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The Mammies and Uncles of the South:  
The Subversive Tales  
of Joel Chandler Harris and Kate Chopin

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**Abstract**

The aim of this essay is to look at Southern racism from a different perspective, namely the subversive influence of the black uncles and mammies, depicted as kind, loyal and caring, in the racial education of the white Southern children. However, these narrators, though meant to comply with the racist requirements of their masters, take control of the stories and, with caution and dissimulation, attempt to educate the children they care for towards a more tolerant outlook on race. The dangers of such an endeavor, especially at the height of segregation and racial violence at the end of the nineteenth century (in the post-Reconstruction South), are evident in the ambiguous critical reception of Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus* stories and Kate Chopin's writings, the authors chosen for analysis. Oscillating from a belief in their compliance to their age's prejudices and codes and a trust in their rebellious attitudes, critics and readers reacted to these stories in different, even contradictory manners. Our intention is to demonstrate that the use of the slave narrator is a subversive way of teaching the white child the truth about the plight of slavery and sway him/her into a more empathic attitude towards racial and class difference.

**Keywords:** uncle, mammy, Uncle Remus, black narrative, post-Reconstruction literature, children, Joel Chandler Harris, Kate Chopin.

The individuality of the American South largely comes from its particular past of slavery, which has been its most distinctive feature, crucial in separating the Southern identity from the dominant American/Northern

one, as well as its doom. This assertion seems contradictory, because it implies that there is no Southern identity outside the acceptance of slavery, but this very acceptance is a form of shame and failure for the South as a culture. The Southern writers dealt with this paradox in various ways, from glorification of the past, nostalgia and a sense of Southern superiority to shame, failure, defeat, translated in gothic and grotesque representations, in distortions and violence, the end-result being a kaleidoscopic image of the South.

In this process of creating a Southern identity and maintaining its distinctiveness in time, the second part of the nineteenth century plays a crucial role. The end of the Civil War marked, for the American nation, the end of slavery and the preservation of the union. For the South, on the other hand, this period reinforced the sense of loss and failure coupled with the shame and guilt for having to bear the burden of slavery and the responsibility for the bloody civil strife. The liberated slaves contributed to this feeling of unrest, as they started to challenge the long-cherished ideas of white superiority and to compete for the positions previously held only by the white population. To fight against these multiple problems, the Southerners conceived a literature that integrated the issue of slavery but also promoted sectional reconciliation. Thus, the South reached the North on the grounds of white supremacy, peace and harmony, “welcoming the prodigal siblings back into the fold by acknowledging the virtues of their society and the tragedy of its loss” and convincing the Northerners “to ignore the issue of racial justice in America, allowing the problems of incorporating freed African Americans into society to disappear, if only temporarily, beneath the smile of the happy darky” (Martin 19).

One of the techniques used by the Southern writers at the end of the nineteenth century was the introduction of the black narrator as a spokesperson for the past, a witness of plantation days whose stories seem to carry the message that the white Southerners want, namely that of the white supremacy justified by the aristocratic roots of the Southerners, but also gaining in authority and genuineness as they come through the voice of the former slave turned into a freed but loyal servant. The presence of the black narrator is a new element in the American fiction of the late

nineteenth century, its most prominent promoters being the plantation crusader Thomas Nelson Page who first appealed to this technique in his debut collection of short stories *In Ole Virginia* (1887), Joel Chandler Harris in his Uncle Remus collections (the first volume being *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, 1880) and the subversive Uncle Julius in Charles Waddell Chesnut's *The Conjure Woman* (1899). If these writers used this narrative technique extensively, in framed collections of tales, others appealed to it only for some of the stories and not for an entire collection. This choice suggests that, one way or another, either for the sake of reconciliation and compliance or to take advantage of its subversive power, Southern writers at the end of the nineteenth century acknowledged the possibilities and nuances implied in the use of this technique.

The presence of the black characters, in comparison to that of the black narrator, was not new in fiction; the literature before the war, Southern or Northern, appealed to them either in support of the slave system, in Southern romances, or as an example of the Southern racism and intolerance in abolitionist writings. Nevertheless, they were never granted a voice of their own. The only writings in which the black slaves told their own stories were the slave narratives, accounts of slave life by fugitive slaves. After the Civil War, though, the importance of the slave narrative decreases, as their primary function was to sway the opinion of the Northerners in favor of the abolition of slavery. The plantation romance, another space that allowed for the extensive presence of black characters, also appears obsolete, albeit dangerous at the end of a war that almost broke the nation apart, for they carried the seeds of rebellion and secession. In this time of forgiveness and reconciliation, it is the black narrator who receives a crucial role: to validate the story of the Old South and justify slavery as a system that was more beneficial to the slave than the modern prospects of poverty. Moreover, since the black narrator appears to comply with the vision of the Southern order promoted by the white, even "plead the cause of his former master" (Mackethan 11), he seems to suggest that there is no tension between white Southerners and their former slaves. Through his voice, the slavery of the old days is justified, acceptable, yet never to return, thus assuaging the Northern fears

of further rebellion and secession and promoting the image of “a world of perfect order, in which both sin and labor are non-existent” (Martin 21).

