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SELF-CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION  
IN THE  
JOURNALS OF CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

A Thesis  
By  
TAMMY L. WILMESHERR

WILLIAM LEONARD EURY  
APPALACHIAN COLLECTION  
APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY  
BOONE, NORTH CAROLINA 28608

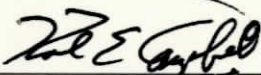
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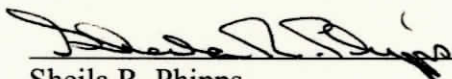
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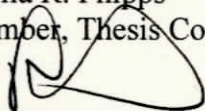
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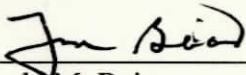
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Chairperson, Thesis Committee



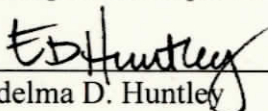
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Member, Thesis Committee



Bruce A. Dick  
Member, Thesis Committee



Lucinda M. Beier  
Chairperson, Department of History



Edelma D. Huntley  
Dean, Research and Graduate Studies

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## ABSTRACT

### SELF-CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION IN THE JOURNALS OF CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

(August 2009)

Tammy L. Wilmesherr, B.A., Mars Hill College

M.A., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Ed.D., Appalachian State University

M.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Dr. Karl Campbell

Charles Chesnutt served as a teacher and supervisor of instruction in North Carolina from 1874 to 1883. During this time he wrote journals that documented his personal, professional, and political experiences. His journals were published for the first time in 1993 and have been awaiting scholarly discussion and analysis in the context of the time and place in which they were written. Chesnutt's journals reveal the maturation of a young man as he confronted issues of race and identity in the post Civil War South. This thesis analyzes the journals and the insight they provide into Chesnutt's life and times, focusing on the personal implications of his mixed race ancestry and the accompanying limitations for his professional and political aspirations.

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## INTRODUCTION

In January 2008 the United States postal service unveiled the Charles Chesnutt postage stamp as the thirty-first stamp in a series on Black American authors. Questions arose regarding the stamp and the man whose image it bore, questions about his background and his personal history, his achievements and his appearance. Unlike W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and James Weldon Johnson, whose likenesses appeared on previous postage stamps in this series, Chesnutt's name is generally unrecognized by the American public.<sup>1</sup> The postage stamp was a significant symbol of honor long overdue Chesnutt's literary contribution.

Chesnutt's literary achievements date back to the 1880s when national journals such as *The Atlantic Monthly* published his short stories. His first book, *The Conjure Woman*, was published in 1899, and featured the main character of Uncle Julius, who spoke in black dialect. These stories were set in post Civil War North Carolina. Chesnutt's second book of stories, also published in 1899, was titled *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line*. Most of these stories reflect the inner struggles of mixed race individuals who confront the dilemma of deciding where they fit into society and how to identify themselves. Chesnutt's novel *The House Behind the Cedars* was published in 1900 and also dealt with the complexity of self-identification and relationships across racial boundaries. *The Marrow of Tradition*, based on events from the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898, was published in 1901.

Although Chesnutt's literary contribution as America's first black novelist to be endorsed by major publishing companies and critiqued by national magazines has often been highlighted, Chesnutt also left behind a legacy of personal journals that have only recently become available to the public. These journals have never been analyzed by scholars in any substantial way and have been largely ignored, eclipsed by his fictional writings. Chesnutt's journals document events of life from 1874 to 1883 and provide insight into the maturation of a young man as he developed his personal, professional, and political awareness. The journals provide a way of looking at the construction of race and power in the late nineteenth century. They illustrate the inherent conundrum of race and the challenge presented by efforts to comprehend racial and social etiquette in a time and place ripe with questioning of roles and identities. These writings are a rich tapestry of Chesnutt's personal sentiments, his professional challenges, his awareness of political machinery, and his maneuverings in the state and in the nation.

Each of Chesnutt's parents was the child of a white plantation owner and a black slave, and therefore he was a fair skinned individual who was often questioned about his racial identity. Chesnutt was born on June 20, 1858, in Cleveland, Ohio, to Andrew and Anne Sampson Chesnutt, who had moved to Cleveland from Fayetteville, North Carolina, earlier in the decade. The young boy moved with his family back to Fayetteville in 1866 when he was eight years old. He remained in the Tar Heel state for the next sixteen years. During those years he was a student, a teacher, and a school principal. And during those years his journal was his trusted confidante and closest friend.

In 1878 Chesnutt married Susan Perry of Fayetteville. In 1883 Chesnutt returned with his young family to Cleveland, the place of his birth, where he and Susan resided until his death in 1932. In 1885 Chesnutt established a successful law practice in Cleveland where he practiced legal counseling and court stenography for the next four decades. Charles and Susan Chesnutt had four children, three of whom established careers as educators. Their daughter Helen taught English and Latin at Cleveland High School where one of her notable students was Langston Hughes.

Chesnutt's journals, made available to the public for the first time in 1993, were written in private moments and, according to the author, were intended only for his own perusal. On March 11, 1880, Chesnutt contemplated the significance of his journal as a tool for remembering and revisiting his thoughts: "my journal is a sort of mental phonograph, into which I speak my thoughts by means of the pen; and at any future time I can recall them by simply opening the book."<sup>2</sup> The act of journaling created an 'other' in his loneliness and provided a place to bring his introspection to light and converse with himself about himself.

For the historian, Chesnutt's journals contain valuable insight into North Carolina history and the history of the United States during the decades following the Civil War. During that time Chesnutt metamorphosed from being an individual who described himself by the surface color of his skin as "white" and proud of North Carolina, to a person who defined himself as "black" and unable to tolerate life in the South.

Chesnutt's journals provide essential information for understanding this transformation in his self-perception and his assessment of his social and political environment. He documented incidents and contemplated issues that shaped his self-

understanding and his social standing, his political convictions, and his determination to fight for equality in a society dominated by race prejudice. His journal entries progress to reveal a maturity of insight as he journeys from self-absorption into an understanding of the difficult realities of racial discrimination. His tendency to judge others by his own ideals of self-improvement become tempered by an understanding of the severity of the limitations imposed by a segregated society. Chesnutt's journals demonstrate that he developed self-awareness and made pivotal personal, professional, and political decisions. By the end of his journals he consolidates his identity as a member of the black community.

Often the study of history becomes a litany of dates and places, just the facts, and we become detached from the emotions of the people who lived through the events of the past. On the other end of the spectrum, historian Timothy Tyson has reminded us that "many people who care are mired in guilt, as if the agonies of history could be undone by angst."<sup>3</sup> Chesnutt's personal experiences, as recorded in the private act of journaling, bring life to history. They resurrect the thoughts and feelings of one man who stood up for more than just himself as he confronted hostile prejudiced attitudes and developed strength of personality and resiliency in the process.

### HISTORIOGRAPHY

The authoritative biography of Chesnutt has yet to be written, and the reconstruction of the story of his life from a critical perspective is noticeably lacking from the resources that are available. In 1952 Helen Chesnutt wrote a biography of her father, *Charles Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line*, using as her primary sources the files of letters, journals, and manuscripts that she found in the attic of the family home in

Cleveland after his death in 1932. She supplemented these artifacts with her memories to reconstruct this personal memoir of the father that she knew, painting an intimate verbal portrait of her father as a hero. Her account is uncritical, filled with sentimental admiration, yet it contains a wealth of information about Charles Chesnutt and his social nexus. It was also significant in hewing the path that led to documents and manuscripts that Chesnutt left behind.

James Weldon Johnson's (1912) *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, although a work of fiction, contains an elaborate argument on the problems associated with personal identity related to skin color in America, and the heart-rending struggles that can accompany the questioning of identity in the act of passing or pretending to be white. William Andrews wrote the introduction to the 1990 Penguin edition of Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man*, and in this introduction Andrews discusses the life and works of Charles Chesnutt as an individual who could have passed over the color line in real life, as Johnson's character did in fiction. Andrews has written several articles on Chesnutt, and has masterfully brought attention to Chesnutt through introductions to other literary works such as this one. Andrews now teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has established his reputation as one of the foremost authorities on Chesnutt since his 1980 publication *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*.

Noel Heermance was one of the first modern scholars to bring attention to the life of Charles Chesnutt in *Charles Chesnutt: America's First Great Black Novelist* (1974). Heermance began his study of Chesnutt as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and his book was the culmination of his doctoral studies at Howard University. Heermance focused on Chesnutt's unusual qualities that set him

apart from both the black and white communities of North Carolina in the late nineteenth century. According to Heermance, Chesnutt's intellectual capacities, his preference for understanding people through comprehending their thoughts, his interest in stimulating conversation from oppositional points of view, and his demand for honesty in relationships contributed to his sense of isolation, and Heermance uses the term "isolattoe" to describe Chesnutt's personality, using some reference to Chesnutt's journals but relying heavily on the biography by Helen Chesnutt to bolster his argument.

Charles Chesnutt's journals, housed at Fisk University in Nashville, have until this time never been the focus of any study. In 1993, Richard Brodhead, who was professor of American Literature at Yale University, edited the journals and they were thereby made available to the public for the first time (*The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). The same year, Brodhead wrote *Culture of Letters* and titled chapter six "Why Could Not a Colored Man?: Chesnutt and the Transaction of Authorship." Brodhead noted that one of the few historians to have looked at Chesnutt's journals was Joel Williamson in *The Crucible of Race* (1984).

In *The Crucible*, a substantial volume of nearly six hundred pages, Joel Williamson devoted six pages to Chesnutt and used a few quotes from Chesnutt's journals to illustrate his points about the dichotomy of race. Williamson noted in the introduction that he did not include a bibliography because it would have encompassed as many pages as the narrative, making the volume formidable if not unmanageable. He also stated that if he had included a bibliography he would inevitably have left someone out, because of the many influences on his research. In addition to Williamson, two other recent historians have made reference to Chesnutt. Glenda Gilmore and Timothy Tyson

have mentioned Chesnutt in their analyses of North Carolina history, but neither has devoted a full length article or book to him.

Biographers and historians have taken various approaches to the study of the years between emancipation and the end of segregation, years of Reconstruction and dislocation, of deconstruction and jockeying for power between state governments and federal government. Historians covering various aspects of the time period in which Chesnutt lived, such as Adam Fairclough's (2001) succinct yet comprehensive introduction to *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality 1890-2000*.

Glenda Gilmore's 1996 study, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1898-1920*, provides an exemplary discussion of the Best Man theory, along with a wealth of information about politicians and historians who have employed the Best Man concept. Her article "The Two Faces of Domination in North Carolina, 1800-1898" in David Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson's collection entitled *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* clarifies aspects and strategies of the political parties in the state during that time. Laura Edwards's *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* also devotes a chapter to the Best Man fallacy.

In his 1996 *Schooling the New South*, James Leloudis investigated the changes that occurred in the education of students and of teachers from 1880 to 1920. He focuses on the changes in education as connected to changes in society at large and therefore his work contributes to an understanding of the relationship between the politics of Reconstruction in the south and the changes such as the graded school system whose movement "drew its leaders from a generation of young men who had grown up amid the

cataclysm of civil war.”<sup>4</sup> The Howard School of Fayetteville that Chesnutt attended as a student and a teacher has been praised for being one of the first to incorporate some elements of graded schooling.

