a *more than completeness*" (Moten 2003, p. 173). This listening praxis distinguishes itself from the word/speech dichotomy that has marked Western rationality, attuning instead to what Matthew A. Taylor identifies as an openness to "harm as well as health, vulnerability as well as—*simultaneously as*—strength" (Taylor 2013, p. 128), or what Dionne Brand describes as that acute sensitivity to "feel everything" which occurs along the traces of sound and fever (Brand 2011, p. 169). Put otherwise, it is to register the hurt of lives that live otherwise, straining to be read, translated, or recorded as other than the

racializing assemblages that discipline humanities at the level of sight, sound, and affect. To quote Weheliye:

Perhaps it might be more useful to construe “cries and groans,” “heart-rending shrieks,” “the mechanical murmurs without content” as language that does not rely on linguistic structures, at least not primarily, to convey meaning, sense, or expression. For language, especially in the space-ways of the flesh, comes in many varieties, and functions not only—or even primarily—to create words in the service of conforming to linguistic structures transparent in the world of Man. (Weheliye 2014, p. 126)

Perhaps, then, it is in the ever-so-slight “vacillation between *phono* and *graph*, human and inhuman, sound and vision” (Weheliye 2005, p. 45) that a language of humanity can sound out its soundness otherwise and in other space-ways, bending linguistic comprehension at the edges of knowledges, *as* knowledges’ edges.

3. “En Lib” and ad Libs: Improvisatory Relations at the Edges of Aid

To attune to the ill-legible, molasses-like surfaces of Chesnutt’s attempts to express the sound of a southern Black culture is in itself a slow, arduous process that requires readers to wade through Julius’ stories with a different pace and relation to time. Readers are presented with vocabulary that has been transfigured, and in turn must conjure new relations between words made possible through Julius’ sonic expression. Notably, this praxis finds kinship with how Moten engages with an “aural aesthetic”: “To move or work through that something, to improvise, requires thinking about morning and how mourning sounds, how moaning sounds” (Moten 2003, p. 201). With the dawn of “mawnin” comes Sis’ Becky’s “mo’nin” upon waking from a dream that fevers her: the dream of her little Mose, transfigured as “mawkin’-bird”, dead, which brings her own body to the edge of death (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, pp. 107–9). This maw is also Julius’ mouth, what John calls the “spacious cavity” that translates Dave’s tale over slices of ham (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 33); or the sawmill that moans and groans in call-and-response with Tenie’s grief over Sandy’s fatal transfiguration to lumber by the hands at the mill (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 20). These are but a handful of the abject inflections, the dis-eased logics, cradled in the breaks of Chesnutt’s improvisations in sound and word, vacillating minutely to open up a cosmos of meaning.

This insight marks a critical point regarding the wah-wah sonics of the *Conjure Stories*: that its sound is generated via its intimate *relation* with the technologies of the written word, not via its *opposition* to it. While sound is often thought of as a pure essence that is pre-linguistic or as something that cannot be expressed in the “confines” of the Word,¹² Chesnutt cracks open language to novel, imaginary, and radically sonic possibilities. Across these tales, words pivot along the edges of pun, contraction, iteration, and inaccurate replications via Julius’ sociolect. Some of these wordplays evoke the muddled tempos and temporalities of sweet time, where the past tense of words like “bewitched”, “remember”, and “heard” will chop the suffix or prefix, like in “bewitch” or “member”, or become other words, like “hearn”. Similarly, present tense iterations slice the “g” with a comma, as heard above in the “mo’nin” and “groanin” that resonates from the county sawmill, Sandy’s treeform, and Tenie’s mourning, suggesting an intimate “in-ness” that binds seemingly disparate human and nonhuman entities into relation. Forms of negation also slide and glide via the miniscule spacings of the omitted contraction, where words like “wouldn’t” or “didn’t” are dismembered to become “would n” of “did n”, a semantic move Weheliye might liken to an “inch[ing] away from a space of pure negativity defined above all by the total privation of agency and subjectivity and toward something more elusive” (Weheliye 2014, p. 110). With its inaccurate replications of English *logos* and inflective bends in signification, Chesnutt’s stories thus find kinship with the wah-wah’s envelope filter: words are open and cut—yet simultaneously cradled and enveloped—by apostrophe or through novel spatial and tonal arrangements, recognizing a porosity of meaning on the words’ very surfaces.