On the other hand, though, the use of the black narrators comes with its dangers, as they decentralize the white authority creating an alternative center of power that is subversive and may undermine the intended message:

as frame narratives, these stories necessarily complicate narrative perspective and destabilize control in ways that both reflect and create dynamics of empowerment that are sometimes unexpected and difficult to control. Particularly significant about these stories is the way they constitute narrative empowerment in terms of region, race, and class; specifically, they depict the plantation myth and its narratives as dually performative, serving two different configurations of empowerment simultaneously and addressing the desires of and empowering not only Northerners and aristocratic white Southerners but even African Americans. (Hagood 423)

Such dangers are further complicated when the storyteller is an adult uncle or mammy and the auditor is a child. In these situations, issues such as experience, authority, age and education upset the desired race and class hierarchies. Thus, the apparent harmless use of the most famous images of black slaves, that of the uncle or the mammy, becomes a subversive weapon through which the young whites of the post-Reconstruction age who listen to the stories may be taught ideas that contradict the prevalent white Southern ideology.

The efficiency of this alternative “education” of the young Southerner is ensured by the use of the dear and harmless image of the older, benevolent slave. The representation of the controllable, “ignorant and improvident, lazy and playful, submissive and loyal” (Tracy 142) slave is common in pro-slavery literature, the writers being cautious to avoid “the sensitive issue of sexuality by depicting servants as middle-aged or old, beyond courting or childbearing age” (Tracy 143). The racial issue that regulates, in the slave South, the relationships between the white child and the black caretaker may be further complicated (and are, in the case of Kate Chopin) by the gender component. As mentioned before, the preference for much older or very young black characters, yet benevolent and simple, is justified by the white supremacy ideology. The black man

is either “emasculated” (old uncle) or “infantilized” (very young and funny, dependent, benevolent, submissive and rather simple-minded), becoming a peaceful and reliable servant that poses no threat to the authority of the white man (Tracy 17-8). In the case of the black woman, the situation is more complicated:

The black woman’s position at the nexus of America’s sex and race mythology has made it most difficult for her to escape the mythology. Black men can be rescued from the myth of the Negro [...]. They can be identified with things masculine, with things aggressive, with things dominant. White women, as part of the dominant racial group, have to defy the myth of woman, a difficult, though not impossible task. The impossible task confronts the black woman. If she is rescued from the myth of the Negro, the myth of woman traps her. If she escapes the myth of woman, the myth of the Negro still ensnares her. (White 28)

She, thus, remains in an oppressive space, caught in oppressive relationships, either economical, or sexual, or both. If she is old, she is represented as “the mammy,” a dear symbol of the Southern plantation which hides the real injustice that lies at its foundation. If she is young, she becomes the “Jezebel,” the plantation’s temptress; either way, the fictional representations of the female slave suggest that the oppression and exploitation worked at more levels than in the case of men. The apparent emotional relationship that exists between the child and the slave-caretaker is also enhanced by the gender component, since the mammy takes on maternal attributes in a literature that insists on the fact that mammies were as close as mothers to the white child in their care.

By insisting on an emotional connection between the loyal slave and the benevolent master, the attention is deferred from the terrible realities of slavery, from economic exploitation and physical and emotional abuse, suggesting that the slaves submit willingly to the benevolent rule of the white patriarch (McElya 5). The writers implied that the fictional uncles and mammies were, in fact, inspired by the real connections of the Southerners with those who were closest to them in their early years and with whom they formed strong emotional bonds. They argued that these slaves could be totally trusted and, in fact, there was no better companion for the young Southerners because the caretakers were supposed to adhere to the behavior codes enforced by the white masters and to contribute to

an education that promoted racism and difference. Children are not born, Jennifer Ritterhouse asserts, with notions of race, they have to be taught in this direction:

That race is a man-made distinction meant to secure and explain material and social inequalities comes into high relief when we consider that every child born into a society has to learn race anew, that every child begins life innocent of the very idea that there are different “races,” much less the idea that “race” ought to matter in certain specific ways as an organizing principle for his or her society. (Ritterhouse, *Growing up* 9)

Ritterhouse also insists on the fact that the “racial education” in the American South is a very important issue and “recognizing race was something that each generation of Southerners had to learn” (Ritterhouse, *Growing up* 7). In other words, the importance of race differentiation preceded any other historical, economic or cultural changes, especially in the post-Reconstruction period. The children of this period had no personal recollections of the times of slavery and, though slowly, the South was moving towards modernity. In this context, the white southern adults directed their efforts to create an entire culture of racial difference for their youth: “The vocabulary, stories, texts, cultural images, and rituals with which white southerners surrounded their children normalized white supremacy and racial violence through perpetuating an idealized, patriarchal vision of their future roles as white southerners” (Durocher 9). Out of all these spaces, the home is a privileged, more controlled environment, where, as Kristina Durocher asserts, “white southerners emphasized economic status, as elite whites drew on their financial standing and rich historical background to teach the next generation about its social identity” (9). Also as elites, they were proud to display their wealth by hiring African Americans and maintaining a sort of surrogate of the slave system that they lost. To this end, they perpetuated from the times of slavery a code of behavior that “outlined a fundamental pattern of white supremacy that both whites and blacks understood” (Ritterhouse, *Growing up* 25), and which was obeyed by the African Americans out of fear of the violence from the white population (Ritterhouse, *Growing up* 25). Thus, children learn from a very young age this dual performance of intimacy and difference, since their contact with their caretakers

inherently involves great intimacy from which, as they grow up, they have to learn how to distance themselves. Problems also appear, especially in the post-Reconstruction period, from the fact that children do not learn about race only from their parents and other whites in a tightly controlled environment. As they grow up, children “have their own history that is ongoing and influential in the world” (Durocher 18) and their youthful experiences have a tremendous impact over their ulterior development. There are a lot of elements that can influence their perception of difference in terms of race, class and even gender which, sometimes, may contradict the prevalent ideology.