Adam Fairclough (1996) delineated the relationship between black teachers and black schools in *A Class of Their Own*, a book for which his disclaimer is that it is “neither a panegyric for Jim Crow nor an encomium for black teachers.”<sup>5</sup> Throughout this study Fairclough underscored the fact that, in spite of the fact that they shared a “history of oppression and the continuing weight of racial discrimination,” class differences as well as distinctions in religion, politics, culture, and philosophies of learning and living created disjuncture in the black society of the post bellum south.<sup>6</sup> Some communities suffered from bickering among churches from different denominations. Another distinction was between freedmen who were freed as a result of the Civil War and freeborn persons who had been free before the Civil War, used as personal identifiers and to promote class consciousness. In *A Class of Their Own* Fairclough recreated the story of teachers and preachers as together they comprised the leadership of black communities because they were often the only literate individuals among the group. The overlapping between black preachers who taught and black teachers who were politically active created the backbone of the communities.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> African American Literature Book Club, "Charles W. Chesnutt." *Black Literature* <<http://aalbc.com/authors/charlesw.htm>> (June 15, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Richard Brodhead (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 61.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 321.

<sup>4</sup> James Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 38.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

## CHAPTER 1: PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION

To be or not to be black, that was the question. A common occurrence in Charles Chesnutt's life was to meet people who did not suspect that he was a black man. How did he negotiate skin color and questions of race, and what did it mean to have Negro blood accompanied by white skin in the post Civil War South? Chesnutt's journals provide insight into the intrigue of racial identity in the post Civil War South.

For Chesnutt, the decades after the Civil War created a need for an identity that would fit into the mainstream culture. The construction of racial identity was deeper than dark skin and more complex than complexion. Those with mixed ancestry often had light skin and could cross over the color line, but there were many risks and consequences related to this decision of self-presentation. Depending on the situation, mixed ancestry could be seen as a curse or a blessing. Fragmentation of identity and disorientation in trying to grasp the boundaries of invisible and shifting barriers was a common conundrum for those of mixed racial heritage. Chesnutt and other mulatto writers of the late nineteenth century grappled with the meaning of shades of color and how to express the dilemma of racial identification. They struggled with what historian Ruth Crocker has described as the challenges of "the hybridity of a racially mixed identity."<sup>1</sup>

Chesnutt was born and grew into manhood during those crucial years that fell between two Supreme Court decisions that would define race and demarcate the boundaries for racial relationships in America well into the twentieth century, the *Dred*

*Scott versus John Sanford* case of 1857, and the *Homer Plessy versus John Ferguson* case of 1896. In the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 the Supreme Court concluded that the founding fathers never intended blacks to be considered equal to whites. The Court supported the notion that Dred Scott, representative of all blacks, had no rights or privileges binding on white Americans. Fugitive slaves could be pursued, arrested, and returned to slavery, even if they had escaped to a free state. Supreme Court Justice Roger B. Taney promulgated the theory that black people were of an "inferior order," so far inferior that they had no rights which required protection. Justice Taney described blacks as separated from whites "by indelible marks" of inferiority and degradation, and were subject to "laws long before established." The legal justification of racial inferiority "was constructed and discursive" and the law of slavery was "branded into" and "impressed on" blacks by the time the Declaration of Independence and Constitution were drafted and could not, according to Taney, be erased.<sup>2</sup>

Chesnutt and countless others of mixed racial ancestry were destined to be defined by blood rather than by appearance. The one drop theory grew out of the belief that each race had its own blood type which was correlated with physical appearance and behavior, and therefore a single drop of black blood made a person black. The perplexity of this dilemma fueled the thoughts and the pens of poets and writers for decades, and as late as the 1920s Langston Hughes would write: "Unfortunately I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word 'Negro' is used to mean anyone who has any Negro blood at all."<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists have called it the hypo-descent rule meaning that racially mixed individuals are automatically assigned the status of the subordinate group. The one drop rule was used in the South to

strengthen the case for segregation. Ironically, legislatures sought to prevent interracial relationships long after countless numbers of slave owners had produced mixed race children with their black slaves. In spite of the *Dred Scott* decision the question of racial identity was never satisfactorily answered. W.E.B. Du Bois asked: “What is this group; and how do you differentiate it; and how can you call it black when you admit it is not black?”<sup>4</sup>

In photographs Chesnutt appears to be white. A common occurrence in his life was to meet people who did not suspect that he was black. He used journaling to contemplate fundamental questions about racial identity and his own identity as he awakened to an understanding of the construction of race and function of labels and categorization. Of one conversation with a white man, a school supervisor, Chesnutt wrote: “when I told him I wanted a colored school” he replied “that the white people wouldn’t respect me if I taught a colored school. Said that the colored people ought to have colored, and the whites, white teachers.” The unsuspecting administrator “offered me the white public school which I respectfully declined.”<sup>5</sup> Through conversations like this Chesnutt came to understand that he bore “the burden of mixed race identity in a culture that can see only black and white.”<sup>6</sup> He mused over the topic of the ability of fair-complexioned blacks to pass for white and in the process explored his own appearance and the possibilities of passing. Through entertaining the idea of himself as someone other than the black man that he had learned to be, he came to important conclusions about his identity and about being true to himself. Journaling facilitated his process of reflection and self-appraisal; his journal served as his “confidant,” one that helped him to transition into advanced stages of self-awareness.<sup>7</sup>

Historian Sheila Phipps has observed that "a journal can be a stage for interaction where writers can reconstruct the scenes of important events between themselves and an 'Other,' the responses of which help define a writer's definition of his or her 'Self.'" <sup>8</sup> In his journal entry of July 31, 1875, Chesnutt wrote that he had often "been taken for white." At a pond that morning a white man had "said he'd 'be damned' if there was any nigger blood in me." <sup>9</sup> With his fair-skin and European features he could have passed for white on numerous occasions since he was so similar in appearance to the average European American. During the course of one day Chesnutt might experience several such encounters to confide in his journal. For example, "at Coleman's I passed," and later on that day he met "on the road, an old chap" who "seeing the trunk, took me for a [white] student coming from school. I believe I'll leave here and pass anyhow, for I am as white as any of them." <sup>10</sup> The "Other" became a mirror on which the whiteness of his skin was reflected.

Literary scholar Richard Brodhead describes Chesnutt as "the child of parents on both sides half-Negro and so a man socially consigned to the category of the Negro." <sup>11</sup> In the census of 1880 Chesnutt is classified as a Mulatto. Before 1930, individuals of mixed European and African ancestry were usually classified as mulattoes, and much has been written about how darker blacks often resented mulattos, while mulattos in turn looked down upon people with darker skin. In the case of Native Americans the one-drop rule extended only as far as those with more than one sixteenth Indian blood. In *The Passing of the Great Race*, Madison Grant wrote that "the cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian; the cross between a white man and a negro is a negro." <sup>12</sup>

One of the most significant and enduring relationships that Chesnutt enjoyed over the course of his lifetime was with another individual of mixed race and one of the most renowned leaders of black Americans, Booker T. Washington. Chesnutt's daughter, Helen, wrote that her father and Washington were "warm and personal friends, with the highest respect and affection for each other" and that when Chesnutt visited Washington's home he "for the first time realized the greatness of the work that was being done at Tuskegee."<sup>13</sup> Both of these men were born in 1858 and after they became acquainted as adults they discovered that they shared an affinity for lively and intellectual analysis of issues. Chesnutt and Washington engaged in correspondence over a number of years, and often debated political issues that were salient to the future of blacks in America. In addition to being mixed race individuals who became leaders of their communities, they each spent a significant amount of time thinking and writing about the perplexing and frustrating issues of racial categorization and the significance of skin color. The two men shared another experience as well. Both Chesnutt and Washington were alternately praised and severely criticized by W.E.B. Du Bois at various times in their lives.<sup>14</sup>

Although Chesnutt had never personally experienced life as a slave, he was fascinated by the life stories of men like Washington who rose from slavery to become great leaders. Booker T. Washington wrote that his mother was from a family of slaves and that he never met his father but heard that he was a white plantation owner. There was never an acknowledged relationship, and Washington "never heard of him taking the least interest in me or providing in any way for my rearing."<sup>15</sup>

Charles Chesnutt became the principal of the North Carolina Colored Normal School at Fayetteville, and many of Chesnutt's contemporaries were administrators of black schools and colleges in the late nineteenth century and were also of mixed racial descent. In addition to Washington, who served as the first president of Tuskegee Institute, quite a few other educators of mixed race who could have passed for white served as presidents of colleges and universities in the late nineteenth century. Some of the more prominent were John H. Burrus (president of Alcorn A&M College of Mississippi), Thomas E. Miller (president of South Carolina State College), Henry A. Hunt (president of Fort Valley State College of Georgia), John Hope (president of Morehouse College and the first president of Atlanta University), Mordecai Johnson (the first black president of Howard University), and David Dallas Jones (president of Bennett College). Other noteworthy leaders of mixed race with whom Chesnutt was acquainted were Archibald Grimke and his brother Francis Grimke who helped to establish the NAACP, and James Hugo Johnston and John M. Gandy who were the second and third presidents of Virginia State College. Writers and professors that Chesnutt knew personally and respected professionally including W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson were also light of complexion and mixed in racial heritage, and at times they became reputable through their efforts to grasp the ramifications of passing and the complexity of the color hierarchy.<sup>16</sup>

Skin color and language often worked together to establish beliefs about a person's identity. Both Chesnutt and Booker T. Washington often judged black individuals by whether they used "good English."<sup>17</sup> Washington witnessed the problem of beliefs about skin color associated with language skills while traveling in the South. In

one town he noticed that the people were agitated to a level that foreshadowed a lynching. When Dr. Washington asked the reason for the fervor, he discovered that the “occasion of the trouble was that a dark-skinned man had stopped at the local hotel.” Further investigation proved that this dark individual was a traveler from Morocco who spoke fluent English, and “as soon as it was learned that he was not an American Negro, all the signs of indignation disappeared. He found it prudent after that not to speak English.”<sup>18</sup> According to both Chesnutt and Washington, to speak proper or standardized English could position one up the scale on the hierarchy of whiteness, whereas using black dialect signified lower classes and less whiteness. Aware of the implications of language, on at least one occasion Charles Chesnutt and his family spoke to each other in French to avoid being relegated to lower class accommodations. They congratulated themselves on their insight for having invested time and effort in becoming conversant in a foreign language.<sup>19</sup>

Just as Chesnutt was forced on occasion to employ dissimulation through language, James Weldon Johnson wrote of avoiding the Jim Crow car by feigning to be from Cuba and speaking to fellow passengers in Spanish “about the conditions in Cuba, where I had not yet been but concerning which I had a good deal of information.”<sup>20</sup> Johnson had a “number of experiences with Jim Crow” which he explained “always stirred bitter resentment and even darker passions in my heart.”<sup>21</sup> He reflected on “that hiatus, of which every Negro in the United States knows the meaning.” When visiting the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Johnson’s efforts to secure a hotel room were met by a desk clerk who, “while his face flushed a bit said, ‘I’m sorry, but we haven’t got a vacant room.’” Johnson was flooded with emotions of “humiliation, chagrin,

indignation, resentment, anger.”<sup>22</sup> In New York City, Johnson found that Broadway shows would “sell Negroes first balcony seats” but only if their race was not “plainly discernible.”<sup>23</sup>