Other words still conjure alternate forms altogether, as in the stunningly complex and vibrant possibility of a foxy escape resonating in Tenie's wish to run away and "go some'rs whar dey could be free en lib lack w'ite folks" (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 18). Here, "live like" becomes "lib lack": the gesture to similarity of "like" becomes a life "lacking" of white folks, or as abjection; and living becomes "en lib", a truncated invocation of liberty and liberation, or a gesture towards the Latin etymology *ad libitum*, a musical notation of improvisatory omission that roughly translates to "at one's pleasures" or "as you desire". Thus, even at the microscopic level of the word, other words and worlds "quare" sound to signal a world that buggies alongside and lays bare its flesh against the linguistic grains of Man. Chesnutt's ever-so-slight re-memberings and dis-memberings of language thus attune to those vacillations that hurt, that pleasure, that come close and drift away, via the praxis of improvisatory glides, via which the borders of words break and wake, infinitely, in quare relation with-in and with-out the world.

However, if Chesnutt's attempts to express the sound of dialect is the very means by which to put linguistic and temporal structures at dis-ease, how does it also serve as its antidote—or, with Hooker in mind, how does sonic play sound itself as both TB and Soul Bug? To pose the question differently: if conjure's spirit work aims to cure a sick world (Baker 1987, p. 47), then how does "cure" resonate in Chesnutt's *Conjure Stories*, a world in which sound moves in bug-like quivers, contaminations, and vacillations? Indeed, "cure" is made unrecognizable to itself, transformed as "kyo". When Primus transfigures back from mule form in "The Conjuror's Revenge", Master Jim makes it evident that to be cured is to be "kyoed up straight" (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 30): to be straightened back into the value-form enforced upon slaves under plantation labour, and thus to accede to doctor's orders, tend to the injury that has taken Primus off the plantation grounds, and return as a "productive force" in the circuitry of capital exploitation. "Kyoing" is also the process through which the ham is prepared for consumption in "Dave's Neckliss", which leads to tragic repercussions: Dave, bearing the mental and physical tortures of carrying around a ham on his neck after being accused of a crime he did not commit, enacts his own lynching by curing himself over the flames in the smokehouse (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 42). Tenie, too, is sent to the smokehouse when her mourning becomes unbearable to her master (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 20). The tales embody these troubling conclusions about what it means to be "cured" on the plantation: that curing is the means by which to exterminate when the mind or "mine" of the slave has lost its legibility as use-value, when no more capital can be mined from the injured or ill body. After curing, their stories are then consumed by the "sympathetic ear" of John and Annie (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 15), or what Stoever describes as their "hungry yet dismissive listening ear" (Stoever 2016, p. 140). To be "cured" in Chesnutt's *Conjure Stories* thus refers to both the insatiable white listener hungry to consume Julius' tales as entertainment, as well as the slow, figureless violences that are enacted through the rationales of white supremacy.

Nevertheless, in attending to the textures of Chesnutt's text, another form of cure emerges in Julius' sociolect: the "aidge", or edge. What does it mean to locate survival and persistence on the aidge, to be a life living "on" and "in" the edge? Stoever's analysis of Chesnutt's "quare sounds" alongside the Fisk Jubilee Singers offers surprising resonance of this "edge" in her analogy for the "sonic color line", describing it as

a *tightrope* for black performers, a site of agency and potential empowerment where negative constructions of blackness could be "inverted," but only through dangerous performances that risked affirming the listening ear by constructing new sonic representations of "blackness." (Stoever 2016, p. 133; emphasis mine)

