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Corporate Capitalism and Racial (In)Justice: Teaching The Colonel's Dream

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**Approaches to Teaching the
Works of Charles W. Chesnutt**

The Modern Language Association
New York, 1982

**Approaches to Teaching
the Works of
Charles W. Chesnutt**

Edited by
Susanna Ashton
and
Bill Hardwig

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Economics, Race, and Social (In)Justice: Teaching *The Colonel's Dream*

Francesca Sawaya

Charles W. Chesnutt's novel *The Colonel's Dream* has been a puzzle to critics and teachers alike. In his other major novels, *The House behind the Cedars* and *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt creates complex, multivocal accounts of race relations, using a wide range of black and white characters. In *The Colonel's Dream*, however, he focuses almost entirely on elite white perspectives and particularly the perspective of the eponymous colonel. Colonel French is a Southerner from a slave-owning family who fought for the Confederacy and then made his fortune as a corporate capitalist in the North before deciding to return to his hometown of Clarendon. Motivated by "the best of intentions," he dreams of economic and social reform in the South, of replacing racial conflict and poverty with "the trinity of peace, prosperity and progress" (*Colonel's Dream* 311, 190). Nevertheless, he explicitly refuses the possibility that such economic and social reform will involve "strict justice" between blacks and whites, because that would involve too "great [a] sacrifice" to white self-interest (234). Why, students might wonder, would an African American novelist devote an entire novel to the views and experiences of a character with such a limited perspective on race? In addition, even with the most modest and moderate goals, the colonel fails spectacularly at every effort he makes to create "peace, prosperity and progress," apparently exacerbating the racial violence in Clarendon. As a result, readers sometimes see the novel as a botch, as an experiment with perspective that charts failure and that itself fails.

Whiteness studies, however, helps students enter Chesnutt's brilliant and complex novel. Emerging as a recognized field of scholarly endeavor in the 1990s, whiteness studies examines the history of the social and cultural construction of white identity and power, in relation to the construction of other raced identities, in order to contribute to antiessentialist, antiracist debates and political movements. David Roediger points out that although whiteness studies became a named field of academic study very recently, there is a long and rich tradition in black thought that precedes this naming and that has analyzed the social and cultural construction of whiteness. This tradition, Roediger argues, emerged out of necessity and an intellectual and political commitment to antiessentialist, antiracist struggle but also out of what he describes as curiosity, even compassion (11–12). It was neglected, bell hooks says, because white people believe that "black people cannot see them" and because ignorance about black people's knowledge—including their knowledge of the social and cultural construction of whiteness—is an "imperative of racial domination" (qtd. in Roediger 6). One measure of this suppression, Roediger adds, is that the "serious 'white life' novel" by black writers has been underexamined (8).

The Colonel's Dream provides an opportunity to examine a "white life" novel by a black writer who saw that understanding the construction of whiteness was a necessity in his day for whites and blacks alike and whose profound political commitments were undergirded by both his intellectual curiosity and his clear-eyed but encompassing compassion.

The time in which Chesnutt wrote has been called the nadir of race relations, but it has also been called the age of incorporation. Central to white power at the turn of the century was the emergent corporation, which was transforming every aspect of American life.¹ Many Americans then believed that corporate capitalism was a progressive force that would work to ameliorate racial conflict. For example, the most successful black leader of the period, Booker T. Washington, gained Northern and Southern white financial and ideological support by arguing that corporate capitalism was an innately equalizing force. "When it comes to business, pure and simple . . . the Negro is given a man's chance," he famously said (155). He appeared to subordinate the fight for legal and political rights to a pursuit of business success: "The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly" (153).

Chesnutt was friendly with Washington but disagreed adamantly in both his private letters to him and in his fiction that corporate capitalism was egalitarian or that a focus on business rather than legal and political rights would lead to social justice. Like many progressives of the period, Chesnutt argued that the collusion between corporations and government in the Gilded Age, and the inordinate power held by these corporations, had betrayed the nation's political ideals of democracy and equality. He focused particularly on the ways that this collusion was betraying the antiracist political movements of the time. The richness and complexity of *Dream*; its fascinating intertextual dialogue with other American literary texts of its time; its anticipation of the themes that would galvanize American novels of the future; and its relevance to debates today about the relation of economics, race, and social justice make it important and exciting reading for students and teachers alike.