In his story “A Matter of Principle” about mistaken identity, Chesnutt’s protagonist argued that “people who belong by half or more of their blood to the most virile and progressive race of modern times have as much right to call themselves white as others have to call themselves Negroes.”<sup>24</sup> Some considered passing or identifying themselves as white as their rightful inheritance rather than deceit. Yet those who passed as white faced the serious dilemma of renouncing family ties and loyalties to the black community. Washington seemed proud of his second wife’s light skin color, but he also emphasized that she never tried to use her fair complexion to gain unfair advantage. When it was “suggested to Miss Davidson that, since she was so very light in color, she might find it more comfortable not to be known as a colored woman” she “replied that under no circumstances and for no considerations would she consent to deceive any one in regard to her racial identity.”<sup>25</sup> At best, passing created a complex set of perplexing social and psychological issues, including a sense of the self divided, a feeling of co-conspiracy with intimates and associates, the fear of having dark-skinned offspring or of being found out through some other means. Split identities had to be mastered and incorporated into an individual’s repertoire of self-defining attributes. In addition, acting like or pretending to be a white man could be considered a crime that would put a black man at risk of being lynched.<sup>26</sup>

There were few things as perplexing as the decision to pass over the color line. Ability to pass could mean the difference between life and death. The risk was taken by

untold numbers. To pass was to defy the established system and to challenge the legal system and hegemony of social and cultural values. The act of passing was a decision, a behavior of social pretention and presentation, with legal and potentially lethal consequences; to pass was to perform a balancing act of individual assertion and self-sacrifice. Reasons for passing included the desire for equal treatment, the need to escape from blatant oppression, the search for employment, the desire to pursue interracial courtship and marriage, and even motives of curiosity and revenge. Individuals might pass to secure comfortable accommodations in restaurants, rest rooms, and public transportation, or to seek employment. Social restrictions and economic necessities motivated decisions, often on the spur of the moment, about who to be, or how to present one's self to others.<sup>27</sup>

Both Chesnutt and Washington admired and wrote about Frederick Douglass. On at least one occasion Mr. Douglass was forced to ride in the baggage car of a train in Pennsylvania as the long arm of Jim Crow reached farther north than Chesnutt had realized. On the train, as Washington would later recall, when "some of the white passengers went into the baggage-car to console Mr. Douglass" he "straightened himself up on the box upon which he was sitting, and replied: 'They cannot degrade Frederick Douglass. The soul that is within me no man can degrade. I am not the one that is being degraded on account of this treatment, but those who are inflicting it upon me.'"<sup>28</sup> This is reminiscent of a statement made by Charles Chesnutt in his journal entry of May 29, 1880, when he attempted to put into words his desire to promote "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 it to scorn and social ostracism, I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people.”<sup>29</sup>

In the years 1874 to 1883 as Chesnutt was documenting his personal experiences in his journals, fears were rising throughout the South that Jim Crow was spreading. De jure segregation was increasing and violence was employed in the effort to enforce a racial hierarchy and prolonged servitude in the postwar South. Being white enough to pass affected personal, professional, and political choices and opportunities, and priorities about self-presentation were questioned. In the conception and construction of a functional identity, the intricate drama faced by individuals passing for white were enmeshed in issues of performance, denial of family and culture, criminality, and internal conflict.<sup>30</sup>

Chesnutt's journals document the ways in which he described individuals by skin tones and how he thought about them. He described one man as “blacker than the ace of spades” while another was “handsome and not so dark.”<sup>31</sup> Adam Fairclough has delineated how both mulattoes and darker blacks sometimes treated each other with derision although “mulattoes rarely expressed open bias against dark-complexioned people.”<sup>32</sup> In contrast, mulattoes were criticized in public venues such as black newspapers for “snobbism” and “exclusiveness.”<sup>33</sup> Chesnutt considered the privacy of his journal to be an appropriate venue for critiques and comparisons based on color. For instance, he remarked of his trip to Statesville on May 4, 1875, that “they are the blackest colored people up there that I ever saw.”<sup>34</sup>

Skin color in school was used to assert authority and form alliances. Dark skinned blacks suspected that whites favored mulattoes because they regarded them as

dependable allies in their efforts to maintain control. One member of a school board told Chesnutt that the former teacher's "main fault" was that "he had one scholar, a little yellow girl" who was "treated better than the other scholars."<sup>35</sup> Adam Fairclough has asserted that there is no definitive answer "as to whether teachers discriminated against darker-skinned pupils within black schools" but he has concluded that "it would not be surprising" if light color "influenced teacher-pupil relationships."<sup>36</sup>

Like Chesnutt, Kenneth B. Young was a successful teacher who had light skin and mixed ancestry. Young preferred being called a mulatto and observed that "the white folks respected mulattoes much more than the ordinary blacks. And we black folks who had that white blood, we were proud of it. Proud because it meant extra privileges for us." One superintendent of schools told Young "you can handle them niggers" because "you've got enough white blood in you to handle them."<sup>37</sup> To establish an intra-racial hierarchical structure social clubs and organizations were formed in which exclusive membership was reserved for fair-skinned blacks. The Bon Ton Society of Washington, D.C. and the Blue Vein Society of Nashville, Tennessee, excluded dark individuals. On the other hand, journalist J. Max Barber told the dark-skinned William Pickens, "I never warmed up to, never quite trusted a half white or near white Negro. He is under a diversity of complexes which do not help his soul."<sup>38</sup>

During the time Chesnutt was working as a teacher and writing his journals, there were purportedly three tests to restrict dark-skinned persons from participating in certain social venues, according to literary scholar Carlyle Thompson.<sup>39</sup> The actual use of these tests has been disputed by historian Adam Fairclough, who has argued that such tests of skin color were more mythical than real and were not actually employed, or if so, only

rarely. The paper bag test involved the individual placing an arm inside a brown paper bag and only if the skin on the arm were lighter than the color of the bag would a prospective member be accepted into a church or social society. With the church door test some churches painted their doors a light shade of brown, and anyone whose skin was darker than the door was not permitted to enter. Other churches employed the comb test in which a fine-toothed comb was hung near the entrance. If a person's hair was of such a texture that it snagged in the comb entrance was prohibited.<sup>40</sup> By attaching significance to skin color and hair texture social hierarchy was reinforced with political and economic ramifications and emotional and psychological repercussions.

In his journals Chesnutt stated his desire to one day "produce a novel of the color line."<sup>41</sup> Themes of color, of passing, and of the aristocratic attitudes of light skinned individuals can be found in his stories. His attempts to grasp the significance and the implications of skin color through his writing began in his journals. His later works of fiction demonstrated that subtle nuances and distinctions were more common than obvious racial overtures; they are gleaned in instances of white individuals glancing in mirrors and seeing facial characteristics that are similar to their black servants. On close examination of his story "Her Virginia Mammy" it is obvious that the whole story is *not* being told, that something essential about the true identity of the protagonist is being held back to protect the dignity and marital possibilities of the daughter who has passed for white.<sup>42</sup> Chesnutt's stories are reminders that assumptions about racial identity were not to be taken for granted or accepted without question.

Like Chesnutt, Washington wrote about the "curious workings of caste in America."<sup>43</sup> Journeying from Virginia to D.C. with a Native American student on a

steamboat, Washington explained that he was “careful to wait and not enter the dining room until after the greater part of the passengers had finished their meal.” He recalled that when he finally felt that the time was appropriate to enter the dining room, he was informed that “the Indian could be served, but that I could not.” Washington would always wonder how the dining host “knew just where to draw the color line, since the Indian and I were of about the same complexion.” He had the same experience when trying to secure a hotel room in D.C.: “the clerk stated that he would be glad to receive the Indian into the house, but said that he could not accommodate me.”<sup>44</sup> Washington also wrote about an incident illustrative of “how difficult it sometimes is to know where the black begins and the white ends. There was a man who was well known in his community as a Negro, but who was so white that even an expert would have hard work to classify him as a black man.” On the train the conductor was perplexed: “if the man was a Negro, the conductor did not want to send him into the white people’s coach; at the same time, if he was a white man, the conductor did not want to insult him by asking him if he was a Negro.” The conductor finally settled the matter by examining the man’s feet, upon which he “promptly decided that the passenger was a Negro.”<sup>45</sup>

Each time Chesnutt decided to identify himself as part of a specific family and community, he was embracing the accompanying limitation. He struggled to bring his self-perception into congruence with the perception that others had of him, yet his journals show that there would inevitably be an ongoing disjuncture between his view of himself and the man that others perceived him to be. On July 31, 1875, Chesnutt documented that he had been the object of attention because of his whiteness: “one old fellow said to-day, ‘Look here Tom, here’s a black fellow as white as you air.’”<sup>46</sup> He

often felt that he was being put on display as a white black man as he faced the dilemma of self-identification.

Like Chesnutt, Homer Adolph Plessy was of mixed race and fair complexion, only one eighth Negro and light enough to pass for white. His name would become an enduring part of American culture and history. The story behind the 1896 Supreme Court decision of *Plessy versus Ferguson* dealt with the question of whether segregation law was based upon skin color or racial identity.<sup>47</sup> Plessy and his legal advisors had conspired to test the ability of a black man to enjoy white accommodations. Plessy sat in the railroad car designated for whites, then told the conductor he was a Negro and was arrested. Ironically, among Plessy's colleagues in this test case was P.B.S Pinchback, the black man who had been a governor during Reconstruction and had openly challenged Louisiana's 1890 law that stated that railway companies traveling within the state "shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white, and colored races."<sup>48</sup> It is also ironic that Albion Tourgee, who like Chesnutt had been born in Ohio and lived for several years in North Carolina, was also a significant player in the Plessy case. Chesnutt had read Tourgee's book *A Fool's Errand* before he reached the age of twenty and had noted in his journal that it was a "remarkable book."<sup>49</sup>

Tourgee was the defending attorney who decided to use the Plessy case to challenge Jim Crow. The defense argument, written by Tourgee, was that Jim Crow laws violated both the citizenship rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment and protection from involuntary servitude inscribed in the Thirteenth Amendment. The Supreme Court ruled against Plessy and held that a Negro is any person with any African ancestry. This decision helped once again to solidify the one drop rule. Justice Henry

Billings Brown framed his *Plessy* opinion by appealing to “established usages, customs and traditions of the people” and held that “legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts or to abolish distinctions based on physical differences, that if one race be inferior to the other socially, the constitution cannot put them on the same plane.”<sup>50</sup>

Brown’s opinion echoed *Dred Scott versus Sanford* of 1857. By the time the *Plessy* decision was made, Taney’s *Dred Scott* argument had been long discredited. Yet it was once again claimed as part of the *Plessy* precedent. In spite of the Civil War, the Constitutional Amendments, and the changes that had taken place all across the country in the forty years between *Dred Scott* and *Plessy*, some things had not changed.