Chesnutt faces this balancing act when he caricaturizes Julius' performance and inflects his language with dialect to satirize the expectations of white listeners and consumers, as he risks the danger of instead satirizing Black storytelling as minstrelsy. For Annie, who's own "poor health" (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 3) inhabits the edges of Chesnutt's frame narratives, finds aid in Julius' tales, particularly in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny"—notably one of the few stories that she sides with Julius rather than her husband—in which her "condition took a

turn for the better" (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 111). At the site of the edge, aid is possible through empathic listening that is fostered by and through illness, as illness is the very edge by which to interpret, work through, and improvise with.¹³

However, this edge is not the same "aidge" that Julius presents in his stories. The aidge is rather located at the limits of the plantation, which is notably where several of the characters find space to hide and transfigure. In "Po' Sandy", it is at the "aidge er de swamp" that Sandy is turned "inter a big pine-tree" (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 17) so he does not get shipped away to another plantation and can converse openly with Tenie. In "The Conjuror's Revenge", Primus finds the conjure man's shote that will transform him into a mule at the "aidge er de Min'al Spring Swamp", which is the last place he could be tracked to (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, pp. 25–26). In "Dave's Neckliss", Julius is unable to find any traces of Dave when he checks the "aidge er de woods" (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 41), where Dave would traverse to "holler en sing" when "it 'peared lack Dave done gone clean out'n his mine" (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, p. 39). The aid of these edges conjures a different type of "cure": not towards a "straightening out" into legibility on the plantation, but rather towards a radical disappearance into ill-fitting forms that disrupt the constraining rhetoric, linguistics, and temporalities of genocidal, colonial exploitation. Paradoxically, these transfigurations—into wilderness; into animal; into consumable product—are the very forms that have been inscribed onto Black bodies by the logics of Man, thus exposing its very contradictions.

Moreover, these "aidges" occur in spaces that signify danger, survival, and escape: the swamp and the woods. As C. Riley Snorton suggests, "the swamp stages the transversal relationship between fugitive life and death, as it also allegorizes how fungibility emerges as a tactic of maneuvering from within the morass of slavery's identity politics" (Snorton 2017, p. 69). The swamp—and, in Chesnutt's works, the woods—are spaces "of near death into which some other quality of living is assumed out of necessity", a location perceived as uninhabitable yet whose terrors are favored over "the forms of racial and gender terror exercised by white men in so-called civilization" (Snorton 2017, p. 72). In the *Conjure Stories*, the transfiguration of conjure is the body sounding out against its own soundness, traversing "out'n" one's "mine", or away from being legibly distinct as ego-subject and into what Moten may call a "radicalization of singularity" (Fitzgerald 2015), where the borders of the self are muddled, murky, and dissolved, without separating from the difference that marks one's particularity. It is at the edges where alternative meanings come to aid an existing-otherwise, outside the labour market exploits of the plantation, and out of the necessity to survive.

But perhaps located at an even further edge of the *Conjure Stories* is the author writing from Cleveland, Ohio, and who to some degree embodies the ill-legible morass of identity via his own relation to race. In a letter to S. Alice Haldeman on 1 February 1896, Chesnutt writes: "I doubt whether I could call myself much of a negro, although I have always been more or less identified with the colored people. I am really seven-eighths white, but I have never denied the other" (McElrath and Leitz 1997, p. 89). Highlighting the myths of racial purity, Chesnutt makes the "edges" of his own racialized status legible, embracing what he satirizes elsewhere as the "disability of color" that the law perceives can be removed by some arbitrary "proportion of white blood" to be found in the "mulatto or person of color" (Chesnutt 1889, p. 6). By refusing clear boundaries of racial categorization through the qualifiers "much" and "more or less", Chesnutt muddies the forms of racial categorization imposed by white essentialism via his own relation to the very blackness that the logic of racism perceives as "disability" or "illness". In doing so, he imagines an existing with-in and with-out the spatial and temporal restrictions placed via the (un)sound logics of racist categorization—and, I wish to suggest, is the same signifiatory muddying that more or less inflects the aesthetic imagining of Julius' sociolect, whose own legibility often gets lost to the deaf ears of his audience's whiteness.