Mining the Garrison: Chesnutt's Philosophy of Writing

I like to begin any discussion of Chesnutt's work with his journals. Chesnutt prepared himself meticulously for his career as a writer and was deeply self-conscious about his goals. His journals provide a provocative starting point for thinking about the broad social and political situation for a black intellectual at the turn of the twentieth century. I often use his entry of 29 May 1880, in which the young Chesnutt commits himself to a writing career. Saying that he "feel[s] an influence that [he] cannot resist calling [him] to the task," he writes:

If I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high holy purpose. . . . The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored

people as the elevation of the whites,—for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with to scorn and social ostracism—I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people; and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it. Not a fierce indiscriminate onslaught; not an appeal to force, for this is something that force can but slightly affect; but a moral revolution which must be brought about in a different manner. . . . [T]he subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the negro, which is common to most Americans—and easily enough accounted for—, cannot be stormed and taken by assault; the garrison will not capitulate: so their position must be mined, and we will find ourselves in their midst before they think it. (Journals 139–40)

Students are always surprised and intrigued by this remarkable entry. Chesnutt describes himself as writing for a white, not a black or mixed, audience. He explicitly reverses the usual tropes of civilization and savagery of the time, in which whites saw themselves as responsible for educating and morally elevating “savages” at home and abroad. It is whites, not blacks, Chesnutt argues, who need to be civilized. At the same time, his attitude toward lower-class blacks is tinged by his relatively elite class status: he describes white racism as “unjust” but also says it is “easily enough accounted for.” Nonetheless, he sees literature as providing a kind of ethical education, as high, holy work that can transform people’s unjust beliefs and feelings. All these topics lead to fruitful classroom debate, but I find that students are most intrigued by his paradoxical description of writing as far more effective than force in the fight against racism, even as it is a form of strategic force, in which a black writer mines the garrison of white feeling. They are also intrigued by the metaphor of white racism as a garrison of feeling, a heavily protected defensive fort of emotions and subjectivity. We debate the question of whether or not literature can work, as Chesnutt imagines, both subtly and yet powerfully. Can literature be this transformative and politically revolutionary? And what techniques would an author use to create change?

The central question for us when we discuss *The Colonel’s Dream*, therefore, is, How does Chesnutt construct and depict white perspectives on race relations in order to mine the garrison of white feelings and thoughts? What kinds of white perspective does he choose and why? What are the limitations to those perspectives and how are those limitations made evident to the reader? This line of inquiry leads us to consider not only perspective but also narrative structure. We analyze, first, how Chesnutt imagines and describes the perspectives of the colonel and the other elite white characters in his social circle. Then we track the different narrative strands he weaves together. This essay deals only with the colonel’s perspective and with one narrative strand—his attempt to reform Clarendon. But by taking into account the perspectives of other characters

and different narrative strands, students can begin to understand the brilliant ways in which Chesnutt links historical and institutional matrices to subjective or affective states, demonstrating how inadequate corporate capitalist ideology and practice are in transforming race relations and structural inequality.

Capitalism, Paternalism, Philanthropy

Chesnutt describes the colonel as a product of both the South and the North, and he describes the divisions as well as the links between elites in those two regions. On the one hand, the colonel served on the Confederate side in the Civil War and loses his fortune and his family. I ask students to think about what Chesnutt focuses on in depicting elite Southern culture and also what a loss of status and family means. I ask them to compare his depictions of the Southern white elite with those by white writers with whom they may be familiar (Mark Twain, Ellen Glasgow, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor). In *Dream*, as in all his fiction, Chesnutt shows the displaced Southern elite imagining themselves as benevolent paternalists, committed to noblesse oblige and working to chivalrously protect those beneath them. He is deeply interested in conceptions of inequality that are unexamined, in the evasions and self-deceptions that lie behind the attempts of displaced elites to regain their power ideologically and practically over both blacks and what he describes as the class of newly ascendant poor whites.² At the same time, Chesnutt demonstrates how noblesse oblige can function as a residual historical formation in the culture of corporate capitalism and of genocidal racism and how it can have unpredictable, sometimes even useful, results.

