CLA JOURNAL Volume 56, No 4

A QUARTERLY OFFICIAL PUBLICATION of THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR 282

Pathways and Porticos: Martin Delany's *Blake* and the Politics of Being 284
By Mario Chandler

A Portal Moment for Portal Writers and Scholars 290
By Edwidge Danticat

Caroline Nightmare: The Skeleton Key as Visual Echo of Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Tales 298
By Kameelah L. Martin

Diasporic Connections: Erna Brodber and Toni Morrison's Literary Explorations of Black Existentiality 315
By Marie Sairsingh

Bangarang at the Border: Surveillance and the "Suspicious" (Im)migrant Body in Makeda Silvera's "Caribbean Chameleon" 320
By Corey Lamont

Ancestral Life Boat: The Cost of Progress in Down in the Delta 344
By Carol E. Henderson

BOOK REVIEWS

Bracey, John H., Sonia Sanchez and James Smethurst, Eds. 356
SOS – Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader. Boston: University of Massachusetts, 2014. 666 pages. ISBN 978-1-62534-031-3. $34.95
Pouring Libation: A Book Review Essay
Reviewed by Michon A. Benson, Texas Southern University

Reed, Anthony. *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 363
ISBN: 978-1421415208. $44.95 (hardcover).
Reviewed by Laura Vrana, Ph.D. Candidate in English, Pennsylvania State University

Asante, Molefi Kete. As I Run Toward Africa. Boulder: 367
Paradigm Publishers, 2011. 327 pp. ISBN 978-161205076-8 $30.95
Reviewed by Christel N. Temple, University of Pittsburgh

CALL FOR BOOK REVIEWS AND BOOK REVIEWERS 370

"Caroline's Nightmare: *The Skeleton Key* as Visual Echo of Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Tales"

Kameelah L. Martin

While considering the construction of the twenty-first century "new south" in Iain Softley's southern gothic film, *The Skeleton Key* (2005), I am most drawn to the filmmaker's reliance on tropes of the "old south" to subvert conventional narratives of social injustice and trauma inflicted upon the racialized other that are ingrained in the mythology of the American South. Set in pre-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, the film engages a subtext of supernatural belief, racial persecution, and self-preservation.[1] The plot is layered between events of the 1920s and the ramifications of said events in 2004. It employs several pillars of the southern plantation tradition of local color writing including southern dialect, an emphasis on regionalism such as Zydeco music and distinct Louisiana food ways, and the southern folk tradition of conjure, or hoodoo.

More specific to what is correlated with the plantation tradition in American literature, there is the wealthy (*nuevo riche*) Thorpe family and their descendants, who own a Louisiana plantation estate albeit in the early twentieth century opposed to the era of chattel slavery or reconstruction. Most of the action is centered around the plantation home so that the house takes on a persona of its own. The house is managed by black servants who are simultaneously thoroughly undeveloped characters and the silent victims of white racial oppression and violence of the lynching kind. The lush, anti-urban landscape of the south is part of the powerful imagery of the film, just as the rural descriptions of John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* inundate his readers.[2] The film even includes the classic allusion to the meddling Northern carpet-bagger who simply does not understand the peculiarities of southern ideology: Caroline Ellis (actress Kate Hudson).

Caroline, a hospice nurse from New Jersey, accepts a position in Terrebonne Parrish with an elderly couple who are not exactly who they appear to be. She gets pulled into an unfamiliar world where hoodoo and folk belief take precedence. Her non-belief and cultural disconnection from the south only work against her in this "supernatural thriller".[3] Softley and screenwriter Ehren Kruger invoke the African American conjuring tradition as a mechanism to resist a undeniably southern brand of racial subjugation in ways, I argue, that are reminiscent of Charles W. Chesnutt's collection *The Conjure Woman* (1899). Chesnutt has garnered critical acclaim for "selling plantation tales which refused his readers the expected pleasures of paradisiacal settings or happy slaves" and for using "a literary form whose appeal lay almost wholly in its romanticization of slavery and the plantation South as a means of revising public perceptions about those institutions" (M. Martin 21). Kruger continues in this vain, spinning a cinematic tale whose success also depends "on his ability to fulfill his [audience's] desires, and his willingness to challenge their expectations only subtly" (18).

The Skeleton Key appears to be a run of the mill suspense thriller on the surface, but closer investigation of the clash between power and culture reveals a sweeping indictment of American race relations, much like in Chesnutt's assemblage. Matthew Martin says of Chesnutt's work: "His position as the first great African American fiction writer depends largely on the subversive quality of his writing, his ability to explode myths about American history and racial supremacy in ways we can see perhaps better than even Chesnutt himself" (18). Indeed, I conjecture that *The Skeleton Key* is one manifestation of the ways contemporary artists and writers have internalized Chesnutt's lesson on how to engage an audience about the aversion to racism felt by African Americans. More poignantly, I believe, the film communicates another equally disruptive message that Chesnutt's work only implies: the horrors of slavery and racial hatred are still haunting us—even in the twenty-first century. The film picks up where Chesnutt left off by employing similar narrative devices and characters and owes a debt to his genius.

Chesnutt was a master of his craft, and much of *The Conjure Woman's* critical discourse centers on how well he manipulates the genre of this era to initiate a new awareness and dialogue about race. The filmmakers appear to be keenly in tune with the conventions of their genre but also with those employed by Chesnutt and his predecessors for the purpose of subverting the status quo.[4] Richard Brodhead surmises that "Chesnutt's fables describe the asymmetrical power struggles of antebellum blacks against slavery. They describe the similarly asymmetrical struggles of postwar blacks against New South economic history" (313). Kruger likewise centers his storyline around an oppressed group, the Thorpe servants, who rely on "wit and trickery" to "bring 'trouble' to the [Thorpes] in ways that constantly undermined [the Thorpes'] efforts to impose on them a value system that they had no reason to accept" (Roberts 43). Congruent with the conjure tales, in the film, "the former white masters and their blacks [servants] are the contending parties here, and the [servants'] art of 'cunjuh' forms the heart of the struggle between them," though the viewing audience is initially unaware (Brodhead 311).