What is heard, then, when Julius describes Dave's necklace crafting—a "lighterd' knot ter a string" he wears to "go off in de woods en holler en sing" (Chesnutt [1899]

2012, p. 39)? With the scraps available to him, Dave crafts a loophole of retreat in dress and song, announcing the presence of human life in the space and time that is “out’n mine”—the out-in weave of wah-wah sonorities that sounds out its own speculative galaxy. Perhaps what can be heard is a form of aid through aesthetic praxis: a form that shares in the very modes of aesthetic conjuring that mark black cultural productions such as Chesnutt’s writing or Hooker’s playing as the very warping, sliding, and bending of and with technologies—page, guitar, or otherwise—that both threaten and produce one’s being in the world under racial capitalism. Chesnutt’s tales, as with Hooker’s double-necked axe, pump up the volume on the slow violence that insidiously erases Black lives and often goes unheard in the logics of Man, but also reminds, to quote Weheliye, to listen to

the sorrow songs, smooth glitches, miniscule movements, shards of hope, scraps of food, and interrupted dreams of freedom that already swarm the ether of Man’s legal apparatus, which does not mean that these formations annul the brutal validity of bare life, biopolitics, necropolitics, social death, or racializing assemblages but that Man’s juridical machine can never exhaust the plenitude of our world. (Weheliye 2014, p. 131)

Dave’s neckace, along with Julius’ storytelling technics that braid with and as the remaining, decayed remains of the South, gesture towards a form of production that does not hold the deceptive promise of a panacea, but rather crafts, stitches, salves, and sutures, as a means to hold—or, in Chesnutt’s iteration, to “hole”—the edges toward other, intimate proximities; a sensing of flesh instead of a making sense of; a sounding of oneself *within* and *with-out* the world, *behind* the grasp of transparent subjectivity, and *through* the *whole* of history.

4. Outro: Wah Wah Blues (Slight Return)

On 21 April 1970, Earl Hooker “stole out of the hospital” and drove towards his mother’s apartment “with the little energy he still had in store” (Danchin 2001, p. 332), aware that he only had a few hours to live. The TB bug was slowly taking Hooker’s soul, just as it had unevenly taken from so many others in America, where “consumption was an almost endemic disease among Afro-Americans before World War II—segregated medical facilities being the rule in insalubrious, over-populated ghetto communities” (Danchin 2001, p. 256). At the edge of dying, outside the limits of the state’s medical facility, Hooker goes against doctor’s orders one last time. This is but one of the little energies weaving with the echoes of slow violence that disproportionately and invisibly affect Black bodies, gliding from the “wah” of Chesnutt’s conjure stories, and warping back, sure enough, as another echo, through to the *here* and *now* of being. It is across these crossroads, those speculative breaks in the logics of Western rationality, where Hooker and Julius are driving, delaying, buzzing with sound like a swarm, yet to be heard. Back to and from the grooves that hyphen the past-present-future and ‘round again, the rockabye of the wah-wah depresses-compresses, lessens-excesses, dispels-expels its “black magical politico-economic spells and spellings” (Moten 2017, p. 6) like the breathing of a life on edge, swamped in the feeling of everything. Maybe *that’s* Soul Bug—there.