This is exactly the very elusive space into which the texts written by Harris and Kate Chopin at the end of the century can be included. The relationship between uncle/mammy and the white child is special: it accommodates intimacy and difference, apparent harmony and possible violence, submission and rebellion. The ritualized behavior that regulates the relationship between the two races in the South, coupled with the past of slavery and the fear of punishment reassure the white parent that the black slave/servant will not break the prescribed lines. However, the control cannot be complete and the stories told by the adult caretaker may have various effects on the mind and the emotions of the child.

Both texts we envisaged for our approach, namely Harris’ first collection of tales *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880) and some of Chopin’s short stories from the 1894 collection *Bayou Folk*, including *La Belle Zoraide*, appealed to the technique of the framed narrative, using the voice of a black narrator. As mentioned before, this technique belongs to an already established post-bellum Southern literary tradition, aimed at regional reconciliation and the reintegration of the Southern literature on the American literary market. These narrators chosen by the two writers are important icons in the American imagination: the older, benevolent and funny uncle (Uncle Remus in Harris’ stories) and the loving mammy (Manna-Loulou in Chopin’s story). The frame narrative is important because of the dialogue it implies between the frame and the embedded stories, but it is also helpful to understand the construction of the frame, the relationship established between the story-teller and the listener, the efficiency of the story in

swaying the listener and changing his/her views. Most of the traditional readings of such texts, as we are going to see, accept the subversive, even rebellious message of the tales, but consider the frame more compliant with the white ideology. Modern readings, however, are more subtle in seeing the signs of subversion in the frames as well as in the tales.

Harris wrote, in the preface to *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings*, that he was not the creator of these tales, he only collected them directly from the source: slaves telling their own tales to someone (like himself) who was unfamiliar with them (10). Though the collection has never been out of print since its first publication in 1880, the critical responses have varied over time. Initially, it was included in the “Plantation tradition,” considering that Harris contributed to the validation of the slave system by depicting a benevolent uncle telling stories to the white heir of the plantation and promoting the North-South reconciliation founded on the reinforcement of white supremacy and the subordination of the African-American population. Thus, it appealed to the Southerners because it promoted black subordination, through its references to the harmonious plantation life. The Northerners were drawn by “Uncle Remus’s personality and dialect,” feeling close to the white boy who does not know these stories and is mesmerized by the story-telling gift of Uncle Remus. They are thus included in a “richly ‘imagined’ intimacy between blacks and whites in days gone by” (Ritterhouse, *Reading* 592). Interesting enough, even African-American audiences were drawn to these stories: “Indeed, for generations black southerners had been using the Brer Rabbit tales at the heart of Harris’s narratives to teach their own children lessons about survival in a decidedly brutal and unjust world. As the quintessential trickster, Brer Rabbit proved that the weak could outsmart and overcome the strong. His victories provided important psychological benefits” (Ritterhouse, *Reading* 591), though there were also many African-Americans, from Harris’s contemporaries to more modern voices, like Alice Walker’s, who objected to what they saw as an abuse of the African-American heritage for the benefit of the white ideology (Cochran 22).

These contradictions in the reception of the tales suggest that they are more complicated than they might have appeared at first and some



critics are more willing to read the text as “profoundly ambivalent,” the “human frame” being most often seen as part of the Plantation romance tradition, while the embedded “animal stories” are “allegorical readings of the triumph of the weak over the strong, of the slave over the master” (Peterson 31). Thus, “Harris’s writings ... display a persistent and conscious manipulation of his culture’s social and literary conventions, a deliberate tension between a surface in comfortable accord with the dominant sentimental pieties (and related ideological projects) of the day and a subversive subtext profoundly critical of those same pieties” (Cochran 27). It is even more interesting that recent critical approaches insist that we should not see such a great distinction between the frame and the tales:

But a closer look at Harris’s first collection ... will show that the discrepancy between framework and tale is more apparent than real, that both Remus and his tales are subversive of the myth of docile, selfless devotion. Moreover, the framework of teller and audience, far from being irrelevant to an understanding of the tales, is the specific means that Harris chose to convey the subversive impact of the tales. For the relationship between Remus and the boy shows that Remus, for all his affection toward the boy and his stated loyalty to his parents, uses the tales and his own power as storyteller to serve his own ends rather than anyone else, that he moves the boy closer to himself and to the ethic of the tales and away from the world of his parents. (Hedin 84)

What these contradictory critical voices point out is the difficulty of understanding the real intentions of Harris, and we might never know for sure. However, a close reading of the text points out the problems that arise from considering the text an apology for the plantation, and it soon becomes clear that Uncle Remus is only apparently a benevolent “darky.” In reality, he is a cunning man who uses the little boy to gain advantages (food from the big house, candles, etc.), but also to undermine the beliefs and ideas he learned from his parents and grandparents, by opening his eyes towards a world of injustice, violence and betrayal. His attitude towards the little boy is typical of the black “uncles”: he always calls him “honey,” he is kind and funny, he seems protective, and he appears to uphold the rules established by Miss Sally, the boy’s mother, such as, for instance the interdiction to play with the Favers’ children, identified as