The similarities between *The Conjure Woman* and *The Skeleton Key* are most discernible when considering the story, "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," the third story of Chesnutt's collection. The motion picture incorporates elements of conjure and

hoodoo, a master raconteur, and relies on a type of "passing" for the climactic plot twist just as in Chesnutt's short story. In this particular tale, Uncle Julius McAdoo tells a cautionary tale to his new employers, the northerners John and Annie, about being cruel to those (animals and humans alike) under their supervision. He recalls how, during the time of chattel slavery, one slave owner's hardness took what little joy could be had from his slaves:

> "Mars Jeems wuz a ha'd man, en monst'us stric' wid his han's. . . . His niggers wuz bleedzd ter slabe fum daylight ter da'k, w'iles yuther folks's didn' hafter wuk 'cep'n fum sun ter sun; en dey didn' get git no mo' ter eat dan dey oughter, en dat de coas'ses' kin'. Dey wa'n't 'lowed ter sing, ner dance, ner play de banjo w'en Mars Jeems wuz roun' de place; fer Mars Jeems say he wouldn' hab no sech gwines-on,--said he bought his han's ter wuk, en not ter play." (Chesnutt 57-58)

Such a cruel and mean-spirited disposition resulted in Mars Jeems being conjured into a bondsman by the local conjure woman, Aunt Peggy, and suffering the meager, inhumane existence of slave life for himself. As a slave, the "oberseah made de yuther niggers he'p tie [Mars Jeems] up, an den gun 'im fo'ty wid a dozen er so th'owed in fer good measure. . . [then] lock' [him] up in de ba'n, en didn' gib 'im nuffin ter eat fer a day er so" (62). In the fictional world of the film, slavery is sixty-odd years in the past, but the New South mimics its past by clinging to notions of white supremacy and the inhumanity of African Americans. Robertson Thorpe (actor Thomas Uskali) was one southern gentleman who held to such traditions, and when his servants, Justify (actor Ronald McCall) and Cecile (actress Jeryl Prescott Sales), tire of his ill-treatment, they too engage in hoodoo acts of body-snatching.

The extreme measures of spirit work performed by Chesnutt's Aunt Peggy and *Mama* Cecile and *Papa* Justify (they are known by their formal titles among the colored folk of Terrebonne Parrish) indicate the type of agency and empowerment afforded them through African spiritual epistemologies. Perhaps the similarity between the two acts is coincidental, but it is also indicative of the dire need for the subjugated to employ escape mechanisms through which to circumvent racially motivated oppression. In Chesnutt's work, the temporary body switch accomplishes the desired outcome: "Julius's allegorical tale has a purpose—to show the white master just how terrible and degrading was the domination of the black person under a white owner and how lasting were the effects of slavery. . . . Forced to live the slave existence, Mars Jeems comes to understand that human dignity and decency transcend color" (White 100). Kruger, on the other hand, does not resolve the matter in such a clean manner. He pushes his subversion

well past the point of discomfort for any audience. In the filmic narrative, it is the Thorpe children whose souls are reconstituted in the physical bodies of the domestic servants, and while in these bodies, they experience the trauma and violence of white lynch mob vengeance. Martin and Grace are hanged and burned, while Mama Cecile and Papa Justify watch solemnly from their newly acquired bodies of white, privileged, school-aged children. It is ambiguous whether the death of the children was expected or an unintentional outcome of the *conjuring moment*, but it does occur, and it leaves Mama Cecile and Papa Justify to live a life masking their true identities.[5]

The Skeleton Key rejects the subtlety with which Chesnutt rewrites his narratives of the old south. Rather, the brutal honesty with which the film exemplifies the discontent of the African American servants and the lengths they will go to rectify their dissatisfaction are seething with social and cultural implications for American race relations. The film debunks the myth of the contented darky altogether, leaving no room for misinterpretation that Mama Cecile and Papa Justify are grateful and indebted to the Thorpes. The oppressed servants resolved to have the last laugh, and it is a laugh that echoes over several generations. Other comparisons between Chesnutt's fiction and the film include a reliance on the trope of the mask and an African American trickster ideology. There is even a moment in the film where a "conjure tale" is relayed within the framework of the larger story—a literary technique that is characteristic of and central to Chesnutt's collection. There is also a principal conjure woman around whom the story develops.

Mama Cecile, we learn, is an infamous conjure woman in her community, and her antics easily call to mind the iconic Aunt Peggy, who is a legendary presence in Chesnutt's Patesville: "Dey wuz a cunjuh 'oman livin' down 'mongs' de free niggers on de Wim'l'ton Road, en all de darkies fum Rockfish ter Beaver Crick wuz feared er her. She could wuk de mos' powerfulles' kin' er gopher,--could make people hab fits, er rheumatiz, er make 'em des dwinel away en die; en dey say she went out ridin' de niggers at night, fer she wuz a witch 'sides bein' a cunjuh 'oman"(Chesnutt 36). Both women are powerful enough to steal souls from human bodies and, more importantly, bold enough to use their power to conjure the white folks. Their respective power, however, is not omnipotent, and as Broadhead suggests, "Chesnutt's tales are at their most moving in charting the limits of such power" (313). Aunt Peggy has to rely on the cooperation of the community—namely Mars Jeems's cook and field hand, Solomon—in order for her spell to take effect: "You take dis home, en gin it ter de cook, ef you kin trus' her, and tell her fer ter put it in yo' marster's soup de fus' cloudy day he hab okra soup fer dinnah" (Chesnutt 60).

