

Paper Abstract:
“Narrative Frames: The Poetics of Rhetorical Transformation
In Charles Chesnutt And Zora Neale Hurston”
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Despite Charles Chesnutt and Zora Neale Hurston’s shared affinity for folklore and folk voices, as well as their skilled use of “embedded narratives” and “framing narratives,” little scholarly attention has been paid to the critical correspondence that exists between the writings of these two canonical authors within the Afro-American literary tradition. This paper examines the ways in which the conjure woman’s magical spell of ‘goopher’ in Chesnutt’s stories and the ‘mule talk’ of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* comprise a rich narratological vocabulary of supernatural, rhetorical and, thus, behavioral transformation registered in the discourses of folklore and the blues at multiple narrative levels for multiple audiences within these texts.

Relative to theories of narrative framing, I argue that these rhetorical performances occur not only textually, but they are also performed intertextually within an historical order of narrative “frame” – that being the “framing narrative” of these authors’ relationship to one another and the Afro-American literary tradition and its readership. The discourse of rhetorical transformation within this larger “historical narrative frame” involves important patterns of signification, which include, the essay demonstrates, Chesnutt’s signification upon the slave narrative tradition – and its relationship to audience – as well as Hurston’s own signification upon received male-hegemonic discourses (particularly, folkloric discourses) in solidarity with her protagonist’s similar performances.