“white trash.” Thus, we are led to believe that Uncle Remus shares with his white masters the same values, which makes him appear even closer to the white family. Similarly, the gestures and the attitudes reinforce the strong emotional connection between the boy and Remus. The collection opens, in fact, with Miss Sally looking through the window of Remus’ cabin and seeing her son’s head “rested against the old man’s arm,” and “gazing with an expression of the most intense interest into the rough, weather-beaten face, that beamed so kindly upon him” (Harris 19-20). Other similar gestures of trust are repeated all through the text: the old man takes the boy on his knee or caresses his head. When the boy is afraid to go home alone (because of the witch story Remus told him, of course), he accompanies him to the big house and stays outside to sing songs with his soothing voice until the little one falls asleep. Time and again, the boy is depicted as mesmerized and fascinated not only with the stories, but with everything in the life of the old man: his whims and habits, the manner in which he smokes, his activities. Anyone would trust his/her child with such a caretaker, and it is no wonder that the late nineteenth-century readers accepted this narrative construct.

On the other hand, though, at a closer look, these elements can be read as steps in the decentralization of the power of the whites and the inclusion of the boy into a different world controlled by Uncle Remus. The change of center is visible from the first scene, mentioned above, which is not an idyllic representation of the white and black relationships, but a shift of authority, leaving Miss Sally, the white adult, outside the cabin which becomes the world controlled by Remus: “the opening scene of the book is superficially pastoral, but it also reveals the dynamics of power that operate throughout the book” (Hedin 86). The cabin may be seen as a threshold between the realities of the white boy and the fantastic world of Uncle Remus’ stories, but it is also a threshold between a world controlled by whites and their ideas and a world controlled by Uncle Remus whose grasp on the little boy increases with each story he tells him. Thus, “the world that Remus tries to wean him from is specifically the world of his parents; that is hardly the act of a loyal retainer, given that what Remus would initiate him into is the amoral world of cunning that the tales represent” (Hedin 85). Story after story, Uncle Remus initiates

the boy into a world of violence, cunning, cheating and stealing, in which the small and weak animal, the Rabbit, is usually victorious. Besides telling him that the weak (the slave) can resist authority and violence through cunningness and dissimulation, Uncle Remus also dismantles myths and ideas that the boy's parents have tried to inoculate. One of them is the Bible, as Uncle Remus tells a different story of the Flood, refusing to acknowledge the story that the boy knows:

“Where was the ark, Uncle Remus?” the little boy inquired, presently.  
“W’ich ark’s dat?” asked the old man, in a tone of well-feigned curiosity.  
“Noah’s ark,” replied the child.  
“Don’t you pester wid ole man Noah, honey. I boun’ he tuck keer er dat ark. Dat’s w’at he wuz dere fer, en dat’s w’at he done. Leas’ways, dat’s w’at dey tells me. But don’t you bodder longer dat ark, ‘ceppin’ your mammy fetches it up. Dey mout er bin two deloojes, en den agin dey moutent. (Harris 34)

The dismissal of the Bible is indicative since this was one of the texts used by the pro-slavery promoters to justify slavery. The Bible and especially Noah’s story (*Genesis 9*) were read as “stories of *differentiation* among Noah’s sons Shem, Ham and Japeth” because it confirmed the notion that “humanity is comprised of essential ‘racial’ types” (Haynes 5), and the result of Noah’s curse for Ham’s transgression is not only the right of men to own slaves, but also the belief that there is an entire race cursed to be enslaved by the other. In America, the story of Noah’s curse became the pillar on which the justification of slavery rested, in spite of the many controversies regarding the real connection between Ham’s transgression and racism or slavery (Haynes 7). Uncle Remus’ direct mention of “ole’ man Noah” and the Flood are a clear subversion of the slave ideology. Moreover, Uncle Remus tells the boy that there are other stories besides the Bible and consequently, other possible ways of understanding the world.

As an answer to his refusal to accept the biblical stories (or the connection between the Bible and slavery), Uncle Remus comes with a very disruptive explanation concerning the origin of the races, telling the boy that “In dem times we ’uz all un us black; we ’uz all niggers tergedder” (Harris 142) and the waters of a magic lake changed people’s

color. Those who reached the lake first became white, the second became mulattoes and those who remained black were those who reached the vanishing lake last. The contention that all the people were black undermines the authority of the white and any claims regarding the superiority of the white race. "The little boy seemed to be very much interested in this new account of the origin of races," says Harris (142), suggesting that he already had information on this issue from his parents: "'But mamma says the Chinese have straight hair,' the little boy suggested" (Harris 143). Uncle Remus knows how to work around the teachings transmitted by the boy's parents in order to gain trust for his own variant: "'Co'se, honey,' the old man unhesitatingly responded, 'dem w'at git ter de pon' time nuff fer ter git der head in de water, de water hit onkink der ha'r. Hit bleedz der be dat away'" (Harris 143). The unhesitant response of the old man has the final authority and the boy questions him no more, showing how the white world is gradually undermined by the ideas of the subdued population, and revealing the tales' success in what Raymond Hedin calls "the boy's growth in cultural sensitivity" (87).