By the time the *Plessy* decision was made, Chesnutt had already decided that the South was *not* poised to change in the direction that would be beneficial for blacks or for himself as an individual who possessed the incriminating one drop. As the nineteenth century moved into the twentieth, Chesnutt concluded that things were headed even further in the direction of oppression. In a letter to Booker T. Washington on November 25, 1908, Chesnutt lamented yet another heart-breaking legal decision. He pointed out that, by prohibiting “Negroes and whites at the same institution,” the Supreme Court had used the case of *Berea versus Kentucky* to reverse a half century of integrated schooling. Chesnutt concluded that it was “almost another *Dred Scott* decision.”<sup>51</sup>

In the years in which he wrote his journal, 1874 to 1883, Chesnutt became increasingly aware of the implications of racial discrimination against those who were obviously black as well as those who, like himself, were light of color. Mulattoes in the South were burdened with the knowledge that their mixed ancestry reflected the proliferation of relationships between white plantation owners and their black slaves, the

relationships that Du Bois described as the “systematic legal defilement of Negro women.”<sup>52</sup> Although Chesnutt’s white skin masked his black blood to the outside world, he was always aware of his mixed race ancestry and the importance of both his black and white heritage. He would continually agonize over the meaning of race and the significance of having Negro blood accompanied by white skin.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ruth Crocker, "Cultural and Intellectual Life in the Gilded Age," in Charles W. Calhoun, ed., *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 229.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Dred Scott Case* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries, 1973), 11-14.
- <sup>3</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea, an Autobiography* (New York: Knopf, 1940), 24.
- <sup>4</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "Dusk of Dawn," as quoted in Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 233.
- <sup>5</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Richard Brodhead (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 61.
- <sup>6</sup> Frances Richardson Keller, *An American Crusade: The Life of Charles Waddell Chesnutt* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 59.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 121.
- <sup>8</sup> Sheila Phipps, *Genteel Rebel: The Life of Mary Greenhow Lee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 8.
- <sup>9</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 78.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.
- <sup>11</sup> Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 177.
- <sup>12</sup> Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York: Scribner's, 1923), 21.
- <sup>13</sup> Helen Chesnutt, *Charles Chesnutt, Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 191.
- <sup>14</sup> Joseph McElrath, ed., *Critical Essays on Charles Chesnutt* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 8.
- <sup>15</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 296.
- <sup>17</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 160.

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<sup>18</sup> Washington, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Helen Chesnutt, 274.

<sup>20</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Viking, 1938), 89.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Chesnutt, "A Matter of Principle," in *Collected Stories of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: New American Library, 1992), 53.

<sup>25</sup> Washington, 87.

<sup>26</sup> Carlyle Thompson, "The 'White' to Pass: Miscegenation, Mimicry, and Masquerade in Chesnutt, Johnson, Larsen, and Faulkner," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1997), 47-49.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-78.

<sup>28</sup> Washington, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 139-140.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Fairclough, 295.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 60.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>36</sup> Fairclough, 294.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

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<sup>39</sup> Thompson, 36-39.

<sup>40</sup> Fairclough, 296.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Chesnutt, "Her Virginia Mammy," in *Collected Stories of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: New American Library, 1992), 42.

<sup>43</sup> Washington, 71.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 78.

<sup>47</sup> Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 243. Plessy was prepared to assume what Sundquist calls the role of "imitation nigger."

<sup>48</sup> Charles Lofgren, *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 179.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 149.

<sup>50</sup> Lofgren, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Helen Chesnutt, 207.

<sup>52</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 12.

## CHAPTER 2: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

During the years that Charles Chesnutt wrote his personal journals he was employed as a teacher and principal in North Carolina. Many of his journal entries were directly related to his experiences as an educator. His role in the community as a school leader was a significant aspect of his professional identity and he often made decisions based on his awareness of the expectations associated with his position. Chesnutt's journals serve as a source for understanding issues that he and other North Carolina educators, especially African-American educators, faced during the decades following the Civil War.

Chesnutt was teaching at the Peabody School in Charlotte, North Carolina, when Cicero Harris, his mentor and school principal, inspired him to keep a record of his daily activities. Chesnutt taught at Peabody from September 1874 through June 1875 and took on additional teaching jobs in the summer in rural areas around Charlotte and Spartanburg, South Carolina. His beginning salary, around seventeen dollars a month, was criticized by some parents who argued that they could not afford to send their children to school. When a father of one student pointed out that "we haven't got any chance" because we "work on other people's, white people's, land, and sometimes get cheated out of all we make: we can't get the money," Chesnutt countered with the argument that education was the means through which future generations would be able to break out of the cycle of poverty and servitude.<sup>1</sup>

As a young educator who had grown up surrounded by opportunities for learning through his literate family, the Howard School, and supportive mentors, Chesnutt showed little sympathy in his first journal for the plight of the poor who were struggling in a system that fostered dependency and exploited labor. The father who said “we can’t get the money” was trying to explain to Chesnutt that he was “caught in the new peonage of tenant farming.”<sup>2</sup> Chesnutt could not sympathize because he had not yet developed an understanding of the struggles of poor blacks in the South. As the child of opportunity, his educational background was enviable considering the lack of funding for schools in both black and white communities. He was committed to the belief that success through education was possible for everyone. Part of his ongoing education would be learning that other black families were not as fortunate as his own. It would take time for him to develop a social conscience and a desire to join in the struggle to help raise awareness of the plight of the less fortunate.

In his journal entry of May 28, 1875, Chesnutt referred to poor blacks as “a trifling, shiftless set of people.”<sup>3</sup> He was offended by their seemingly indifferent attitudes and absence of motivation which was manifest in absence from his classroom. The term “shiftless” was used frequently and unfairly by both blacks and whites to describe the lifestyles of black laborers. Historian Leon Litwack has pointed out that “few charges infuriated” black laborers “more than that of idleness.”<sup>4</sup> One freedman expressed his rage by saying that ““they take all our labor for their own use and get rich on it and then say we are lazy and can’t take care of ourselves.””<sup>5</sup> Some black leaders refrained from harsh judgment as they were guided by compassion to understand the unrelenting economic system that stymied individual motivation. W.E.B. Du Bois

argued that a lack of productivity in the post war South was “not simply the result of shiftlessness on the part of Negroes” but “the result of cunningly devised laws” which were “made by conscienceless men to entrap and snare the unwary,” making escape an impossibility and “further toil a farce.”<sup>6</sup>

Chesnutt’s sense of elitism and lack of sympathy for the less motivated during his early career has been pointed out by scholars and critics.<sup>7</sup> But he was the product of his time. Historian Michael Les Benedict explains that according to “Victorian moralism” economic success was dependent on a good moral life delineated by personal ambition, perseverance at hard work, and “good morals.” In that context, the belief prevailed that “the ambition of those who secured good educations would be rewarded.”<sup>8</sup>

Chesnutt could not understand why rural families did not appreciate school and did not want to pay teachers. On more than one occasion he found himself presenting his case for a teaching salary to an unconvinced parent: “I tried to convince him that we earned it, but he couldn’t see the point.”<sup>9</sup> One “old man said that ‘you preachers and teachers are too hard on us. You want us to pay you thirty or forty dollars a month for sitting in the shade, and that is as much as we can make in two or three months.’”<sup>10</sup>

Caught up in a desperate struggle for existence, many sharecroppers and menial laborers failed to see practical value in education. Parents who were skeptical of school did little to encourage their children. Du Bois remembered that when he asked one family who worked on shares why the children were not attending classes, the father explained “how the crops needed the boys; and the thin, slovenly mother, whose face was pretty when washed, assured me that Lugene must mind the baby” and “I knew that the doubts of the old folks about book-learning had conquered again.”<sup>11</sup> Not only blacks but many poor

whites were uncomfortable in, and even resentful of, the classroom environment. For the poorest families school was a place of bewilderment, a disturbing adventure that aroused conflicting emotional responses. Teachers had to stand strong to overcome the resistance to education by pupils and their parents.<sup>12</sup>

Chesnutt was often discouraged by the suspicions of educated people that he confronted among his students and their families. He turned to his journal to voice his frustration: "uneducated people are the most bigoted, superstitious, hardest headed people in the world."<sup>13</sup> On the other end of the spectrum were those students and families who believed wholehearted in the value of learning and craved more than just the rudiments. Historian Leon Litwack asserts that "if some elderly blacks flocked to the newly opened freedmen's schools in the hope of reading the Bible," younger students "thirsted for knowledge not only of the Scriptures but of those subjects that would help them to improve their lot in this world."<sup>14</sup> Du Bois hungered along with his students whose "young appetites had been whetted to an edge by school and story and half-awakened thought."<sup>15</sup>

Just as teachers did not receive wholehearted support from students and their parents, neither did students experience unconditional positive regard from teachers. In fact, teachers were known to express antipathies toward their students and to voice doubts about their capacity to learn. Chesnutt was offended when his students did not share his commitment to putting forth great effort and he was often exasperated by incorrect grammar and pronunciation, and he obsessed over the dilemma of how to reform speech habits of rural black students embedded with colloquialisms such as "wasser-melon."<sup>16</sup> Historian Adam Fairclough has suggested that traditionally "in their quest for middle

class respectability" black teachers were "deeply ambivalent about the black lower classes. On the one hand they regarded them as kinfolk and fellow victims of slavery and racism. On the other hand they believed, with whites, that slavery had debased the black family and made it hard for the freed people to establish moral habits."<sup>17</sup> Richard Wright, an educator in Georgia, complained of his community that "they say I am stuck up because I don't stand on the corner of streets and in store doors with them."<sup>18</sup> Middle class blacks who guarded their reputation as community leaders felt the need to protect themselves from association with those who participated in questionable activities such as gambling, drinking, smoking, and carousing. Chesnutt was opposed to spending time with individuals who habitually occupied themselves with tobacco-chewing and spitting.<sup>19</sup>

Chesnutt often used his journals to lament the "scarcity of good teachers."<sup>20</sup> In his journal entry of Friday August 13, 1875, Chesnutt inserted an illustration from one of his pedagogical readings regarding the need for competent instructors. According to the "incident" report, a visitor to a school was guided toward the school master, a "withered old man, who lay on a little bed in one corner," while "a number of children were crowded together without any occupation." When asked "what do you teach the children?" the school master replied "nothing sir" because "I know nothing myself."<sup>21</sup> Although this story may seem anecdotal it was all too representative. Booker T. Washington interviewed a teacher who was in search of a school, and the question was posited "as to the shape of the earth and how he would teach the children concerning this." The prospective teacher responded by saying that he was "prepared to teach that

the earth was either flat or round, according to the preference of a majority of his patrons.”<sup>22</sup>

Teachers made up the backbone of the black middle class, and were, along with preachers, the most important source of black leadership. Leon Litwack has described how graduates of black colleges and normal schools “looked askance at the semiliterate ‘preacher-teachers.’”<sup>23</sup> It was a source of frustration to Chesnutt and other teachers that preachers enjoyed greater prestige and influence than teachers who did not preach.<sup>24</sup> Preachers were often not as educated and were not held to the same standards as teachers, and this increased feelings of hostility and resentment for those like Chesnutt who dedicated themselves to quality of education.<sup>25</sup> Chesnutt wrote that they “don’t know words enough for a fellow to carry on a conversation with them.”<sup>26</sup> Even in the pulpit Chesnutt noticed that some preachers held their Bibles upside down. Yet many preachers insisted that they could teach and opposed better trained teachers who might threaten their influence.<sup>27</sup>

There were many complaints about preacher-teachers as the education of these men, according to historian Adam Fairclough, “rarely matched their eloquence.”<sup>28</sup> Chesnutt was appalled by inaccuracies and exaggerations that he heard in the speech of preachers who served as teachers. His journals were written in a time when blacks were leaving white churches and forming their own congregations, and their preachers often doubled as teachers. Chesnutt devoted several paragraphs of his journal to describing the extravagant showmanship of the preacher-teacher in Fayetteville known as “Brudder Sam.” He described the “Brudder’s” style of preaching as “truly dramatic” and devoted not to the deity but to the denigration of educated “‘fellers wid dere starched shirts, and

dey beaver hats, and dere kid gloves who don't know nuffin bout 'ligion.'"<sup>29</sup> Chesnutt elaborated on how Brudder "went on in a sing-song style, interspersed with frequent groans, and hoarse drawings-in of the breath" while his congregants responded with "'Amen! Amen!'" Brudder "brought the bible down on the pulpit desk with a force that shook the house" and inspired among the worshipers a "common impulse to make all the noise possible." One enraptured worshiper "threw herself on the benches with a violence that threatened serious injury to her spine."<sup>30</sup> Chesnutt did not try to hide his disdain for the tendency of preacher-teachers to rely on intense emotional fervor to compensate for lack of professionalism.