Correspondingly, Mama Cecile must wait until her victims fully believe in hoodoo before she can transfer their souls into another body. The conjure women share uncanny characteristics of each other, yet I find it most telling that Softley and Kruger's film garners my comparison to Chesnutt's fictional conjure woman without either character's physical presence being largely entered into the equation. There is not a notable on-screen presence of a black female conjuring figure in the majority of the film. That is, the black actress portraying Mama Cecile has less than two full minutes of screen time in an hour and forty-four minute feature film. This echoes Chesnutt's representation of Aunt Peggy in *The Conjure Woman*. He provides no physical description of Aunt Peggy, rendering her black female body absent from the text.[6] Mama Cecile is alluded to in the film, yet viewers are barely granted the pleasure of seeing this archetype envisioned on the screen.

While my primary interest is identifying ways the film serves as a visual echo of Chesnutt's conjure tales, I analyze *The Skeleton Key's* hoodoo subtext through the lens of black female spectatorship to deconstruct the meaning of the cinematic absence of a black female presence in a film that heavily appropriates black (and often female) folk traditions.[7] I also demonstrate how Kruger, as the screenwriter, is pulling from an expressly African American storytelling tradition in the structure of the visual narrative. My secondary interest thus lies in articulating a discourse on black women and spirit work that "is less about the unseen presence of blackness and more about its impact on its surrounding, or what [Toni] Morrison calls the 'Africanist Presence'" (Hobson, *Venus* 15).

I initiate my analysis with a decidedly black feminist approach to the study of film. I engage in what Janet Hobson calls "viewing in the dark"—that is, placing attention "not just on the visual, but also on the unseen and the heard" Africanist presence in the film (Hobson, *Viewing* 48). Hobson builds her paradigm from Toni Morrison's critical discussion of blackness in the literary imagination, *Playing in the Dark* (1996), and applies the notion to the study of American film. In *Playing in the Dark* Morrison admonishes her literary compatriots that "the contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination" (5). Hobson suggests, and rightly so, that a similar dismissal or refusal to acknowledge the presence of racial others occurs in the popular visual imagination where black female bodies, in particular, struggle against looking relations that capture usually white and male "responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" in the American landscape (Morrison 5).

For instance, my interpretation of *The Skeleton Key* insists that by acknowledging the Africanist presence, in this case African American conjuring

and narrative traditions, Kruger displaces the white male as the dominant bearer of the gaze. To understand fully the complexities of the subtext of racial oppression and to see the act of body snatching as a justified retribution for Mama Cecile and Papa Justify, one must learn to view Kruger's story from a point of view that recognizes and perhaps even *empathizes* with the black American experience and an African spiritual epistemology. The literature (or film, in my case) is not read for what it says about American culture in totality when the Africanist presence is mitigated from the discussion. Morrison is criticizing the scholar who only reads and comprehends his or her subject through the narrow lens of western whiteness. Sarah Projansky and Kent Ono similarly condemn films that call attention to otherness (blackness specifically) as a means to situate whiteness as the default positionality.

They contend that "by explicitly addressing whiteness through their characters and narratives, these films [that specifically place whiteness in relation to blackness] provide an opportunity for us to highlight the process and/or strategies by which whiteness recenters itself—even in the face of explicit attention to blackness—and hence occludes 'other' positions" (151). Projansky and Ono's position demonstrates how a majority of films by white male filmmakers are presented and how the white male is the default bearer of the gaze or perspective from which the film should be viewed. Kruger and Softley, however, feign a centering of whiteness for the majority of the film ultimately to *de-center* whiteness and the white male gaze altogether by pulling the proverbial rug from under the audience.

They successfully dislodge whiteness by employing an African American narrative tradition and trickster ideology and by shifting from the traditional position of understanding events in the film as they relate to white characters and viewers to an understanding and acknowledgement of how such events relate to the unseen black characters and the often unacknowledged black spectator. It seems that Kruger and Softley are possessed of a trickster spirit themselves. Kruger's ruse of black physical absence makes clear what the audience may be missing when they turn a blind eye toward the Africanist presence in literature, film, and even history. Without recognition of the intangible Africanist presence, the film's insurrectionary message gets lost in translation. What initially appears to be a problematic dismissal of the black female body is actually a strategic design to promote the destabilizing of socio-political lines of traditional filmmaking. In the case of *The Skeleton Key*, the "disembodied presence" of Mama Cecile "shapes and characterizes the dominance and normalcy...of whiteness in cinema" not simply to reify whiteness but also as part of Mama Cecile and Papa Justify's intricate mechanism of survival: affixing the souls of black folks to white bodies wherein said souls escape racial persecution, violence, inhumane treatment, and stretch the limits of mortality (Hobson, *Viewing* 48).

There is also a secondary conjure woman referred to in the visual text, similar to Chesnutt's introduction of Tenie in the story, "Po' Sandy." Mama Cynthia (actress Maxine Barnett) is the conjure woman who runs a hoodoo shop in Algiers, just across the river from the French Quarter. Neither she nor Mama Cecile has substantial time on screen or significant dialogue, Mama Cynthia having considerably less time than Mama Cecile.[8] Where the viewer does see the image of the conjure woman in Softley's film, the representations seem questionable. Mama Cynthia too easily acquiesces into the mammy archetype. She is a large, dark-skinned woman wearing a brightly colored, polka dot handkerchief on her head. She wears gold teeth, perhaps to give the image a twenty-first century flare, and a mismatched muumuu of purple and gold. Around her neck she wears a large, ornate beaded necklace coupled with a second necklace made of "coon dongs," or raccoon penis bones.[9] She even hums an old Negro spiritual-esque melody as she prepares the conjure package for her new client, Caroline. As such, she communicates a style of buffoonery reminiscent of the early and silent Hollywood cinema. She is "presented in a manner wholly consistent with accepted racial stereotypes" of times past, which begs the question of directorial intent (M. Martin 27).