Another story that challenges not only the cultural tradition of the white but also the authority of the father in the white family comes with the story about the witches. Southern literature appealed to the black people's belief in superstitions in order to imply that the African-Americans are irrational, superstitious and inferior as a race in comparison to the whites who are rational and enlightened (Nowatzki 25). In this situation, it is the father who taught the boy that witches do not exist, to which Uncle Remus replies: "'Mars John ain't live long ez I is,' said Uncle Remus, by way of comment. 'He ain't bin broozin' 'roun' all hours er de night en day'" (Harris 134). Uncle Remus, thus, challenges the father's authority with his age and experience. Since it is the patriarchal, white system that he challenges through his stories, it is the figure of the father that he more often attacks: "Remus, it emerges, is much more than an 'Uncle,' and he has more than mere stories to present. He's a father, and he takes his paternal responsibilities seriously. He knows a larger world than Mars John's, and has a deeper wisdom to pass on" (Cochran 26). Moreover, he insists that Miss Sally and Mars Jeems (her bother who

died in the Civil War) used to call him “daddy,” and he was the one who was granted the care of the plantation when Mars Jeems went to war:

“Daddy’ – all Ole Miss’s chilluns call me daddy – “Daddy,” he say, “pears like dere’s gwineter be mighty rough times ‘roun’ yer. De Yankees, dey er done got ter Madison en Mounticellar, en ‘twon ‘t be many days ‘fo ‘ dey er down yer. ‘Tain ‘t likely dey’ll pester mother ner sister; but, daddy, ef de wus come ter de wus, I speck you ter take keer un um,” sezee. Den I say, sez I: “How long you bin knowin’ me, Mars Jeems?” sez I. “Sence I wuz a baby,” sezee. “Well, den, Mars Jeems,” sez I, “you know’d t’wa’nt no use fer ter ax me ter take keer Ole Miss en Miss Sally.” (Harris 181)

It is more than an emotional connection between a slave and his masters; it is a level of intimacy that exists only within a family in which Uncle Remus assumes the role of father and protector of the plantation, the typical position of the white patriarch, in the absence of the “old master” who is never mentioned in the text. As Robert Cochran aptly remarks, “the familiar plantation romance is turned upside down, its foundational ethnic hierarchy undone” (26). In this way, the child’s perspective is overturned; he cannot rely any longer on what he had been taught by his parents (and, by extension, by the white society, in general) and is forced, in a gentle, but firm way, to widen his perspective and accept more stories.

This rebellious attitude of Uncle Remus passed almost unnoticed for such a long time, and especially in the dangerous period of the post-Reconstruction South, because it is carefully achieved. Uncle Remus is cautious and knows his limitations; he is respectful towards his “superiors” and his undermining allusions to the other whites’ authoritative ideas are oblique (Hedin 87). This is the source of his success, a technique that is often used by Brer Rabbit in his tales: cunningness and dissimulation, the experience of slavery that has taught him how to ease the hardships and even to gain advantages. It would be a mistake, though, to reduce Uncle Remus to a mere advantage-grabber. It is true, as many critics suggest (Hedin, Cochran, Peterson) that he convinces the little boy to bring him food or candles from the big house, but this is not his only aim. The emotional connection between the two

cannot be denied and, through his Brer Rabbit stories, Uncle Remus gives the little boy a sense of empowerment in a world where a child's word does not count for much. Remus presents him with alternative stories and ideas, tells him that the world is not right or peaceful, but violent and unjust, but that there are ways of survival; he also teaches him about the weak and the poor and he prepares him for a life in which he will not be protected by Miss Sally or his father, or even by Uncle Remus; a world in which the ideas of white supremacy and black submission may no longer work, a world where open-mindedness and tolerance might be more helpful than the typical Southern pride. Cochran acknowledges this duality saying that "Remus here serves his own ends, of course, but he also perseveres in his reeducation of the boy. The little boy needs it, too. He'll soon enough be grown, soon be out on perilous ground beyond Remus' protection. That dangerous world is inadequately understood by Mars John, who has been sheltered by birth and upbringing from too many harsh realities" (26).

Harris' collection of stories has proven in time to be more complex than it appeared to its first readers. The fact that the story-teller is a former slave and the listener is a white child further complicates the issues of hierarchy and authority, but it shows the great importance of story-telling in the education of children and the influence it has in swaying their minds and undermining their ideas. This can be helpful as well as dangerous, but, in the context of the American South, the black storyteller prepares the white boy for a different world in which racial and class relationships are challenged under the pressure of the modern world.

Chopin's storyteller is similarly subversive, complicating the discussion with the gender component. Apparently a typical housewife and a devoted mother, Chopin was far from becoming a conventional Southern writer. Set in a multiethnic and multicultural environment, her stories challenge the conventionally prescribed gender, racial and class roles, so that, "what truly distinguishes Kate Chopin is her departure from the traditional stereotypes that her contemporaries utilized" (Potter 42). And just like Harris, her rebellion is cautious, convincing the readers and editors that she complies with the nineteenth century genteel codes by depicting "the other" in terms of American ethnicity: namely, the Creole

woman or the black/mixed-race slave. As Jane Goodwyn notes, subversion is one of the main instruments used by Chopin who structures her stories in such a way as to beguile the readers with an apparent movement towards conventionality and closure only to surprise them with sudden twists (4).