Another issue in the debate of how best to educate was the attitude among Northerners that the South and the teachers that it produced were inadequate. Chesnutt's mentor, Robert Harris, wrote to the American Missionary Association from Fayetteville and warned that southern blacks were "not competent to manage a class, or to give proper instruction to those who are beyond the alphabet. We can only use them as assistants, and they are poor at that."<sup>31</sup> Harris and other Northerners, according to Fairclough, "believed in the inferiority of southern society" and the superiority of the North.<sup>32</sup> They doubted the abilities of southern teachers and were fearful that what "little knowledge they had could be imparted in a few weeks; after that, they held their pupils back."<sup>33</sup> Unlike the ill-qualified black teachers who were harshly criticized, white Northerners who came to the South were often praised by educators including Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Washington believed that the part that "Yankee teachers played in the education of the Negroes immediately after the war will make one of the most thrilling parts of the history of this country."<sup>34</sup> Many years later, historian Leon Litwack

disagreed with Washington's assessment. "Whether to appease the hostility of native whites or to placate the cultural biases and psychic needs of their northern friends," Litwack writes, "freedmen would be forced to pay some price in violated sensitivities and prolonged dependencies."<sup>35</sup> Litwack echoed the sentiments of African-American scholar Carter Woodson who wrote in *The Mis-Education of the Negro* in 1930 that educated blacks, like middle class whites, looked down upon the lower classes with an attitude of condescension that they learned from Northern missionary teachers.<sup>36</sup>

Chesnutt complained that students who were unprepared and hardly qualified were being certified to teach by county examiners, who were desperate to qualify potential faculty. Students often decided to leave school and teach rather than continue their own education because teachers were in high demand in rural schools. The literate and semi-literate quickly became teachers, as well as politicians and preachers. These categories often overlapped as both preachers and teachers engaged in politics. Some teachers easily met their own minimal standards for success as they capitalized on the eagerness with which their pupils had grasped the opportunity to come to them. Others were distracted by large numbers of pupils of various ages and abilities in the same room, a room which was often in various states of disrepair.

One of Chesnutt's first interviews for a teaching position was near Salisbury, North Carolina. He described the facility as "a very dilapidated log structure, without a window; but there was no need of one, for the cracks between the logs furnished a plentiful supply." The "interior was rougher than the outside" with "ten or a dozen slabs with legs made of oak saplings" and a lamp "suspended to the joists by a string."<sup>37</sup> In spite of all the inadequacies of the educational ambiance, teachers had an undeniable

sense of the importance of their profession. As teachers turned to look upon faces full of expectation they could have appreciated the words of Du Bois when he said "I loved my school, and the fine faith the children had in the wisdom of their teacher was truly marvelous. We read and spelled together, wrote a little, picked flowers, sang, and listened to stories of the world beyond the hill."<sup>38</sup>

Chesnutt stated that one of his goals in journaling was to keep a record of his "performance" and "facts concerning teaching."<sup>39</sup> He spent many hours analyzing pedagogical theories. As of June 1875 he bemoaned the fact that "Universal Education is certainly a much-to-be-wished for, but, at present, a little-to-be-hoped-for blessing."<sup>40</sup> In the tradition of Ben Franklin, he believed in the possibilities of the self-made man and often reminded himself that "the quality of self reliance is of the first importance."<sup>41</sup> Always looking to improve his proficiency in classroom management, he took note of books that he found helpful. On July 21, 1881, he spent the day reading a "course of professional literature" from which he "derived valuable information." This book carried the confident title *School Amusements; or, How to Make School Interesting, Embracing Simple Rules for Military and Gymnastic Exercises, and Hints upon the General Management of the School Room.*<sup>42</sup>

Unlike the anecdotal old teacher of his journals who knew nothing and therefore had nothing to teach, Chesnutt always worked toward improving his own education and was not satisfied until he earned the highest level of teaching certificate. The teaching certificate examination was based on questions that reflected the preferences of the county superintendent of education. Examinations for black teachers in North Carolina were unpredictable in content and scoring. In Warren County, James S. Russell received

a second-rate certificate by correctly answering the questions that the white candidate had missed. Charles N. Hunter in Robeson County was awarded a third-grade certificate “after a stiff examination conducted by three scholars of the old school,” according to Adam Fairclough.<sup>43</sup> Charles Chesnutt documented his pride in achieving a “splendid first-grade certificate” after a written exam that lasted for two days.<sup>44</sup>

Chesnutt attended the State Educational Convention in Raleigh in July 1875 and “heard some excellent speeches and papers.”<sup>45</sup> Black legislators in several states argued passionately to outlaw racial discrimination in schools. In an unpublished letter to a local newspaper Chesnutt praised North Carolina’s progress toward equality in education. He pointed out that the school fund was distributed “in proportion to the number of scholars of each race.” He took “pleasure in saying that many of the Southern States could well take example from N.C. in her attitude toward the Colored people.”<sup>46</sup>

The residents of Fayetteville had certainly done their part to prove their commitment to education. They had donated money to purchase land for the establishment of a school for the education of black students in 1867, and General Howard of the Freedmen’s Bureau paid to construct the school building. Having their own building rather than being housed in a church or in a dilapidated “shed,” as Du Bois remembered his school in Tennessee, protected the Howard School from intrusion by incompetent preacher-teachers.<sup>47</sup> Andrew Chesnutt, Charles’s father, was one of the seven contributors and school board members who served in perpetuity.<sup>48</sup>

In 1877 Governor Zebulon Vance designated Fayetteville’s Howard School as the location for the State Colored Normal School, although other cities such as Charlotte and Greensboro vied heavily for this honor. Historian Gordon McKinney has researched this

decision by the Governor and has found no documents that would explain Vance's reasons for choosing Fayetteville over other, equally attractive locations.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps Vance's decision was based on the fact that the Howard School had been successful as an institution for Negro education since 1867, and the transition to a normal school would not be difficult.

Charles Chesnutt was appointed assistant principal when the Colored Normal School was established. Upon the death of Principal Robert Harris in 1880, Chesnutt was promoted to the position of head principal, a position that he held for the next three years. As principal, he worked hard to make a good impression and felt that he succeeded in doing so.<sup>50</sup> When Chesnutt "went to Raleigh in the interest of the Normal School" he was assured that he had "made a good impression."<sup>51</sup>

Chesnutt was expected, as were most black educators, to periodically prove to the white authorities that his students were capable of academic accomplishments. Fully aware of theories of the mental inferiority of blacks, teachers and supervisors were expected periodically to assess the results of their efforts and to report them to a curious and skeptical public. There was serious doubt that freedmen had the capacity to learn, as evidenced by the surprise that was expressed by northerners who visited southern schools. Historian Leon Litwack has found the surprise to be troublesome as he questions whether the "astonishment registered by teachers, superintendents, and visitors alike over the intellectual attainments of black pupils reflect a different standard of expectation and measurement than they would have applied to white pupils."<sup>52</sup>

At the end of each school year, Chesnutt invited black and white leaders from around the state to observe the progress of his students. The month of June, 1880, was

marked by an Exhibition that Chesnutt deemed “quite a success” with “no expression of dissatisfaction from anyone.”<sup>53</sup> This was Chesnutt’s first public program as principal and he made sure that every student had plenty of time to perform. He was pleased to report that “very few indeed of the audience left during the exercises, though the program occupied upwards of three hours.”<sup>54</sup> Another visit to his school by a prestigious and influential educator that gave Chesnutt satisfaction occurred on April 10, 1881, when he documented in his journals that “Rev. C.A. Harvey visited our school” and he “showed no visible signs of prejudice.”<sup>55</sup> Reverend Harvey was an influential administrator at Howard University in Washington D.C.

Chesnutt honed his skills at critiquing educators and the construct of formal education as he recorded his experiences along with his observations and insights into the teaching profession. He discussed timeless topics such as the restlessness of young minds and the need for extracurricular activities and social interaction, especially on days such as March 17, 1881, when his “young folks” were caught up in the energies of “spring fever” and the young boys needed a discussion about proper behavior around young girls.<sup>56</sup> Chesnutt exemplified what are known in today’s educational programs as “best practices” for teachers and principals. Decades before the concept of adolescence was proposed by G. Stanley Hall in 1904, Chesnutt gave serious thought to respecting the dignity of his students even when he disapproved of their speech and other habits. Commitment to an ethical lifestyle and professional conduct were part of his reflective journaling practices. He strove for lofty ideals because, as he explained in his journal, “my profession demands it of me.”<sup>57</sup> He was ahead of his time as he embodied the ideals of Teacher as Learner and Principal as Learner that were later emphasized in twentieth

century school leadership programs.<sup>58</sup> Chesnutt went the extra mile in his efforts, as seen in the documentation of his professional habits and his never-ending quest to make the most of professional opportunities. He praised the schools of D.C. when he toured the nation's capitol in 1879 and "visited the public schools of the city, and found them well graded, and generally having efficient teachers."<sup>59</sup>

Chesnutt was an innovator among educators in his efforts to find alternatives to corporal punishment. He disagreed with most black educators and many southerners on this point. "No one need tell me" he wrote on November 27, 1875, "that a school cannot be governed without the administration of corporal punishment" because "I have taught five weeks without it."<sup>60</sup> His preferred method of confronting misbehavior was through reasoning with students and rewarding good behavior while concentrating on academic performance. Adam Fairclough has argued that "historians of black schools have neglected the subject of corporal punishment."<sup>61</sup> He asserts that it is undeniable that "corporal punishment was part of the culture of American schools, and it was more deeply entrenched in the South than in other regions," and in "black schools even more than white."<sup>62</sup> But Chesnutt and a few other black educators questioned the practice. James Weldon Johnson "tried to avoid corporal punishment if possible" and bemused the most effective posturing in his role as teacher: "shall he act the tyrant, and be feared as one? Or shall he just be one of the fellows, and loved as one?"<sup>63</sup>

One educator who was Chesnutt's equal in accomplishments and interests was his competitor for school funding, George H. White. Historian Eric Anderson depicts George H. White of Bladen County, North Carolina, as a well educated black man who graduated from Howard University in 1877 and went on to earn a law license in 1879.