Funding: This research was supported by the Canada Graduate Scholarship—Doctoral program (SSHRC), grant number 767-2022-2435.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to Anna Thomas for her guidance, support, and feedback on this article, as well as the participants in her course, *Black Forms: Critical Race Theory and Diasporic Literature*. These engagements resonate in ways that cannot be adequately translated, but nevertheless echo behind, within, and through this work.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Lyrics are drawn from Sebastian Danchin (2001), *Earl Hooker: Blues Master* (p. 272) in tandem with what has been transcribed on the crowd-sourced lyric website, *Genius* (“Two Bugs and a Roach—Earl Hooker”, *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Earl-hooker-two-bugs-and-a-roach-lyrics>, accessed on 23 October 2022) and personal listenings.
- ² While Moten invokes these concepts most directly in relation to David Hammons’s exhibition *Concerto in Black and Blue*, it is evident that the visual, sonic, linguistic, and otherwise work in concert for Moten: “James Baldwin, Melle Mel, Robert Hayden—they all sound this [blueblack] as a way of making space against the edge of color” (p. 228). Moten invokes the blues specifically shortly after: “America has always got the blues, he [Gil Scott-Heron] sings, and in his eyes, which are her eyes and ours, our story is the story of America in that general absence of a story that someday might allow us to be eased with being more+less than one” (p. 229).
- ³ For more on “inaccurate replication,” see the work of Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, as first coined in Bersani and Dutoit (1993), *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais*, and expanded upon in their later writings.
- ⁴ Original publication date refers to the publication year of *The Conjure Woman* (1899), which only featured seven of Chesnutt’s conjure stories as selected by Walter Hines Page and other editors at the Houghton Mifflin Company. However, the 2012 edition I draw from includes all fourteen of Chesnutt’s conjure stories, presented in chronological order and edited by Robert B. Stepto and Jennifer Rae Greeson.
- ⁵ Chesnutt has Julius temporally frame the events of several of the conjure stories with this particular turn of phrase, including the first story, “The Goophered Grapevine”, as well as “Po’ Sandy”, “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt”, “Mars Jeem’s Nightmare”, and “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny” (Chesnutt [1899] 2012, pp. 7, 21, 82, 92, 103).
- ⁶ For more on “conjure cosmology”, see Matthew A. Taylor (2013), “Hoodoo You Think You Are? Self-Conjuration in Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*” in *Universes Without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature* (pp. 113–38).
- ⁷ Pochmara (2021) also describes Chesnutt’s manipulations of the “rigid color line” as a “bending”, albeit in reference to his use of melodrama (pp. 56–57). I instead harness this term to capture bend’s relation to the musical technique of bending the strings of a guitar, which itself disrupts musical scale by manipulating and wavering in the divide between notes, and is often employed in tandem with the wah-wah pedal.
- ⁸ For details on Chesnutt’s complex approach to dialect, see Lisa Cohen Minnick (2004), “‘A High, Holy Purpose’: Dialect in Charles W. Chesnutt’s *Conjure Tales*” in *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech* (pp. 77–98).
- ⁹ Refer to Jimi Hendrix (1968), “Voodoo Child (Slight Return)”, in which Hendrix gestures towards his own conceptual galaxy: “I didn’t mean to take up all your sweet time/I’ll give it right back one of these days/If I don’t meet you no more in this world/Then I’ll meet you in the next one/And don’t be late”.
- ¹⁰ This metaphor, as gestured to here and earlier in this article, is drawn from Karl Marx ([1848]1910), *Communist Manifesto*, when Marx is describing the unique tactics the bourgeoisie harnessed to overthrow feudal society: “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. *All that is solid melts into air*” (p. 16). In the same breath, Marx calls attention to the historically revolutionary impulse of the bourgeoisie, while also condemning the ways in which capital has come to insidiously inflect all modes of occupation and aesthetic expression.
- ¹¹ Across Chesnutt’s *Conjure Stories*, “Master” is written as “Mars”.
- ¹² For example, see Alexander G. Weheliye’s critique of the “speech/writing antinomy” upheld in Western thought ranging from Plato to Derrida in *Phonographies* (Weheliye 2005, pp. 30–36), as well as Fred Moten’s observation of the “occlusion that occurs sometimes in the name of a deconstruction of phonocentrism and always within a tradition of logocentrism, which has at its heart a paradoxically phonocentric deafness” (Moten 2003, p. 185).
- ¹³ Johanna Hedva (2016), in their essay “Sick Woman Theory”, draws together the political dimensions of listening and sickness when they describes hearing Black Lives Matter protests through their bedroom window while being immobilized by their chronic illness, which comes to inform their “insistence that most modes of political protest are internalized, lived, embodied, suffering, and no doubt invisible”.

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