The short story *La Belle Zoraïde*, included in the collection *Bayou Folk* (1894), was generally seen as a tragic account of the impact of slavery “on both female erotic desire and maternal instinct” (McCullough 211). The heroine, the “*café-au-lait*” (Chopin 282) slave Zoraïde, raised and pampered by her mistress-godmother, falls in love with the wrong man, thus refusing to marry the slave chosen by her mistress. After the birth of her *griffe* (three-quarters black) baby, her lover is sold to another plantation and the child sent away, so that Zoraïde falls into madness.

The story, unlike the majority of others by Chopin, has a narrative frame, Zoraïde’s tragic account being told by an old mammy to a young white lady, Madame Delisle, who, as we understand from the text, was raised by Manna-Loulou. The presence of the frame does not change the meaning of the story, but adds depth to the understanding of motherhood in the context of slavery, not only concerning the black slaves, but also the white mistresses. There is also another aspect that is reinforced by the frame and it proceeds from the question: “why would Manna-Loulou tell this specific story to the mistress? What does she hope to achieve?”

Another issue that might raise some problems is the fact that Madame Delisle is not a child, but a grown woman. Nevertheless, the inclusion of this particular text together with Harris’ is appropriate, since Madame Delisle’s behavior is childlike, she is “pampered (and infantilized)” and “accustomed to being put to bed” (Castillo 64) to the sound of her mammy, just like children do; she does nothing, but lie “in her sumptuous mahogany bed, waiting to be fanned and put to sleep to the sound of one of Manna Loulou’s stories” (Chopin 281). She is dependent on the help of her slave in everything, just like a little child depends on the mother.

Two elements of importance are established in this short beginning: the intimacy and the difference between the black mammy and the white mistress. The intimacy comes from the choice of the “mammy” as

narrator, a representation charged with emotion in American culture. The difference comes from the racial and social status of the mistress and her slave, which does not allow too much intimacy.

So, the choice of the “mammy” as narrator is very important. The mammy is “the most widely recognized symbol of African-American maternity” (Wallace-Sanders 7), and by the middle of the nineteenth century, it became a national icon (McElya 9). This image is always coupled with allusions to strong emotional bonds, and it was considered that “the intimacy between the ‘Black Mammy’ and the children of her owner was the closest of all relationships that existed between her and the other persons in the household” (Parkhurst 360). In this way, the mammy has come to represent, since the times of slavery to our contemporary world, a symbolic reconciliation with the past of slavery. On the other hand, though, we cannot help noticing the profound racism that permeates this image, in spite of the appearance of love and maternal devotion. The mammy is not a mother but a servant. A mother has a position of authority over the child, the servant does not. This is made clear in literature with the insistence on mammy’s role in the family “more as a loyal servant rather than as surrogate mother” (Wallace-Sanders 7). She is expected to love, serve and cherish the white child, to devote her entire existence, up to neglecting her biological children, to the white family, but no more. She has to give everything but expect nothing in return. This is the reason why, despite her immense popularity, the mammy remains a stereotype, a shadow and an ineradicable memory of a guilt-ridden past:

The narrative of the faithful slave is deeply rooted in the American racial imagination. It is a story of our national past and political future that blurs the lines between myth and memory guilt and justice, stereotype and individuality, commodity and humanity. “Mammies,” as they have been described and remembered by whites, like all faithful slaves, bear little resemblance to actual enslaved women of the antebellum period. [...] She is the most visible character in the myth of the faithful slave, a set of stories, images, and ideas that have been passed down from generation to generation in the United States, through every possible popular medium, from fine art and literature to the vaudeville stage and cinema, and in countless novelty items from ashtrays to salt and pepper shakers. (McElya 3-4)



Like many other similar images, Manna Loulou, is, up to a point, a stereotypical representation of the mammy, “black as night,” and old (Chopin 280), calm, patient and loving, with a soothing voice and a wealth of stories to tell. She is a symbol of a slave past that is apparently looked upon with nostalgia and benevolence. The emotional connection between Madame Delisle and her mammy is in keeping with the expectations of the nineteenth century readers and is meant to reassure the “nervous strait-laced editors of the Genteel Tradition that what follows is merely a story of quaint old plantation days” (Castillo 65).

With Chopin, though, things are never as easy and harmless as they appear to be. The subtle use of symbols undermines the readers’ expectations. Thus, even if the beginning of the story is set in a harmless environment: Madame Deslile’s bedroom, the symbols connected to the setting suggest that oppression and inequality permeate even the most intimate spaces. At a closer look, the mammy is not only a symbol of emotional attachment but also one of economic dependence, as a slave. Her gestures are indicative: Manna Loulou “had already bathed her mistress’s pretty white feet and kissed them lovingly, one, then the other. She had brushed her mistress’s beautiful hair, that was as soft and shining as satin, and was the color of Madame’s wedding-ring” (Chopin 281). The allusions to the luxurious lifestyle of her mistress who waits for her slave in the “sumptuous bed” (Chopin 281), not to mention the reference to the gold ring and the color of Madame Delisle’s hair, enhance the racial and social differences between the two women: one black “as night” and the other blonde “as gold.” Chopin’s subtle way of playing with the readers’ attention is exemplified by Manna Loulou’s kissing the feet of her mistress, a gesture of submission and differentiation veiled by the adverb “lovingly,” which balances the negative representation of slavery with the emotional connection. In fact, it is the emotional connection that matters here, because, in the absence of real authority, feelings, attachments and emotional bonds are very efficient in changing one’s views, as we have seen in Uncle Remus’ stories.