White had served as principal of the North Carolina Colored Graded School of New Bern and the Presbyterian Parochial School. He also served in the general assembly in 1881 and in 1883, and was later elected to the U.S. Congress.<sup>64</sup> Chesnutt relished the sense of pride that he felt whenever he "took the wind out of White's sails," as was evident in the journal entry of February 27, 1881.<sup>65</sup> White had requested that the Colored Normal School be moved from Fayetteville to New Bern, and that administrators be appointed by the legislature, but the state school committee sided with Chesnutt's request for the school to remain in Fayetteville. The issue was resolved later that year when the state approved additional locations for Colored Normal Schools, including New Bern. George White was named principal of the New Bern school. The other towns to receive funding, in addition to Fayetteville and New Bern, were Franklinton, Plymouth, and Salisbury.<sup>66</sup>

While serving as a principal Chesnutt strongly desired to continue his own education and appealed to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for assistance. John J. Ladd was the chief instructor at the school for training white teachers within the University of North Carolina and he was, according to Brodhead, "an arbiter of Chesnutt's achievements as they would have been measured had his race not excluded him from that school."<sup>67</sup> Chesnutt described with satisfaction his interview with Professor Ladd, who concurred with Chesnutt's high opinion of his own mental abilities. Ladd praised Chesnutt's mastery of Latin, emphasizing that he had never met a student who had "learned so much under such limited conditions."<sup>68</sup>

If Chesnutt had been allowed to attend the University, he would have been on campus with Charles Duncan McIver, Edwin Anderson Alderman, and James Yadkin Joyner, young white men who became well known among educational circles for their

efforts to reform North Carolina schools to graded schools. Historian James Leloudis has demonstrated that by the late 1870s the University of North Carolina had “traded in its past for a curriculum and a professorate attuned to the New South quest.”<sup>69</sup> While “their elders mourned the loss of a past world, the graded school men longed for the South’s reunification with the North and its integration into the modern world of industry, commerce, and science.”<sup>70</sup> Chesnutt would have found mental stimulation on the campus that pulsed with challenge and possibility as new ideas were eagerly debated. He could not attend, however, unless he had passed as white, which he was not willing to do.

As a dedicated teacher, there were times when Chesnutt found himself weary from his work, or “fagged out” as he described it, at the end of the school day, and even physically ill.<sup>71</sup> He suffered from lack of intellectual stimulation, isolation, and social ostracism as he did not “fit into” either the black or the white community.<sup>72</sup> He desired the energizing effect of being with other adults who were engaged in intellectual pursuits. He admitted that his solitary journaling could never compensate for the “harmonious, healthy mental development” which “requires the friction of mind upon mind. Only debate, argument, interchange and criticism of opinion can give one that skill and judgment which is necessary to select the valuable and reject the worthless.”<sup>73</sup> The mastery of subjects that he achieved through self-education was remarkable, and Joel Williamson, one of the few historians who have examined Chesnutt’s journals, recognized that “Chesnutt had a tremendous capacity for self-teaching.”<sup>74</sup> He was passionate about learning, yet race prejudice against him forced him to suffer from a lack of camaraderie. His educational desires were unfulfilled and his craving for a shared educational experience was frustrated. He was even denied private instruction in foreign

languages and in music because quality teachers of these subjects did not accept blacks as pupils.<sup>75</sup>

German teacher Professor Neufield of Fayetteville told Chesnutt that he considered taking him as a pupil but that the community had objected. Ellis R. Kyle, mayor of Fayetteville, was among those advising Professor Neufield not to teach Chesnutt because of his race. Kyle's position on this issue was explained to Chesnutt by Dr. T.D. Haigh, a white physician in Fayetteville and chairman of the Board of Managers of the State Colored Normal School. In a conversation with Chesnutt (while attending Mrs. Chesnutt in the birth of their daughter), Dr. Haigh expressed his opinion that "the Professor ought to take me. Said he could sympathize with me, for he knows my position, and could imagine my feelings. He recognized my ability and accomplishments, and felt that my lot was a hard one, to be cut off from cultivated society."<sup>76</sup> Whether or not this was a sincere expression by Dr. Haigh of the inequality and segregation that was socially imposed in Fayetteville is unclear. Although Chesnutt was convinced that Dr. Haigh was sympathetic, there is no evidence that the doctor made any attempt to condemn discriminatory practices. Instead, he encouraged Chesnutt to move north to look for better opportunities and less race prejudice. Eventually Chesnutt would come to accept the suggestions and insinuations of the more powerful white community and would follow their prescribed path that would lead to the North.

Chesnutt was fascinated by the study of languages. In addition to Latin, he mastered French and German, primarily through self-education. Chesnutt savored the study of Greek and Latin as he put forth effort to "store away" classical languages as "mental pabulum which will provision my mind for future voyages."<sup>77</sup> Chesnutt was

very much aware that Latin and Greek were the main staples of a university education and were a prerequisite for other professions such as the medical profession, one of the possible careers that he imagined for himself.<sup>78</sup> There was still another reason that the classical languages could have special significance. Fairclough points out that "the study of Latin and Greek symbolized something much bigger."<sup>79</sup> Mastery of the classical languages was evidence of "black ambition, a determination to share in the highest culture that America had to offer."<sup>80</sup> One black teacher "recalled hearing as a small boy that Senator John C. Calhoun had once defended slavery by asserting that blacks were incapable of learning Greek." Proving themselves competent in linguistic ability "symbolized the idea that blacks should be thoroughly assimilated into American culture."<sup>81</sup>

Chesnutt finally found one individual in Fayetteville who agreed to tutor him in Greek, James Allison Hodges. Hodges was a graduate of Davidson College with the class of 1879 and upon graduation he established a medical practice in Fayetteville. He served as vice president of the North Carolina Medical Society. Hodges offered a few Greek lessons to Chesnutt during a four month period ending in February 1882, yet these lessons were insufficient and only whetted Chesnutt's appetite for more interaction of a scholarly nature. On February 18, Chesnutt noted that "Hodges has paid me some high compliments" on the mastery of Greek. At the same time Chesnutt acknowledged that the discriminatory nature of Southern society prevented his propensity toward academic rigor "from bringing any substantial rewards."<sup>82</sup> He realized by this time that classical languages would not open the minds that had shut the doors to matriculation based on racial identification. Destined to a life of solitary studies he compensated by reassuring

himself that “solitude is best for study,” even as he pined for collegial interaction: “one needs conversation, and recitation, discussion to fix what he has learned upon his memory. But alas! I suppose I must ‘take the good the Gods provide me’ and resigning myself to the inevitable, cease to long for what is beyond my reach.”<sup>83</sup>

Charles Chesnutt’s career as a teacher and supervisor of instruction unfolded during a time that was complex with diverse opinions on the meaning and methodologies of education. In the post Civil War South, tensions were inherent in the opposing philosophies of Northerners against Southerners, blacks against whites, teachers against students, and certified educators against those who taught as an extension of their church leadership roles. Chesnutt’s professional life encapsulated the tensions and illustrated the dilemma of education in its multifarious aspects. He was born a Northerner, yet grew into manhood and experienced his professional development in the South. His light skin put him in the position of being a mediator between the wealthy white and poor black communities. His commitment to high standards of professionalism bolstered his cynicism toward less educated preacher-teachers. On the secret pages of his journals Chesnutt faced the implications of racial identification and the limitations that it placed on his professional aspirations.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Richard Brodhead (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 61-62.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 388.

<sup>5</sup> Laura M. Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne: Written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884*, ed. Rupert Sargent Holland (Cambridge: Oxford Press, 1912), 31.

<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 166.

<sup>7</sup> Sally Ann H. Ferguson, "Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks and Future Americans," in *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 109-119.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Les Benedict, "Law and the Constitution in the Gilded Age," in Charles W. Calhoun, ed., *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 334.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Du Bois, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 296.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 81-82.

<sup>14</sup> Litwack, 471.

<sup>15</sup> Du Bois, 70.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 48.

<sup>17</sup> Fairclough, 277.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

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- <sup>19</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 41.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 70.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 80.
- <sup>22</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 57.
- <sup>23</sup> Litwack, 485.
- <sup>24</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 158.
- <sup>25</sup> Litwack, 478.
- <sup>26</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 56.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 38.
- <sup>28</sup> Fairclough, 36.
- <sup>29</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 129-130.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 130-131.
- <sup>31</sup> Fairclough, 37.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 36.
- <sup>33</sup> Litwack, 479.
- <sup>34</sup> Washington, 98.
- <sup>35</sup> Litwack, 455.
- <sup>36</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), 13-14.
- <sup>37</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 57.
- <sup>38</sup> Du Bois, 66.
- <sup>39</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 85.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 79.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 92.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>43</sup> Fairclough, 103.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 57.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>47</sup> Du Bois, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Gordon McKinney, electronic correspondence with the author, 25 September 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 162.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>52</sup> Litwack, 485.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 164.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Sergiovanni, *The Principalship: A Reflective Practice Perspective* (Boston: Pearson Allyn and Bacon, 2006), 149.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 116.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>61</sup> Fairclough, 291.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>63</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Viking, 1938), 267.

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<sup>64</sup> Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872-1901: The Black Second* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 207.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 179.

<sup>66</sup> Anderson, 207.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 104.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>69</sup> James Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 38.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 165.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>74</sup> Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 61.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 67.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>79</sup> Fairclough, 150.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 169.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

### CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL AWARENESS

On July 10, 1880, Charles Chesnutt confided to his journal that the “time had come” to “face the truth about his situation.”<sup>1</sup> Personal affronts forced the young man of twenty-two to look outside of himself and his profession to the greater context of his social and political milieu. Journal entries between 1879 and 1883 document Chesnutt’s growing comprehension of “his place” in the post Civil War South, and his unwillingness to accept the limitations of that proscribed place.<sup>2</sup>

One of the events that awakened Chesnutt to the truth of his situation was the Republican Convention at the Fayetteville Market House in the spring of 1880. At this Convention, Chesnutt proudly accepted the nomination for Town Commissioner when his name was put forth by black members of the Republican Party. Chesnutt withdrew his name from contention, however, when he was criticized and threatened for accepting this nomination by powerful white men who voiced loud opposition against him when they “put fleas in my ear,” as he recalled their subtle threats and warnings.<sup>3</sup> His faith and innocence were wounded by this incident that caused him to feel the awkwardness of public humiliation and private rage. He began to experience “that cynicism which is bred in the minds of the young when they first begin to see life as it is.”<sup>4</sup> The same Republican men who disapproved of Chesnutt’s candidacy had, earlier in the decade, elected his father, Andrew, as Commissioner for Cumberland County. Ironically, Andrew was of darker complexion than his son, yet skin color and racial heritage had not

prevented the senior Chesnutt from being elected Commissioner, and then Justice of the Peace. Alliances had shifted, however. According to literary scholar and Duke University President Richard Brodhead, Charles Chesnutt's failure to gain support "reflects the changed prospects for black office-holding after the Republican's loss of power in the mid-1870s."<sup>5</sup>

The 1870s was a decade in which Chesnutt had actively participated in many of the interests of the Republican Party. Like many Republicans, Chesnutt was involved in Protestant religious services and he followed with fascination the development of a great revival that was taking place across the country. He entertained the idea of putting together a collection of spiritual songs for the "literary people of the North."<sup>6</sup> His journal entry of March 14, 1879, included a copy of a letter he had written to the Christian Union, thanking them for their coverage of the revival performance by the Fisk Jubilee singers, with hopes that the attention would assist in "the advancement of the colored people."<sup>7</sup> References to the Fisk Jubilee Singers would later appear in the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes. The Jubilee Singers popularized the Negro Spiritual as a musical genre by performing across England and the United States. In the process they secured enough funds to construct the Fisk University Jubilee Hall, immortalized by Du Bois, as the "chapel of melody," the South's first permanent structure built for the education of black students.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to Protestant religious services, Chesnutt actively supported the prohibition movement. He confessed to his journal that his interest in this effort was primarily that "the Prohibition movement would have the effect of partly breaking down the color line" and "bring the white and colored people nearer together."<sup>9</sup> He

documented dates that he attended meetings and the biracial nature of these meetings, and he supplemented these factual accounts with didactic stories and skits against public drunkenness. He noted with pleasure that the “large and enthusiastic Prohibition meetings at the Market House” in Fayetteville brought black and white citizens together.<sup>10</sup> This was one of the few venues through which Chesnutt could associate with white citizens in a cause of common concern.

