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Essay 1: Plantation Tradition  
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“Virtue Knows No Color Line”

Plantation Tradition, the stereotypical representation of the relationship between Southern white men and African Americans, is a common focus of post-war literature. The nation was “coming to terms with the unprecedented cultural upheaval triggered by the freeing of the slaves” (Heath 601). The enduring racial prejudices in the Southern states are explored in Charles Chesnutt’s *The Goophered Grapevine* and Ida Wells-Barnett’s *A Red Record*. In the *Goophered Grapevine*, a humorous short story, Chesnutt tells the narrative of a plantation from the point of view of a former slave. The hopeful story subverts from Plantation Tradition because stereotypical prejudices are overlooked by the main character. *A Red Record* is the summary of Wells-Barnett’s inquiry about the genuine motive behind African American lynching. The account supports Plantation Tradition because Southern white men take on the role of a victim to justify their lynchings. *The Goophered Grapevine* and *A Red Record* use different methods to reject Plantation Tradition and to establish an understanding of the dreadful prejudices and lack of virtue that is a part of America’s history.

Uncle Julius of Charles Chestnutt’s *The Goophered Grapevine*, is a former slave who overcomes Plantation Tradition by obtaining the regard of the white visitors. Upon meeting Uncle Julius at the McAdoo plantation the Northern white man describes his first impression saying,

“He was not entirely black, and this fact, together with the quality of his hair, which was about six inches long and very bushy, except on the top of his head where he was quite bald, suggested a slight strain of other than negro blood. There was a shrewdness in his eyes, too, which was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character”

(Heath 735-736).

Uncle Julius is explained as shrewd foreshadowing the clever tale he shares with the white couple. The white man’s fascination with Uncle Julius shows his disregard of slave prejudices. Since the man is from the North, he is separated from the Plantation Tradition of the South. The couples interest in Uncle Julius’ ridiculous story about McAdoo’s plantation validates their respect for him.

The story Uncle Julius tells about Mars Dugal, the former plantation owner, does conform to Plantation Tradition in ways. Mars Dugal is a wealth seeking Confederate who is willing to sacrifice others for his own accomplishments. Mars Dugal was convinced his slaves were eating his grapes so he, “sot spring guns en steel traps, en he en de oberseah sot up nights” (Heath 737). When his traps didn’t work, he asks Aunt Peggy to put a spell on the crops so that the slaves will stop eating his grapes. These cruel precautions communicate his distrust for his slaves. Mars Dugal’s best slave Henry was bewitched from eating the grapes and forced to live growing and dying in union with the grapes. Mars Dugal aligns with Plantation Tradition because of his willingness to sacrifice his slaves for the sake of wealth.

As the story comes to a close, the practices of Plantation Tradition on Mars Dugal’s land are put to a halt. A Yankee visits Mars Dugal creating the disaster that ends slavery on the plantation. His misfortune is portrayed saying, “Mars Dugal tuk on might’ly ‘bout losin’ his

vimes en his nigger in de same year; en he swo' dat ef he could git holt er dat Yankee he'd wear'im ter a frazzle" (Heath 742). The Yankee who is responsible for destroying all of Mars Dugal's crops symbolizes the defeat of the Confederacy. Despite Uncle Julius' story, the white Ohio man and his wife decided to buy the plantation. Uncle Julius tried to persuade the white visitors to leave the plantation because he doesn't want to be forced to leave. William Andrews explains this persuasion saying, "The teller of the conjure tales, Uncle Julius, is also a unique figure in Southern plantation literature, a former slave who recalls the past not to celebrate it but to exploit white people's sentimentality about it" (Heath 726). Uncle Julius tries to evoke an emotional response in the white visitors to mislead them so he may continue to live peacefully on the plantation. *The Goophered Grapevine* ends in objection to Plantation Tradition as the new plantation owner offers to pay Uncle Julius for being his coachman and even provides him with employment.

Ida Wells-Barnett's *A Red Record* similarly demeans Plantation Tradition but is formatted as a direct argument. Wells-Barnett was challenged with the discrimination and prejudice of growing up as an African American in Confederate Mississippi (Ida B. Wells). *A Red Record* is based Well's-Barnett's real experiences so there is an undeniable bias in her view of the southern white male. Her goal was to investigate the white man's motivation in lynching. She concluded that, "more than ten thousand Negroes have been killed in cold blood, without the formality of judicial trial and legal execution" (Heath 611). Thousands of Negroes have been unjustly murdered by Confederates. She explains the white man's three excuses for his "barbarism." These excuses of the Confederate men serve to portray them in a positive light. They are able to

make victims of the African Americans and therefore ‘justify’ their lynchings. Wells-Barnett questions the validity of these excuses and condemns their use of Plantation Tradition.

There are three excuses for the lynchings that Wells-Barnett identifies and disputes in *The Red Record*. The first is: “the necessity of the white man to repress and stamp out alleged race riots” (Heath 611). Wells-Barnett argues that no Negro rioter was ever proven guilty and yet only Negroes have been lynched in the riots. The second excuse was to prevent “Negro domination.” Many Negroes were killed in attempt to exercise their right to vote. Wells-Barnett writes, “the Negro clung to his right of franchise with a heroism which would have wrung admiration from the hearts of savages” (Heath 612). The government had given the African Americans the right to franchise but could not protect this right. They were left to try and protect their right to vote on their own. Wells-Barnett felt strongest about the third excuse which states, “Negroes had to be killed to avenge their assaults upon women” (Heath 612). Humanity despises violence against women so this was an easy target for southern men. Wells-Barnett is sure to define rape as “any misalliance between the white woman and colored man” (Heath 613). She clarifies this saying any alliance is “proof of force.” Ignorant white men believed it was impossible for a white woman to consent to a Negro man. Wells-Barnett goes on to define true chivalry as a respect for all women no matter what race. She was generally supportive of white women because of her experience with northern missionaries who have come South to help the emancipated slaves. All three of the excuses Wells-Barnett identifies are prime examples of Plantation Tradition being practiced. The Confederate males gave an idealistic and twisted interpretation of reality. These men try to come off as courageous defenders instead of revealing

their true identity as murderers. The Confederates, entertained by seeing the African Americans suffer, try to extend the power taken away from them during the Emancipation.

*The Goophered Grapevine* and *A Red Record* expose the prejudices of Plantation Tradition in different ways. *The Goophered Grapevine*, a conjure tale written mainly in black dialect, uncovers former slave Uncle Julius' strenuous past. The story has a hopeful ending as the plantation is transformed into a place where both the white man and Negro can profit. *A Red Record* is an informational text criticizing the white man's motivation for lynching. Wells-Barnett provides a realistic view of what it was like to be a Negro in the South after the Emancipation. Although *A Red Record* is a much more literal text, both stories seek to disapprove of the unjust discrimination of African Americans. Wells-Barnett's insight, "Virtue knows no color line" is a conclusion that can be drawn from both texts (Heath 614). They both devalue the control of the Confederacy to emphasize the importance of virtue. The use of Plantation Tradition in *A Red Record* and *The Goophered Grapevine* uncovers the severity of the inequalities between racial groups in our country's history.

References

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