All these signs that point to dependence and submission coupled with repeated references to emotional attachment may have two contradictory outcomes, just like Harris’ stories. First, the frame creates

an acceptable image of slavery, in which there is no discontent and the slaves work out of love for their masters. In fact, “one of the roles of the ‘Black Mammy’ was definitely that of orienting the children into the culture of their group. At no time she did depart from the mores in her relation with them” (Parkhurst 360), which means that she must educate the white children in the spirit of acceptance of slavery and enforcement of the system, teaching them the hierarchies of their world, so that “there need be no fear that from her the child would not receive the sense of its status in the social world ... the proper form of etiquette, of deportment to all of the people on the plantation, the proper forms of address and the proper distances to maintain” (Parkhurst 361-2). In this light, though the story of Zoraïde is both tragic and rebellious, presented by the loving mammy, it seems more acceptable to the nineteenth century readers because the emotional bond between Manna Loulou and her mistress balances the cruelty depicted in the story, in an attempt to suggest that such scenes of oppression, though they existed, were rare and belonged to the past. The second outcome, though, is that Manna Loulou, under the guise of submission, manages to control the story and her listener. Thus, “this passive white dependence on black agency” (McCullough 215) gives Manna Loulou some agency. Just as in the case of Harris’ Uncle Remus, Manna Loulou knows how to present her characters, how to dissimulate and veer the plot so as to make the rebellion more palatable for the white mistress. To this aim, she directs Madame Delisle’s understanding of the text and attachment to the characters by various devices, presenting, for instance, Zoraïde in a pitiful light, insisting on the stereotypical image of inferiority of the slave as a passion-ridden individual, unable to control her instincts: “Poor Zoraïde’s heart grew sick in her bosom with love for le beau Mézor from the moment she saw the fierce gleam of his eye, lighted by the inspiring strains of the Bamboula” (Chopin 283). In Manna Loulou words, passion and not discomfort with slavery is the only reason for Zoraïde’s rebellion against her mistress’ orders: “‘But you know how the negroes are, Ma’zèlle Titite,’ added Manna Loulou, smiling a little sadly. ‘There is no mistress, no master, no king nor priest who can hinder them from loving when they will’” (Chopin 285). Of course Manna Loulou is sure to stress that there is punishment for that, as Zoraïde’s

mistress forbids this relationship, just as Madame Delisle expects: “However, you may well believe that Madame would not hear to that. Zoraïde was forbidden to speak to Mézor, and Mézor was cautioned against seeing Zoraïde again” (Chopin 285). The sad smile that accompanies her words seems, however, to contradict the apparent compliance of the old mammy to such due punishment.

In order to stress the tragedy of the enslaved woman who is denied erotic fulfillment (in Zoraïde) and maternal fulfillment (both in Zoraïde, who grows mad after her baby is taken from her, and in Manna Loulou, mother for the white mistress, but not for her own children, as there is no mention of any), Chopin juxtaposes the image of the mammy with that of the “Jezebel.” Thus, the presence of Manna Loulou, the old mammy, deprived of sexuality, represented as a “grandmotherly” woman, “a beloved cook and a loving caretaker,” meant to “legitimize relations between black women and white men as maternal and nurturing, not sexual” (McElya 8) is contrasted against the other stereotype of the plantation world, the “Jezebel,” in the beautiful Zoraïde, “a person governed almost entirely by her libido” and “exceptionally sensual” (White 29). Nevertheless, this opposition based on sexuality is undermined by Chopin who brings these two women together on the grounds of love and maternity. The connection between them is subtly created at the beginning of the story, when Manna Loulou thinks of Zoraïde after hearing the faint sound of a man singing, which brings to her minds “an old, half-forgotten Creole romance, ... a lover’s lament for the loss of his mistress” (Chopin 280-1). We are not told why this old love song makes such a powerful impression on the old slave and why she immediately thinks of Zoraïde, of all the possible tales that she could have chosen, but it is obvious that it represents, for Manna Loulou, much more than a mere tale of the past.

Seen together, these two women defy the stereotype that is forced upon them. Manna Loulou is loving and loyal, but her choice of stories and her memories speak of a past of frustration, denied love and restriction. Zoraïde, on the other hand, is the beautiful mulatto who refuses to bow to her mistress’ wishes and seeks erotic fulfillment. She follows her heart and not her duties, and she is punished for this

transgression being separated both from her lover and from the baby. Despite all this, she stubbornly refuses to surrender, falling into madness rather than accepting the control of the master. Zoraïde *la belle* becomes Zoraïde *la folle*, forever trapped in a special moment in time as she clings to a bundle of rags, thinking that she holds her baby in her arms. She is now useless to her mistress and to the plantation, forever mad, but forever free from any further abuse or exploitation. Ironically, in her madness, Zoraïde is freer than most slaves: she is a mother to her own baby. In reality, though, she is denied, like most women slaves, erotic or maternal fulfillment. She reiterates the fate of her own mother who had to give up Zoraïde, a charming toddler, chosen by Madame Delarivière who wanted to raise her, not as a daughter, but more as a pet. She also reiterates the fate of Manna Loulou, the mammy of her white mistress but not mother of her own children.