Neither Kruger nor Softley addresses this in any published interviews, and limited access to the production notes and the film script leaves the question unresolved. One possibility, however, reveals itself if one continues to draw parallels between Kruger's screenplay and Chesnutt's fiction. In his description of Uncle Julius in "The Goophered Grapevine," Chesnutt strategically makes use of popular stereotypes of African Americans, particularly calling to mind the exaggerated full lips often attributed to an African phenotype in visual representations of his time by having John recount how Julius "was smacking his lips with great gusto" and noting that "the performance was no new thing" (Chesnutt 34). Chesnutt seems to have also been particularly intimate with his audience—enough to anticipate their expectations for plantation tradition literature. In order to draw them in, he had to acknowledge such simple and offensive characterizations of African Americans, if only to later "lessen the impact of his departure from" those very same expectations (M. Martin 27). Uncle Julius is also keenly aware of the masking he must perform in order to have his sway with the white couple. He willingly plays the "comic type of the slave with smacking lips and rolling eyes" to satisfy the ideas of blackness with which the white couple expect to be met and that mark himself as a "safe Negro" (27). "Now, ef dey's an'thing a nigger lub, nex' ter 'possum, en chick'n, en watermillyums, it's scuppernon's," Uncle Julius exclaims, in his best shuckin' and jivin' routine (Chesnutt 35).

Perhaps the characterization of Mama Cynthia is also a ploy on the part of the screenwriter and director to induce the audience to read her as the buffoonish

stereotype of the mammy and refuse her any real credibility, and by association, disrepute the hoodoo tradition as a viable threat to whiteness. Mama Cecile, on the other hand, does not appear in the twenty-first century at all. Her image is offered to viewers as a photograph, as a ghostly reflection in the mirror, in a flashback sequence where she is convulsing under the auspices of "the conjure of sacrifice" and, finally, as strange fruit hanging from the live oak tree. I think it is also important to note that she is always pictured wearing servant's attire. The white characters in the film, and perhaps even white on-lookers in the audience, are "reassured of their racial, class, and gender status through the [body] of the black female comfortably placed . . . in a role of servitude" (Hobson 47). There is no question about what role she plays in the Thorpe household, though this belies her identity outside of the Thorpes's dominion. I read this as another ruse by Kruger to meet the expectations of a predictable audience only to disrupt them later in the film. Mama Cecile is presented as non-threatening and servile in her few moments on screen. This, coupled with the problematic characterization of Mama Cynthia, leaves the viewing audience likely unsuspecting of black women who conjure—an attitude that seems essential to the success of the plot twist. Other than in these sparse images, however, the physical black female body of the conjure woman is absent from the film that so inherently relies on her presence. The absence of the black female presence in *The Skeleton* signifies the trickery often embedded in African American resistance rather than validating the perceived supremacy of white womanhood. As a two-headed figure, Mama Cecile emerges as the accomplished trickster leading Caroline down a pre-determined path.

Upon viewing the film with the mostly white cast, it is easy to assume that the flick is yet another cinematic narrative that reinforces the prominence of the Eurocentric, western perspective and that the few token black characters have little bearing on the lives and development of their white counterparts. Kruger and Softely's trick ensures that viewers will acknowledge how the ignorable black presence is really at the helm of the ship, steering and maneuvering at every turn. They negate the privileging of white male perspective and voice by displacing the Africanist presence (black bodies), though the film itself is full of signifiers of black presence/culture (hoodoo) and hinges on the experience of the black servants. Not only does Kruger pull from the conjure and folk tale traditions of the American south, but he also weaves an unconventional passing narrative.

As the denouement reveals, the elusive Mama Cecile is actually "present" for more than three-fourths of the film. She is presented to the audience in the aged body of Violet Devereaux (actress Gena Rowlands), a southern white woman. Aunt Peggy succeeds in teaching Mars Jeems a lesson in humanity with her body-transferring conjure. Mama Cecile, however, dons the bodies of white women as a

seditious act of resistance and masterful trickery. She and Papa Justify understand the injustice, prejudice, and mal-treatment visited upon the black body and opt to undermine the status quo with their conjuration of sacrifice. The trick grants immediate and lasting protection for Mama Cecile and Papa Justify from the social ills of their southern, segregated, 1920s environment. By throwing off her black skin, Softley and Kruger empower Mama Cecile to reject the white, Christian, patriarchal oppression of the Thorpe family, effectively using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. By first assuming the life of young Grace Thorpe, then as Violet Devereaux, and finally as Caroline Ellis, Mama Cecile finds shelter from Jim Crow, the Klu Klux Klan, and quite literally, the lynch mob that destroys the body in which she came into the world. As a white woman, she lives a peaceful life of relative seclusion—living off the land and vegetation of the Thorpe estate—unfettered by the racial tensions and social turmoil of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There seems no safer space for Mama Cecile than a white woman's body.