Although Chesnutt willingly and eagerly participated in activities that were important to the Republican Party, he craved a larger role of leadership within the party or in governmental affairs. After being rejected at the local level as a candidate for Town Commissioner, he turned his attention to securing a job in the nation’s capitol. With a Republican serving as president, coupled with his personal history of loyal support for the Republican Party, Chesnutt thought he had a chance to procure a civil service position. He traveled to Washington D.C. in the summer of 1879 and visited the Senate Chamber where he heard a speech by Senator Zebulon Vance, former Governor of North Carolina. On this trip Chesnutt carried a letter of introduction and intent that he had written about himself, expressing his desire to work in government. But upon introducing himself and stating his intentions to Senator Vance he met with blatant discouragement and therefore “did not attempt to deliver” his letter of interest to Republican Representative Daniel Lindsay Russell from Wilmington.<sup>11</sup> He decided against trying further and returned home rather than pursuing the alternative option, to “stick to the city for several months and worry down his Congressman.”<sup>12</sup>

It is logical that Chesnutt envisioned himself as competitive for civil service. With his stenographic and compositional skills he could have contributed to the

overwhelming yet essential tasks of party functioning such as producing and sending out pamphlets to small towns all across America. He was aware of what historian Lewis Gould has adroitly depicted as the “traditional spoils system that awarded appointments to the party faithful.”<sup>13</sup> Yet Chesnutt was not able to reap the benefits of the system. Although he fit into the category of “party faithful” he was neither a traditional white nor black man, and did not harvest the traditional spoils.<sup>14</sup>

Chesnutt encountered dozens of fellow job-seekers on his trip to D.C. He confided in his journal that, although he found the city to be “large and beautiful,” it was daunting because of the “great competition” for jobs.<sup>15</sup> Many individuals faced what Du Bois would lament as “the hard reality of bread-winning and the consequent deification of Bread.”<sup>16</sup> Chesnutt’s journals reflect a specific time period and its challenges, a disorienting time and space of liminality, a time when expectations fluctuated and fears exasperated. Attempts to participate in, and contribute to society, and to earn a living without overstepping the boundaries of constructed “place,” left individuals feeling perplexed.<sup>17</sup> The social and political milieu, according to historian Laura Edwards, “engendered strife and confusion.”<sup>18</sup>

Part of the confusion resulted from the attempts among white men to regain their former power. Decades after the war, the institution of slavery flourished fondly in the hearts and memories of the white populace of Fayetteville, and reminiscing over the way things used to be often provided the intrigue for local conversation. Arguments abounded over the question of what to do with former slaves. Some were in favor of keeping southern blacks in a caste system. Others thought they should be trained in industrial education. Some considered the possibility of deportation or colonization; others

predicted that black people would die out from disease, poverty, and crime, which showed a lack of faith in their resilience. Beliefs about racial differences and color hierarchies dominated white thought and resistance to assimilation.<sup>19</sup>

George H. Haigh, owner of a bookstore on Market Square and owner and editor of the *Fayetteville Observer*, complained to Chesnutt in a casual conversation on March 18, 1880, that “you can’t get a servant to do hardly anything. They don’t like to be ordered about. They don’t work like they used to.”<sup>20</sup> George Haigh’s opinion on those who had left Fayetteville before the war was that they “were our best colored people. It was a loss to the town when they left.”<sup>21</sup> Haigh’s preference for the way things used to be was a sentiment shared by many white Southerners who resented the loss of power. Du Bois highlighted this arrogance of former slave owners when he wrote that “the South laments” the “slow, steady disappearance of a certain type of Negro, the faithful, courteous slave of other days.”<sup>22</sup> Historian Leon Litwack has documented “comparisons of productivity under slave and free labor, a favorite pastime of postwar commentators” who “clearly favored the old system.”<sup>23</sup>

Chesnutt’s journal provides insight into his growing assertiveness. He responded to George Haigh’s unenlightened discourse by retorting: “I can’t see how intelligent colored people can live in the South even now” because of “the existing prejudice -- the impossibility of a rise in the social scale.”<sup>24</sup> This verbal defense of himself and of the black race marked a turning point in Chesnutt’s attitude and behavior. He was finally willing and able to voice his dissatisfaction to a powerful white man. Chesnutt had in many ways outgrown the “supernaturally dull and prosaic town” of Fayetteville, where he had become “almost entirely self-dependent for companionship.”<sup>25</sup> He had also

outgrown his silence, his complicity in allowing condescension to go unchallenged. It is evident that he had matured into a socially aware individual, a sensitive man who acknowledged his bitterness over “the subtle, almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the Negro, which is common to most Americans.”<sup>26</sup>

In stating his preference that black people should leave Fayetteville, Mr. Haigh demonstrated an attitude that was shared by his fellow white townsmen who wanted to maintain their place on the top of the social hierarchy. According to Chesnutt:

Mr. H thought that these grades of society were the best preservatives of society. He thought that this fretting about one's condition was fighting against God. He asserted that the condition of things would never be different, for the line must be drawn somewhere, and the best plan is to draw it where it is. He spoke with dread of the state of affairs if the social barriers were broken down.<sup>27</sup>

Chesnutt pointed out in his journal that he had attempted to enlighten Mr. Haigh by replying that “society even in this case would regulate itself.”<sup>28</sup> Chesnutt had wanted Mr. Haigh to understand that class differences were as powerful as race: “I asked if they were troubled much with poor whites at St. Johns. He replied in the negative.”<sup>29</sup> Chesnutt had become more assertive and engaged in the debate about race and class. As he grew more comfortable with his own identity he learned to extract the sting from personal affronts and social insult. He had become quite uppity in the eyes of lesser men with greater power.

As a future lawyer, Chesnutt was learning to argue his case by appealing to logic. As a future novelist he was practicing his compositional craft with elements such as intrigue, dialogue, denouement, and character development. The conversation between Chesnutt and Mr. Haigh had concluded with Mr. Haigh's pronouncement that “things never, never, never would be changed, and that the only thing for a man who doesn't like

it to do, is to go away where things are different.”<sup>30</sup> On March 25, 1880, a week after this conversation with Mr. Haigh, Chesnutt reminded himself to talk to “Congressman Russell from our district” about “my desire to get a position as a stenographer, or clerk, in Washington.”<sup>31</sup> Four days later on March 29 he was again journaling about his desire as he reiterated: “I want a position as stenographer at the National Capitol.”<sup>32</sup>

Chesnutt’s motivation to move northward came from external sources such as the explicit statements by Mr. Haigh, as well as from inside himself. It was a “mixture of motives,” as he would say of this feeling that at times bordered on desperation as he was compelled to distance himself from the South.<sup>33</sup> In another journal entry of March, 1880, he described his desire to emulate Judge Albion Tourgee, who had lived in North Carolina and had written a fictional account of the South. Tourgee had sold his book, *A Fool’s Errand*, for twenty thousand dollars to publishers in the North. The awareness of this publication fostered Chesnutt’s argument that there was less discrimination in the North, with “their eyes not blinded by the dirt and the hazy moral and social atmosphere which surround the average negro in the south” and “not prejudiced by a love of our institutions.” He imagined that “colored people in the North would be more intelligent and whites less prejudiced” than in the South.<sup>34</sup> He would later be saddened to find that prejudices and misconceptions about human beings had taken strong root even above Mason and Dixon’s Line.

Beginning in 1880 Chesnutt documented elements of conversations that emphasized racial conflict. In his journal entry of January 21, 1881, he captured remnants of an exchange that he had with a resident of Fayetteville named Robert Hill. This reconstructed dialogue demonstrates Chesnutt’s growing frustration with narrow-

minded prejudice. Mr. Hill, a former slave, told Chesnutt about a conversation he had with Junior McLaughlin, a poor white clerk who worked in a dry goods store in Fayetteville. McLaughlin had asked Hill what kind of man Chesnutt was. Hill had replied "a perfect gentleman in every respect; I don't know his superior." McLaughlin questioned Hill further as to whether Chesnutt thought of himself as equal to whites. Hill responded in the affirmative. The conversation between Hill and McLaughlin had ended with McLaughlin's assertion that "Chesnutt is a nigger and nothing in the world can make him anything else," a sentiment which, according to Chesnutt, "embodies the opinion of the South on the Negro Question."<sup>35</sup>

Chesnutt added in his journal, regarding his own thoughts on this unsavory exchange, that Hill "might have added, if he had known my opinion, that I would think very meanly of myself if I didn't consider myself better than most of the white men I have met."<sup>36</sup> For the next six months Chesnutt struggled internally over how to answer the "Negro Question," concluding on July 21, 1881, with his commitment to take action when appropriate and in the process to keep his dignity: "I will fight the opposing forces. I will learn to control myself."<sup>37</sup>

One of the means through which Chesnutt practiced controlling himself was through reading and reflection. Some of his favorite books, second only to literary classics in vying for his affection, were books of political and governmental policy and studies in American History. He enjoyed Horace Greeley's *History of the Civil War*, a best-selling book during the late nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup> Always acutely aware of historical as well as current events and their long-term implications, Chesnutt was beginning to acknowledge that opportunities for success for himself and his family had become

increasingly thwarted in the South. He enlarged the scope of his journaling from introspection to contemplation of the significance of social and political struggle.

Through analysis of his responses to incidents and conversations, Chesnutt demonstrated that he was developing awareness and consolidating his identity as a member of the black community. He was also honing his skills of social criticism as he noted the forces that worked to keep black people in "their place," a term he often sarcastically employed.<sup>39</sup> His dissatisfaction that "colored people of the South are mostly engaged in teaching, or the ministry," the "only professions we can enter with much prospect of success" was growing with each failed attempt to enter into the arena of political or governmental employment.<sup>40</sup>

Chesnutt employed the imagery of Procrustean mythology to depict the sinister attempts to those in power to thwart efforts toward equality. He described the truncation of emancipation as the cutting off the feet to make black men fit into "their place."<sup>41</sup> In Greek mythology, Procrustes was a bandit who invited travelers to spend the night in his magic bed, which he claimed was the perfect size for everyone. To support his claims, Procrustes amputated feet and severed portions of legs of his guests who were too tall, and stretched on the rack those who were fell short of a perfect fit. By thus torturing his guests, Procrustes could live up to his claims that his bed was the right size for everyone.