On the other hand, the colonel has also become an elite Northerner. After the war, he was offered employment by a Northern relative sympathetic to the Confederacy, which again highlights the links as much as divisions between North and South. The colonel makes his fortune as a capitalist—the story opens in medias res with his negotiating the sale of his bagging company to the “bagging trust” (85). Once the negotiation is complete and he has accrued his millions, he decides “to do something for humanity” (189), returning to the South to begin that process. But if Chesnutt connects the colonel’s benevolent paternalism to his Southern roots, he also links it to Northern corporate capitalism, suggesting that Southern and Northern elites are not so different. In many ways, the colonel is a familiar Northern figure of the Gilded Age. A wealthy industrialist turned philanthropist, he evokes real business titans of the time who turned to philanthropy (Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, John D. Rockefeller), as well as fictional ones (Hank Morgan of Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, Adam Verver of Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*, Frank Cowperwood of Theodore Dreiser’s *Trilogy of Desire*). The colonel is also a figure who anticipates modern black novelists’ depictions of Northern liberal

white paternalist philanthropists—for example, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*.³

Chesnutt criticizes both Southern and Northern white elites and the collusion between them: the colonel's reform efforts partake of both old-fashioned Southern paternalism and a more modern Northern capitalist paternalism. The colonel engages in personal efforts to help individual blacks in his employ and in the employ of his elite white friends, but at the same time he attempts to create structural change that borrows from corporate capitalism and its forms of paternalism. In one of his first such actions, he decides to reopen a disused mill in Clarendon:

To a man of action, like the colonel, the frequent contemplation of the unused water power, which might so easily be harnessed to the car of progress, gave birth, in time, to a wish to see it thus utilized, and the further wish to stir to labour the idle inhabitants of the neighbourhood. . . . And so he planned to build a new and larger cotton mill where the old had stood; to shake up this lethargic community; to put its people to work, and to teach them habits of industry, efficiency and thrift. This, he imagined, would be pleasant occupation for his vacation, as well as a true missionary enterprise. . . . (178–79)

In language comparable to that used by Twain's Hank Morgan, we see how old-fashioned paternalist noblesse oblige combines with a more modern capitalist paternalism that values social control and the maximizing of profits. The colonel will transform an unprofitable water source into a profitable one and lethargic laborers into well-regulated ones. Chesnutt's touch here is deft and restrained. He does not demonize the colonel but highlights his unexamined belief that social control and maximizing profits are inherently benevolent, progressive, and ethical goals, through the use of quasi-religious, quasi-business language ("a true missionary enterprise"). The colonel's assumption that capitalism is natural, even the work of God, and his condescending self-righteousness in deciding what will benefit the community, is emphasized by his certainty that his efforts will be easily successful and provide a "pleasant occupation for his vacation." Chesnutt then carefully anatomizes in the chapters that follow how the colonel's missionary enterprise meets resistance and fails.

Chesnutt's analysis of the way a combination of Southern and Northern benevolent paternalism and capitalist ideology limits the colonel's perspective and hence his reform efforts are carefully elaborated. The colonel sees the South as economically backward in comparison with the capitalist North and therefore believes himself engaged in a missionary enterprise, but Chesnutt suggests that such a dichotomy is false. First, a slave system and the racial violence that inheres in it are not at all in opposition to rationalized profit making. Indeed, slavery and capitalism can operate simultaneously and support each other. For example, Chesnutt shows that slavery continues in the capitalist present through

convict labor. Even the colonel recognizes this as he begins to get a clearer picture of the labor situation in the South. He thinks to himself, "New definitions were given to old words, new pictures set in old frames, new wine poured into old bottles" (260). Second, Southern slavery was different from Northern capitalism but left its historical imprint on both whites and blacks. A commitment to rational self-interest and maximizing profits, Chesnutt demonstrates, can erase neither the past nor its long-term psychological consequences. He carefully analyzes the ways in which certain kinds of emotional or psychological states of being, associated with the history of slavery, maintain their hold against capitalist beliefs, which ignore the past.