Mama Cecile essentially passes for white in a most exceptional way, yet the advantages and logic for doing so echo those of other people of color—both fictional and real—who choose to wear the mask of whiteness. To be clear, I am invoking the term "passing" as it is used and understood within the black imagination, rather than relying on the trope of the tragic mulatto—an ideal of the black experience constructed by and for white consumption. Mama Cecile is engaged in the type of passing or masking that is privileged in the African American literary tradition as exemplified in Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" or Nella Larsen's fiction. As explained by Brian Redfield, a character from Larsen's classic novel, *Passing* (1929), passing for white is a natural "instinct of the race to survive and expand" (216).

Mama Cecile and Papa Justify are not among the ambiguously raced, but their decision to hide their souls in the bodies of their young white charges is absolutely about securing a better quality of life. It is also about literally saving their lives.

As a white woman Violet is non-threatening, even in her belief of hoodoo, to other whites. She is suspected only of being brainwashed by the coloreds' superstition; thus, Mama Cecile's trick remains safely undetected. It is only when Violet is revealed to the audience as a black conjuring woman that any perceived "horror" and malevolence of her acts are realized. Ironically, this is also the moment that Violet/Mama Cecile is simultaneously revealed as a folk hero and resistant subject to the black spectator whose expectation is justice for the lynched servants. As Manthia Diawara poignantly explains in "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," when popular films continue to simplify black

experiences and injustices by "transferring villainy" to black characters who have suffered at the hands of white institutions "it denies the pleasure of resolution to the African American spectator" (73). This is not the case in *The Skeleton Key*; Kruger opts to vindicate the black servants for the oppression they have suffered by white hands. Justice indeed. It is her passing as white that provides safety and anonymity for Mama Cecile. This is an essential part of her trick, and without whiteness and an acute understanding of how it functions, it is unlikely that Mama Cecile and Papa Justify would have been able to pull off such a grand gesture of their conjuring prowess.

The boldness and incredulity of the conjure of sacrifice ensures that the audience—who undoubtedly pondered the full implications of their realization that Mama Cecile is actually present during the entire film—views the conjure woman as an entity that falls entirely outside of connotations of "the help." The audience can no longer project the American mammy imaginary unto Mama Cecile, though she is in uniform. Jeanette S. White aptly notes of the African American characters in Chesnutt's conjure tales, "the former slave represents the oppressed, whose turn it is to even the score and thus repay the white man for all the injuries inflicted upon them" (97). This is the position both Papa Justify and Mama Cecile assume during their servitude with the Thorpe family. Mama Cecile is willing to sacrifice Grace, Violet, and finally, Caroline to ensure her own survival and quality of life. Like Uncle Julius and his spell-casting stories, Mama Cecile understands that hoodoo is "really [her] only arsenal [and she] has no qualms about using [it] to further [her] causes" (97).

The revelation of Violet's identity at the film's conclusion calls for multiple viewings to pry apart the alternate reality that has been spun. The critic must now call into question every word, gesture, and glance exchanged between Violet, Caroline, and Luke Marshall (Peter Sarsgaard), the lawyer whose body, we learn, Papa Justify inhabits. The spectator must now view Violet as Mama Cecile, conjurer *magnifique* who wholly embodies the Africanist presence that silently pervades the film—though the moving image suggests otherwise.

When Mama Cecile, masquerading as Violet, refuses to greet Caroline at their first meeting and complains to Luke that "she won't understand the house," she is already planting the seeds of deceit and trickery—luring Caroline into her hoodoo world and challenging her non-belief.[10] Mama Cecile continues to test the limits of her next victim's belief in the invisible world when she inquires if Caroline is "religious at all"? Caroline admits that she tries "to keep an open mind." Mama Cecile nods approvingly: "That's good. That's very good," just before sending Caroline to the attic. Another attribute of an accomplished trickster is having

an intimate knowledge of the behavior and pathology of his or her adversary or dupe. By anticipating the dupe's reaction to certain triggers, the trickster is able to successfully bait the dupe into doing his or her bidding. Uncle Julius is likewise able to manipulate John and Annie by understanding the privilege of whiteness; "Julius makes no mistake in evaluating *his* prey and seems to know exactly how far he can go in pushing both John and his wife" (Taxel 106). Mama Cecile is also profoundly aware that Caroline's position of privilege and heir of entitlement as a white, urban female will lead her to snoop around in the attic, foregoing any boundaries of privacy and propriety until she finds the hoodoo room. In the film, Caroline asserts her white privilege over Violet—almost consciously, I would argue. She assumes that because of her northern sensibilities that she is somehow more superior in thinking and knowing than her southern and rural elder. She never says as much openly, but her unconscious habits belie her lauding of white privilege over another white person. Shannon Sullivan's scholarship suggests that this is not an uncommon trait of white privilege as "race and white dominion can vary based on geographical and regional differences" (25). Mama Cecile seems to anticipate this upon meeting Caroline and adjusts her game accordingly. Granting Caroline a skeleton key for her home earlier in the film encourages such arrogance and accelerates her descent into Mama Cecile's conjure milieu. Indeed, Mama Cecile is relying on Caroline's attitude that whiteness *is* the skeleton key with which she can open any door in the world.[11] Mama Cecile, masking as Violet, banks on Caroline's white privilege and unconscious habit of entitlement to lead her along the route that will allow Mama Cecile to perform the Conjuration of Sacrifice on her.