At times Chesnutt became a type of Procrustes unto himself as he measured his progress and berated his shortcomings in a torturous effort to make himself into the type of black man that white society would embrace. In his justification of personal choices Chesnutt tried to meet expectations of white society. Tallying his assets he included his "affectionate wife" and "two lovely and interesting children" along with "the respect and

confidence of the best people in the community.”<sup>42</sup> He seemed apologetic in his journal entry of July 21, 1881, when he described his wife as “not pretty.” Although she did not meet societal standards of beauty, he emphasized her compensatory attributes such as her virtue. She was “good,” she had “self-respect” and “maidenly modesty.”<sup>43</sup> Historian Laura Edwards has pointed out that successful politicians were expected to have wives who were “cheerful, virtuous” and blessed with “beautiful feminine graces, beloved by all.”<sup>44</sup> The lovely spouses “provided domestic retreats removed from public view and cultivated the integrity of their husbands.”<sup>45</sup>

Edwards’s explication of political ideals of the period emphasizes the mandate that “only the Best Men should be entrusted with public power.”<sup>46</sup> The term Best Man conjures the image of a wedding or joining of lives. Hope of a union that could split the Veil, one of the images immortalized by Du Bois, would prove to be anathema to the time and place in which Chesnutt lived.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Chesnutt’s life and aspirations foreshadowed the end-of-the-century inevitability of migration that has been emphasized by historian Glenda Gilmore: “Black Best Men would have to leave North Carolina or outwardly conform to a place in society that was less than manly.”<sup>48</sup> Chesnutt was aware of the dialectical implication of manhood and expressed to his journal his “greatest desire” to “become a man in the highest sense of the word.”<sup>49</sup> He rebelled against the patronizing that robbed him of manhood.

The decision to move to the North was not easy, and often the journal was Chesnutt’s only confidante, because family and friends were opposed to his going away, resentful of the prospect of losing him. He was well aware that those who looked to him for leadership in the black community “would rather that I should stay.”<sup>50</sup> To give him

further incentive to stay, Chesnutt noted in his journal that he was told by an influential black leader that proposals were being made “to make Fayetteville a port of entry, and we want you for Collector of Customs.”<sup>51</sup>

Chesnutt’s family had deep roots in North Carolina and strong family connections in Fayetteville. By the 1880s, Charles’s relatives in the town included a wife and babies as well as siblings, cousins, friends, mentors, and his “paterfamilias” for whom he felt “filial obligations.”<sup>52</sup> Moving to the North would mean leaving his wife Susan and their children behind for several months until he found a home for them. He acknowledged his love for his children several times in his journals. During their absences he had written “my father-heart yearns for them.”<sup>53</sup> One of the consistent threads running throughout his journal, and throughout his life, was his devotion to his family. On March 7, 1882, he wrote “I sometimes hesitate about deciding to go, because I am engaged in good work. But many reasons urge me the other way; and I think I could serve my race better in some more congenial occupation. And I shudder to think of exposing my children to the social and intellectual proscription to which I have been a victim.”<sup>54</sup>

Chesnutt had secured a prestigious position in Fayetteville as an educator and had earned the circumscribed respect and support of the powerful white elite in the community, as long as he stayed in “his place,” which Chesnutt never intended to do. The isolation and ostracism that he described as his “lot” for being “too stuck up for the colored folks” and “not recognized by the whites” became untenable.<sup>55</sup> He was rebellious, in a self-preserving way, and his dreams, fueled by a high opinion of his abilities, refused to disappear.

Decades before Abraham Maslow conceived the Hierarchy of Self-Actualization by analyzing the accomplishments of individuals such as Frederick Douglass, Chesnutt was blazing his own path toward self-fulfillment.<sup>56</sup> The acknowledgment of the truth of his situation forced Chesnutt to choose the future over the past and the North over the South. Personal dignity and honor demanded that he seek a more equitable place for himself and his family. Rather than live under the shadow of feigned acceptance by those who “always did like niggers as long as they kept in their place,” as he satirically caricaturized false friends, he followed his belief that truer friendships and greater freedom awaited elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> Some of Chesnutt’s most poignant feelings surfaced in his journal entry of March 7, 1882:

I hear colored men speak of their ‘white friends.’ I have no white friends. I could not degrade the sacred name of ‘Friendship’ by associating it with any man who feels himself too good to sit at table with me, or to sleep at the same hotel. True friendship can only exist between men who have something in common, between equals.<sup>58</sup>

Chesnutt’s journals are the only place where his attempts at writing in verse have been preserved. The soft rhythm and rhyme contrast to the harshness of segregation and servitude: “I have no remarkable fondness, For handling the plow or the hoe, Boot-blackening or driving a carriage, Which I had to do not long ago.” His poetry questioned the legal basis for racial separation, wondering “why there’s one set of laws for the white folks, And a different set for me.” He employed irony and sarcasm to conclude his poetic quest for understanding:

Perhaps some wise white man or other  
The riddle will kindly explain, Why justice and Christian charity  
Are different for different men. Why they set us aside in the churches  
And in the common schools, And in the insane asylums  
They separate even the fools.<sup>59</sup>

Chesnutt resigned as Principal of the Colored Normal School of Fayetteville in 1883 and left the state. That same year he discontinued the practice of journaling. Never again during the remaining fifty years of his life would he keep a record of his daily experiences.

Chesnutt moved to Cleveland where he became the first African American in the state of Ohio to pass the state bar and establish his own legal consulting firm. In Cleveland he pursued his dream of becoming an author, creating stories of the South and of the color line that were not too far removed from his own experience.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Richard Brodhead (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 136.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.
- <sup>8</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 177.
- <sup>9</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 165.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.
- <sup>13</sup> Lewis Gould, "Republicans versus Democrats, 1877-1901," in Charles W. Calhoun, ed., *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 265.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.
- <sup>15</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 116.
- <sup>16</sup> Du Bois, 81.
- <sup>17</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 31.
- <sup>18</sup> Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), xi.
- <sup>19</sup> Gould, 242.
- <sup>20</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 126.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

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<sup>22</sup> Du Bois, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 340.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 134.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>44</sup> Edwards, 238.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>47</sup> Du Bois, 165.

<sup>48</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 91.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 167.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>56</sup> Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper, 1954), 236.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Journals*, 161.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 175.

## CONCLUSION

Late one evening in the fall of 1917 there was a knock on the door of the home of Charles and Susan Chesnutt. The visitors were a well-dressed couple with an adorable and beloved two year old child. The parents had come to seek legal assistance for their dilemma. They explained they had adopted their child at birth and the hospital records indicated that the baby boy was white and in good health. As the infant grew into early childhood, however, it became clear that he had mixed race ancestry.<sup>1</sup> The white parents wanted help in finding a good black family to raise the boy, because they could not tolerate the whisperings among neighbors and the fear of being the victims of prejudice and discrimination. The child and his adoptive parents clung affectionately to each other. Everyone who witnessed the scene was distraught, and, as Chesnutt's daughter Helen described the event in the biography of her father, "all the women were sobbing."<sup>2</sup> Although Chesnutt was saddened by the decision of the parents to give up their child, he was instrumental in finding a new home for the boy. Helen Chesnutt wrote years later that the child grew up in a pleasant environment where he lived contentedly and thus this incident had a "fairly happy ending."<sup>3</sup>

This was only one of the numerous incidents that Chesnutt faced throughout his life in which he had to confront the meaning and implications of race and color. By the time he was a middle-aged man with an established legal profession, he was accustomed to dealing with the dilemma of racial identification. As a young man from age sixteen to

twenty-three he used his journals to document his awareness of racial construction. His personal, professional, and political attitudes and aspirations were influenced during those pivotal years by the significance that society had attached to skin color and racial heritage.

In Chesnutt's personal life, his journals were the avenue for articulation of his coming to manhood and identifying himself as black when the possibilities for passing as white were not far from his thoughts. His dilemma was how to identify himself to others as he struggled with the meaning of black and white and the implications of self awareness. Those who chose to pass, as well as those who chose not to pass, had justifiable reasons. To have been put in a situation by society that made the decision necessary was to have been asked to perform an incredible feat. Born on the heels of the *Dred Scott* decision, and reaching maturity just before the *Plessy* decision, Chesnutt was destined to be defined by blood rather than by appearance. Using his journals to question, discover, and define himself, he developed his awareness of the hierarchy of color and knew personally what Booker T. Washington meant when he wrote "how difficult it is to know where black begins and white ends."<sup>4</sup> The question from the twenty-first century vantage point is not why some individuals chose to pass while others did not, but why a society was structured in such a way that this decision was necessary.

Chesnutt's professional life provided plenty of substance for daily contemplation. His journals are a primary source for understanding issues that he and other North Carolina educators, especially African-American educators, faced during the decades following the Civil War. In his documentation of events surrounding his school he gives insight into the multiple conflicts that were inherent in the educational system.

Differences in philosophy between the middle and lower classes, teachers and students, blacks and whites, Northerners and Southerners, professional educators and preachers, are all captured in his journals. He confronted the issues of inadequate facilities, insufficient teachers' salaries, and was ever aware of being under the watchful eye of the white powerbrokers. He wrote about his own expectations for students, how to control behavior and how best to teach, and the need for continuing his own education.

Chesnutt's journals bear witness to the blatant prejudice that he confronted as he developed social and political awareness. His maturation is evident as he grew from judging poor blacks harshly to identifying with the struggles of all victims of racial discrimination. He became sympathetic with others as he felt his own wounds from the severity of limitations imposed by a segregated society. His years in North Carolina, to which his journals serve as a testament, were pivotal in shaping his resistance to the increasing challenges imposed by a post-bellum southern society, where place and race were based on the predication of prejudiced traditions. In spite of his outstanding educational accomplishments, his opportunity for leadership in the political arena was denied. Working through and writing about his disappointments, Chesnutt demonstrated creative flexibility. He became part of the inevitable diaspora that siphoned off some of the best and brightest talents from the South as he joined the migration to safer places in points North, places where positions in the larger society presented greater possibility for personal, professional, and social fulfillment. The story of Chesnutt's experiences in North Carolina that are recreated through his journals can remind readers that, in the words of Timothy Tyson, part of the "work we face is to transcend our history and move toward higher ground."<sup>5</sup>

The loss to Fayetteville, North Carolina, of a gifted leader and educator was a gain for Cleveland, Ohio. But Chesnutt's legacy remains and can be seen in a triumvirate of contributions. The library on the campus of Fayetteville State University bears his name. His contributions to American literature through his short stories and novels bring attention to the history and culture of the late nineteenth century. A third significant contribution was to American history through his journals that he left behind which create a context for understanding a man, his dual heritage, and his time and place. Chesnutt's personal, professional, and political experiences as recorded in his journals bring history of life and life to history. They allow historians to resurrect the thoughts and feelings of one man who symbolized ideas and issues greater than just himself as he confronted hostile prejudiced attitudes and developed strength of personality and resiliency in the process.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Chesnutt, *Charles Chesnutt, Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 191.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>4</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 321.

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## VITA

Tammy Wilmesherr spent the happy days of her childhood between the Cherokee Indian Reservation and Wilmington, North Carolina. She was valedictorian of her eighth grade class at Micaville Elementary. Tammy was recognized for her mathematical abilities in high school and was awarded college scholarships to Western Carolina University and Mars Hill College. She has earned graduate degrees in education, counseling, foreign languages, and history. She enjoys playing classical piano music and writing journals. Tammy works as an educator and a court interpreter within the North Carolina Criminal Justice system. She is currently under consideration by the Guinness Book of World Records for the most graduate credit hours ever earned by one individual.