In this light, Manna Loulou and Zoraïde are not two opposing representations of the plantation world, but two facets of the same reality: one of oppression and “absolute control over life and health of the slave by the master/mistress” (Goodwyn 3). Thus, Goodwyn further argues, “the status of Manna-Loulou, the story-teller, is indistinguishable from the subject of the story, Zoraïde” (3). Through these representations, Chopin subtly suggests that the “Jezebel” and the “Mammy” are not real figures of the plantation, but mere stereotypes, artificial constructs meant to keep the black slaves under control by disregarding them as human beings. The only resistance possible, she further seems to imply, for a slave woman in the plantation system is either madness (Zoraïde defies the system by rejecting it altogether) or dissimulation (Manna Loulou’s cautious attempt to make her mistress empathize with the fate of slaves by apparently obeying the slave-master etiquette).

We should not overlook the importance of the gender component (not found in Harris’ stories) so vivid in Chopin’s texts. This short story gives voice to the silent South not only of slaves, but of female slaves, who suffered more than the enslaved men on the plantation as the exploitation was not only economical, but also sexual. This is the reason why Charlotte Rich sees this story, told by one of the oppressed, as “a subversively cautionary tale against a particular evil of slavery, lack of

choice in marriage, which brings to mind a more sinister counterpart: lack of any choice, for many female slaves, over how their bodies were used sexually” (160).

The ending of the story that is meant to show the effects of the story on the conscience of the young white lady, newly married and so mistress of the plantation, received ambiguous interpretations. The story ends with Madame Delisle manifesting her pity for the poor baby who lost her mother.

“Are you asleep, Ma’zèlle Titite?”  
 “No, I am not asleep; I was thinking. Ah, the poor little one, Manna Loulou, the poor little one! better had she died!”  
 But this is the way Madame Delisle and Manna Loulou really talked to each other: -  
 “Vou pré droumi, Ma’zèlle Titite?”  
 “Non, pa pré droumi; mo yapré zongler. Ah, la pauv' piti, Manna Loulou. La pauv' piti! Mieux li mourir!” (Chopin 291)

If in the case of the white boy depicted by Harris, the effects of Uncle Remus’ stories are powerful and immediate, in this situation, the effect is more difficult to grasp. It is true that the story impresses the white woman so much that she cannot sleep, as was the purpose of this bedtime ritual, and leaves her thinking about the fate of the little baby who will grow up without a mother. Thus, we might argue that Manna Loulou manages to move her mistress and make her ponder upon the fate of the slaves. But since Madame Delisle does not consider Zoraïde, but only her baby, it might mean that, in her view, the rebellious mulatto was duly punished for her transgression and unworthy of pity. Kate McCullough, for instance, considers that Madame Delisle misunderstood Manna Loulou’s lesson, coming up with a “self-protective and equally racist” interpretation, by “turning Zoraïde’s story into the story of a poor orphaned baby” (216). Nevertheless, the repetition of her final words in the “patois,” “the way Madame Delisle and Manna Loulou really talked to each other” (Chopin 291), creates a common ground for the two women, a world of their own, of stories and emotions and, in this gendered space, common issues of womanhood, from erotic desire to motherhood, beyond class and race can be addressed freely, outside the patriarchal control.

The two writers, Harris and Chopin, are brought together, in this approach, on the grounds of a similar narrative technique: the use of a black narrator who tells stories of the slave past. Uncle Remus and Manna Loulou are supposed, apparently, to embody the humane face of slavery represented by the emotional connection between the older caretakers and the white children. Both texts, in fact, dwell on this emotional connection and consciously enhance the special bond created between the white children and their uncles/mammies. However, at a more attentive look, this emotional dependence of the white children on the black slaves who take care of them overturns plantation hierarchies by endowing the slave with the power to sway the mind of the child through tales and stories. The real purpose of the seemingly harmless tales is to create an alternative to the white ideology, to raise the child's awareness to the slave's plight and to create a path towards tolerance and empathy. Harris' stories fall into this type of understanding, but Chopin's tale complicates the understanding of the slave South by adding the gender component. Through her story, Chopin wants to achieve more than making the white readers sympathetic to the slaves' fates. She points to the exploitation of the female slaves at various levels: economic, emotional and sexual and tries to bring women together (through the presence of the Madame Delisle, the white listener and Manna Loulou, the black story teller) in a common gendered space of love and maternity in order to elicit empathy and understanding.

The Southern literature of the nineteenth century, before and after the Civil War, has received renewed attention in the last years. Chopin has been recognized as an important and complicated writer since the middle of the twentieth century, while other writers are now re-read with a more attentive eye to nuances. It has become increasingly clear that stories relying on memories of the plantation, like the one discussed above, are not to be dismissed as simple, melodramatic or nostalgic tales that uphold the slave system. The fact that the writers themselves chose a slave narrator complicates the perception, since the racial component is complicated by others such as parental authority and education. Often the complacency to codes that enforce racial difference appears in these stories to be only a mask that dissimulates another purpose. Telling these

stories in a post-Reconstruction world is also significant. If white society stubbornly clings to racism and the perpetuation of injustice, black uncles and mammies try to veer the children into a modern world of tolerance and empathy.

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