Mama Cecile, like Uncle Julius, also invokes the storytelling tradition as a rhetorical tool to instill skepticism, inspire fear, and position herself as an avid believer in southern folk magic when she relates the story of the "Two-headed Doctors" in the Thorpe home. Mama Cecile's narrative provides more evidence of the Africanist presence hiding behind the mask of whiteness; it evinces "the oral heritage of African peoples: stories within stories, spoken language, call and response, hyperbole, personification, and signifying"—not unlike Chesnutt's strategy in his collection of tales (Montgomery 5). Mama Cecile assumes the position of raconteur in order to sway the meddling northerner Caroline into believing in hoodoo and further drawing her closer into her conjure entrapment. Uncle Julius "knows well the art of 'working roots' through the power of the spoken word. Wearing the veil of ignorance, Uncle Julius weaves a convincing web through which he ensnares his employers" (White 89). Mama Cecile also gives a convincing performance of a white woman who has been spooked by African American folk beliefs, but more importantly the conjure woman demonstrates that "the spoken word works in" her; and, like her ancestor Julius, she "knows how to wield language to [her] advantage" (89). Violent begins:

> "You're not from the south. You won't understand. That room up there? You just don't go in and throw things out of a room like that. You leave it just where you found it. The house is theirs just as much as ours.... About ninety years ago, there was a banker here. His name was Thorpe. He made his fortune cheating the poor. He was a mean man, he was a... he was a... *cruel* man. It was him, his family and a couple of servants. Name of Mama Cecile and Papa Justify. Now, the way I heard it, Old Man Thorpe didn't know that Papa Justify was a two-headed doctor... was a *conjure* man. And so was Cecile. They believed in...[hoodoo]. That was their room."

The storytelling sequence, viewed from a spectatorship that acknowledges Mama Cecile's presence in Violet's body, is critical to understanding how deeply her character is indoctrinated in an African American trickster ideology. Her rhetorical position calls to mind the discursive style of Zora Neale Hurston—an author well known for spinning tales about various tricksters in African American folklore as well as tales about herself. Kruger emulates Hurston's knack for storytelling by pushing the trope of the mask to an entertaining, preemptive extreme in this tale within a tale, a likely result of using *Mules and Men* to research "how [hoodoo] was woven into and affected [African American's] daily lives" (Goldsmith 52). Hurston's influence is evident as Violet assumes a storytelling posture and describes Mama Cecile and Papa Justify's conjuring abilities as "hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick," a vernacular phrase endeared to and much used by Zora Neale. Mama Cecile clearly places her literary trickster pedigree on display when she becomes the author of her own tale. She uses her story to signify on her strength and power as a conjure woman. She uses the art of indirection to inform Caroline about who she is dealing with and to warn her of the danger she will face if she continues to meddle.

Mama Cecile gives voice to her own story, weaving a tale about her life that reveals more truths than falsehood about her hoodoo practice and how it destroys the Thorpes—to which Caroline seems impervious due to her non-belief. The trick to the story is that it is the one moment when Mama Cecile seems to put all of her cards on the table and provides the listener (and viewers) with the most insight into her personal history. Ironically, this is also the moment when Caroline is most skeptical. She is so guarded and secure in her non-belief that her refusal to recognize another worldview blinds her from what is right in front of her. Mama Cecile uses her narrative, as John Roberts suggests, as a means to elevate the conjurer

and persuade the listener of his or her power—only the storyteller and conjurer are one and the same.[12] If it achieves nothing else, the story piques Caroline's curiosity about what the real source of Ben's ailment may be—the same curiosity that keeps her entangled in the conjure woman's web. Untutored in the ways of the invisible world yet a master at the ways of white folks, Caroline assumes that anyone can practice hoodoo and tries to co-opt conjure after superficial investigations. She arrogantly proclaims to Ben, "I know a spell, too."

Mama Cecile's most telling trickster pose, however, is when she baits Caroline into believing in and performing the "Conjuration of Supreme Protection," a ritual the hoodoo lady begins to act out when Caroline tries to harm her. Softley gently nudges the audience (with suggestive camera shots) to understand that Mama Cecile/Violet feigns the performance of the ritual in order to get Caroline to trust in its power. As Caroline enters the Devereaux house after confiding in Luke Marshall, the camera pans slowly across the kitchen capturing boiling pots, a bowl of white rice, and two freshly plucked chicken corpses; Mama Cecile is cutting Ben's hair at the table (or perhaps collecting his hair clippings) when Caroline announces herself. Mama Cecile immediately moves toward the opposite counter drawer, retrieves a recipe book, which is earlier identified as the (hoodoo) recipe book of Mama Cecile and Papa Justify during Caroline's attic ramblings, from which she removes a single page. Though the camera does not make the page fully visible, one can see that it is a conjure spell that calls for sulfur, chalk, blood, and hair. Mama Cecile folds the page and slips it into her apron pocket. As it were, Caroline drugs the conjure woman in a vain effort to remove Ben from the premises. Mama Cecile pretends intoxication and falls to the floor dramatically as she pulls the page from her pocket and begins to draw the cosmogram on the floor. Caroline snatches the spell away.

Caroline learns to trust in the Conjuration of Supreme Protection when her safety is at risk. Caroline's belief is fully realized in a moment of desperation, and she initiates this conjuring moment unaware that this is Mama Cecile's biggest trick yet. She fears for her life and has witnessed enough of the supernatural that her belief system is rocked to its core. Caroline furiously gathers the sulfur and chalk. She draws the cosmogram indicated on the page. She cuts a lock of her own hair and slices her hand to provide the last ingredient: blood. She completes the conjuring moment just as Mama Cecile has dragged her body, now bruised and battered from chasing Caroline through the house, to the ritual space in the attic. Caroline taunts, "You can't touch me. You can't get near me. See this? This is your spell of protection." Mama Cecile responds mockingly, "Is that what that is, now? Who *exactly* gave you that spell? All that circle protects is you . . . *from leaving it*! We've been waiting for you Caroline. Waiting for you to believe. 'It doesn't work if

you don't believe'". The scene cuts to an extreme close-up of Luke's serpent-ringed hand placing a needle on the "Conjuration of Sacrifice" record—a ring that has previously been identified as that of Papa Justify's. This is the first indication to the audience that they have been masterfully duped by Softley and Kruger and that the tricksters are about to reveal their deceitful act. When Caroline next appears in the frame, she awakens in the corporeal shell of Violet Dereveaux, battered, beaten, and shocked into silence by the realization that Mama Cecile and Papa Justify have successfully stolen her body.