Resentment and the desire for revenge is harbored against blacks by their former white owners, while the blacks have their own (more obvious) reasons for anger and resentment against whites. The whites express their feelings through an overpowering and systematic state-based violence, while the blacks resist in any way they can—including guerrilla warfare. Chesnutt's analysis of the history of these emotions, their tenacious hold on the present, and why capitalism, both ideologically and practically, can neither account for nor transform these emotions is again deft and restrained but carefully detailed. The colonel understands and even sympathizes to a degree with the elite and lower-class whites—" [H]e could almost understand why they let their feelings govern their reason and judgment" (261)—and therefore decides to be "patient, and . . . prudent" in his social reform (262). But his patience and prudence, tied as they are to false assumptions about human psychology as always rational and self-interested, can do nothing to change the emotional dynamics in the South and its violent results. If anything, the colonel's prudence exacerbates tensions, and after a series of interracial and intraracial tragedies occur that affect his own family, he precipitously abandons his reform efforts and flees North.

The narrator's ending message of hope, despite the depiction of intractable racial conflict rooted in the past, has puzzled many a reader. In my classes we do a close reading of the last pages of the novel.⁴ We examine the colonel's capitalist dream of social reform, which hopes to establish "the trinity of peace, prosperity and progress" (190), as opposed to the narrator's concluding hope, in which "Justice, the seed, and Peace, the flower, of liberty, will prevail throughout all our borders" (359). I ask the students to compare the colonel's three goals with the narrator's two, and we work to expand our analysis of the implications of Chesnutt's subtle criticism of the limitations of capitalist assumptions and ideology. Why is justice missing from the colonel's trinity? Why is it so central to the narrator? What might Chesnutt be saying about the relation between corporate capitalism and justice, or, more to the point, about the lack of relation? Chesnutt was not a socialist, but his account of the inadequacy of corporate capitalism in dealing with history and the history of emotions, and thus social justice, is scathing.

To conclude our discussion, I often return to Chesnutt's description in his journal of his goals as a writer. I ask the students if they feel that his text effectively mines the garrison of white feeling and thought. I also ask the students,

since the book mostly poses itself as a realist exploration of the historical forces that shape perspective, if Chesnutt implicitly proposes any solution to the racial conflicts in the North and South or to the continuing problem of white racism. In other words, if historical forces shape—and limit—emotions and perspective, how can change ever occur? If a dominant corporate capitalism limits our views of social justice, what does Chesnutt suggest might transform our perspectival limitations?

NOTES

¹Rayford Logan first applied the term *nadir* to race relations” (*Negro*). Two classic accounts of the effects of corporate capitalism on American life are Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* and Robert Wiebe’s *The Search for Order*.

²See particularly *The Marrow of Tradition* for the variety of ways that the paternalist benevolence and lost status of the Southern elite express themselves.

³Chesnutt wrote two other “white life” novels, *A Business Career* and *Evelyn’s Husband*, both rejected for publication, that anticipate Ellison’s and Wright’s depictions of Northern corporate capitalist paternalism. Arguably, Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius stories are likewise “white life” short stories, showing as they do on the highly limited perspective of a Northern capitalist.

⁴A particularly interesting figure to discuss in the conclusion, and who seems to represent the difficult position of the black intellectual in the period, is Henry Taylor, the schoolteacher who aligned himself with the colonel in his reform efforts. Seen as an enemy of his race by the blacks and thwarted by the whites in his plans for an industrial school, he had to flee the South and work as a porter in the North, which is the “best job” he can find—an indictment of Northern racism (357). This outcome, as well as Taylor’s views of the future, are worth analyzing and debating on their own terms, in terms of Chesnutt’s position as a black intellectual, or, in more advanced classes, in terms of other figurations of the position of the black intellectual in a dominant white society: W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folks*, Carter G. Woodson’s *The Mis-education of the Negro*, Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*.