While Hobson argues that "those of us who study film and wish to incorporate black feminist analyses still confront the cinematic construction of black female bodies as stereotyped, marginalized, or invisible," I submit that Kruger and Softley offer a small modicum of relief by subverting that norm with the incredible plot twist of *The Skeleton Key* (*Viewing* 53). Mama Cecile's disembodied presence is intentional and strategic to the film's narrative—a conjure tale of the highest order. The audience is made to believe that the black servants are only peripheral to what occurs at the Thorpe home when, truly, the entire story revolves around their resistance to racial oppression by use of syncretized African traditions. *The Skeleton Key* paints a vivid and memorable picture of how conjure and hoodoo have been used as a defense mechanism and means of escaping persecution for people of African descent. Rather than submitting to the default design of other Hollywood films that delve into African spiritual traditions and politely reinstate the status quo, which maintains that black conjurers are never the victor, Softley's film does not rescue Caroline, the white, female protagonist, and punish the black interlopers of white bodies. Caroline falls victim to Mama Cecile's conjure of sacrifice and will live the rest of her limited days in the defeated body of Violet Devereaux. Mama Cecile awakens in Caroline's young, taut body ready to defy mortality for another lifetime. Yet, it is Chesnutt's spirit that is so heavily invoked in this film. The film speaks to two different audiences and gives rise to questions of racial equality and social behaviors with a mastery that is Chesnutt's alone. Kruger's mirroring of the narrative structure and literary devices employed in *The Conjure Woman* revives Chesnutt's literary efforts in a new medium. Though not directly associated with Chesnutt, for the audience who knows his work intimately, *The Skeleton Key* serves as a visual resonance in which we can hear the voices of our literary past roaring into the future.

Works Cited

Brodhead, Richard. "Chesnutt's Negotiation with the Dominant Literary Culture." The Conjure Stories. Eds. Robert Stepto and Jennifer Rae Greeson. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012. 308-315. Print.——. "Introduction." Chesnutt, Charles W. The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales. Ed. Richard Broadhead. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. 1-21. Print.

Chesnutt, Charles W. *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales.* Ed. Richard Brodhead. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. Print.

Diawara, Manthia. "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance." *Screen* 29.4 (1988): 66-76. Print.

Dunbar, Paul Lawrence. "We Wear the Mask." *American Negro Poetry.* Ed. Arna Bontemps. New York: Noonday Press, 1963. 14. Print.

Goldsmith, Jeff. "Ehren Kruger's Key to a Grimm Summer." *Creative Screenwriting* 12.4 (July/Aug 2005): 48-53. Print.

Hobson, Janell. Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture. New York : Routledge, 2005. Print.

——. "Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film." *Looking Across the Lens: Women's Studies and Film. Special issue of Women's Studies Quarterly.* 30.1/2 (Spring-Summer 2002): 45-59. Print.

Hurston, Zora Neale. Mules and Men. 1935. New York: Perennial, 1990. Print.

"John Pendleton Kennedy." *The Literature of the American South: A Norton Anthology.* Ed. William Andrews. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998. 58-60. Print.

Larsen, Nella. Passing. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929. Print.

Martin, Kameelah L. *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, & Other Such Hoodoo.* New York: Palgrave, 2013. Print.

Martin, Matthew. "The Two-Faced New South: The Plantation Tales of Thomas Nelson Page and Charles W. Chesnutt." *The Southern Literary Journal.* 30.2 (Spring 1998): 17-36. Print.

Montgomery, Georgene Bess. "Testing and Tricking: Elegba in Charles Chesnutt's 'The Goophered Grapevine' and 'The Passing of Grandison'." *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Placing a Stamp on America. Special issue of Studies in the Literary Imagination* .43.2 (Fall 2010): 5-14. Print.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.* New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.

Projansky, Sarah, and Kent A. Ono. "Strategic Whiteness as Cinematic Racial Politics." Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity. Eds. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999. 149-174. Print.

Roberts, John W. *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom.* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1989. Print.

Russell, Aaron E. "Material Culture and African American Spirituality at the Hermitage." *Historical Archaeology* (1997): 63-80. Print.

Samuel, Kameelah Martin. "Charles Chesnutt and the Legacy of The Conjure Woman." *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Placing a Stamp on America. Special issue of Studies in the Literary Imagination* 43.2 (Fall 2010): 15-30. Print.

Streeter, Caroline A. "Was Your Mama Mulatto? Notes toward a Theory of Racialized Sexuality in Gayl Jones's Corregidora and Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust." *Callaloo* 27.3 (Summer 2004): 768-787. Print.

Sullivan, Shannon. *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. Print.

Taxel, Joel. "Charles Waddell Chesnutt's Sambo: Myth and Reality." *Negro American Literature Forum* (Winter 1975): 105-08. Print.

The Skeleton Key. Dir. Iain Softley. Perf. Gena Rowlands, Kate Hudson. 2005. DVD.

White, Jeannette S. "Baring Slavery's Darkest Secrets: Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Tales as Masks of Truth." *The Southern Literary Journal* 27.1(Fall 1994): 85-103. Print.

Yronwode, Catherine. http://www.luckymojo.com/raccoonpenis.html. n.d. 4 October 2012. Print.

Notes)

[1] In this essay, I give credit to both the director, Iain Softley and the screenwriter, Ehren Kruger for the creative vision of the film. Kruger composes the narrative and is responsible for such elements as the plot twist, dialogue, and character development, while Softley is responsible for the camera angles, lighting, developing mise-en-scènes, and the composition of each frame. My analysis of the film relies on both aspects of development, and thus I consider Softley and Kruger to be two sides of one coin—equally contributing to the film-making process. For this reason, I make reference to both men throughout the essay emphasizing their collaborative effort.

[2] John Pendleton Kennedy's novel Swallow Barn; or a Sojourn in the Old Dominion (1851) is considered by many literary historians to be the prototypical plantation tradition narrative. It was one of the first novels to situate the south as nostalgic paradise and set a precedent for future writers to mythologize the antebellum south. See Andrews 58-60.

[3] The film is described as such on the official promotional site: www.theskeletonkeymovie.com.

[4] In "Charles W. Chesnutt and the Legacy of The Conjure Woman," I discuss how Chesnutt makes use of an African American oral narrative structure in his conjure tales. I trace the narrative organization of his fictional tales to the genre of oral folk tales collected from various sources. My central argument is that Chesnutt is not creating a new structure but subscribing to a much older narrative tradition that has origins in slave communities. Chesnutt also pulls from southern literary traditions, as argued by a number of scholars, namely Richard Brodhead. His work is very genre specific—though it pulls from two differing genres.

[5] Conjuring moments are identifiable moments in a text in which a conjurer engages in casting a spell, creating gris-gris, planting a charm, conducting a ritual of healing or otherwise participating in the business of conjure, hoodoo, and root work. These moments, as I argue in Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, & Other Such Hoodoo, function to move the narrative action forward.

[6] I discuss the implications of Aunt Peggy not having a physical description and its impact on future characterizations of conjure women in African American literature in the essay "Charles W. Chesnutt and the Legacy of The Conjure Woman."

[7] I borrow the term "visual echo" from Caroline Streeter, who uses it to articulate how the historical narrative of the tragic, sexualized mulatto is visually echoed or embodied in the characterization and casting of American cinema. Here, I mean to suggest that The Skeleton Key is a visual rendering of Chesnutt's conjure tales. This is not to suggest that it is a mere visual adaptation of Chesnutt's collection but, more precisely, that it reverberates the tenants of Chesnutt's narrative genius in quantifiable ways. See Streeter, "Was Your Mama Mulatto?"

[8] This estimate is one taken from several viewings of the film where I counted the number of times the character of Mama Cecile is actually shown in the film.

[9] Raccoon penis bones, according to Catherine Yronwode, are mostly used as sexual amulets and charms used in love spells across the midwest and southern United States. They have been linked to African American spirituality and material culture, generally, but their use has certainly moved outside of any one specific cultural group. Iain Softley confirms that the set was full of such raccoon penis bones in the director's commentary, a special feature on the DVD. See Yronwode (website) and Aaron E. Russell (68).

[10] Here, the reader should note that the quotations from the film are a result of my own transcription rather than that of the original script. Because I could not gain proper access to the script, I have provided transcriptions that attempt to reflect the emphasis and intonations of the dialog as performed by the actors in the film.

[11] I am indebted to my colleagues Beauty Bragg and Thabiti Lewis for the engaging discussion in which this metaphor was developed. They are equally responsible for generating the idea that whiteness acts as a skeleton key in American society, and I am appreciative to them both for helping me think through my argument.

[12] See John W. Roberts for a detailed discussion of the conjurer as trickster figure (96).

Diasporic Connections: Erna Brodber and Toni Morrison's Literary Explorations of Black Existentiality

Marie Sairsingh

The concept of the African Diaspora emerged out of and became consolidated in twentieth-century Pan-Africanist discourse, which functioned as a philosophical and political counterpoint to European Enlightenment treatises and to the practices of racial slavery, colonialism, and racial oppression. Pan-Africanism stressed the commonalities among Africans globally and articulated political imperatives in the interest of global black liberation. Early Pan-Africanists Martin Delany,[1] Alexander Crummel,[2] and Edward Blyden[3] expressed variously the importance of African-descended peoples forming alliances that would facilitate the channeling of black self-interest, self-discovery, and self-reliance. In later decades, W.E.B. Du Bois (credited as the father of *modern* Pan-Africanism), Marcus Garvey, C.L.R. James, George Padmore, Leopold Senghor, Aime Cesaire, Jomo Kenyatta, among others, together representing a prodigious black transnational collective, continued the advocacy of black equality worldwide. Successive generations of black intellectuals have assumed a place on the continuum of what Cedric Robinson refers to as the "black radical tradition."[4]

In the mid-1950s, the concept of "diaspora" became prevalent and, according to Brent Hayes Edwards, signaled an important intervention in Pan-Africanist discourse that simultaneously acknowledged constitutive differences in "formations of black internationalism" and provided a "conceptual metaphor" for the analysis of these formations, while implicitly signaling a "linking or connecting across gaps" (11). Kim D. Butler, in her essay, "Clio and the Griot: The African Diaspora in the Discipline of History," sheds light on the evolving currency of the term and cites a central moment in emergent diaspora consciousness when at the 1965 meeting of the International Congress of African Historians in Tanzania, Joseph E. Harris, renowned professor of history at Howard University, delivered a talk titled, "Introduction to the African Diaspora" (23), signaling the call for Africanist historians to make the African diaspora an integral part of the continent's history.

Historical developments - the abolition of slavery across the Americas and the Caribbean; the resurgence of European imperialism in the 1880s scramble for Africa and the instituting of colonial regimes, in early 1900s; and the internal and external migratory movement of African descended peoples to various urban centers - served to increase interconnectedness and strengthen communications