"You is got a monst'us heap ter l'arn yit": Charles Chesnutt's Revisions of Albion Tourgée's 'Carpetbagger' and 'White Negro' Characters

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Abstract
Arguably the greatest advocate for Civil Rights among whites in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction periods, Albion Winegar Tourgée (1838-1905) influenced the African-American novelist Charles Chesnutt (1858-1932) significantly. Both authors were born in Ohio, wrote fiction and nonfictional essays about the desperate situation of Blacks in the South during and after Reconstruction, and both ended their respective careers with a sense that their reception was either ignored or misunderstood.

Keywords
Civil Rights, racial relations, Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction, Albion Winegar Tourgée, Charles Chesnutt, "tragic mulatto" trope

Introduction

Albion Tourgée wrote two best-selling novels – *A Fool's Errand* (1879) and *Bricks Without Straw* (1880), both of which were written shortly after he had left North Carolina after residing there for fourteen years. A Civil War veteran and then an attorney who practiced law in New York, Ohio and North Carolina, he authored 18 novels in addition to his extensive political activism and legal work. Nearly assassinated by the Ku Klux Klan while serving as a judge on the North Carolina Supreme Court,[1] he is today better known by legal historians for his crucial work on a landmark United States Supreme Court case, *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* in which he argued against the legalization of racial segregation. He lost the case as most liberal Americans at that point in the post-Civil War period pursued reconciliation with the South and, following the ideals of Booker T. Washington, accommodated Southern segregationists, much to Tourgée's regret.

In the same year that he argued before the Supreme Court (1896), Tourgée wrote the first anti-lynching law in the history of the United States (for the state of Ohio). In addition to his work in law and literary achievements, Tourgée shared with Chesnutt a commitment to the education of both African Americans and women. He helped found what eventually became a traditionally African American women's school of higher education, Bennett College in Greenboro, North Carolina, and just before he left the state permanently, he successfully argued before the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1879 to allow a white woman, Tabitha Holton, to be admitted to the bar and work as a lawyer. Through Tourgée's efforts, North Carolina became the first Southern state to admit women to the legal profession.

Obviously, Civil Rights greatly interested Charles Chesnutt, though initially he was attracted to Tourgée's literary achievements. Very little attention has been dedicated to their literary relationship at all.

1 W. McKee Evans, *Ballad and Fence Rails: Reconstruction on the Lower Cape Fear*. (New York: Norton, 1974), 146.

Tourgée's Career in Fiction-Writing

Tourgée's first published novel, *Toinette, a Tale of the South* (1874), written while Tourgée served on the North Carolina Supreme Court, deals with a white Southern lawyer, George Hunter, who cannot acknowledge his love for the heroine, his slave who bears their child. Hunter fights for the Confederacy and is nearly fatally injured early in the war but is nursed back to health by Toinette. When he attempts to renew their intimacy, she demands that he marry her first. He refuses and angrily denounces the idea, claiming her as his own property. She eventually escapes and as a runaway slave, passes for white and establishes herself in Oberlin, Ohio, a renowned station on the Underground Railroad and a longtime center for abolitionist political activism. This sentimental novel was only moderately successful, and did not have an especially striking plot.

In contrast, Tourgée's second novel, an autobiographical view of Reconstruction as perceived by a carpetbagger, bestowed on him celebrity status and a significant income. Published anonymously in November 1879 after he had moved to Colorado to work as a reporter on the *Denver Evening Times*, within six weeks, *A Fool's Errand* became a national best-seller and the novel for which he is best remembered today.

Readers curious to learn the identity of the author undoubtedly aided in the successful sales. This novel was followed up by his second best-seller only one year later. *Bricks Without Straw* told the story of Reconstruction from the point of view of two former slaves, concluding with a plea for greater Federal involvement in the South. None of his later works received either the acclaim or commercial success because, as Mark Elliott puts it, "Tourgée's penchant for didacticism increasingly hurt his critical reputation as the rage for unsentimental realism in fiction took hold."[2]

Chesnutt's Reception of Tourgée

The first reference by Chesnutt to Tourgée appears very early when Chesnutt was not only highly impressed with the $20,000 compensation for *A Fool's Errand* but wished at a certain point to model his career after Tourgée's, who was one of the leading novelists of that time.[3] In his journal entry (dated March 16th 1880), Chesnutt directly argued that he knew the South and the black people better than two Northerners who wrote such well-received novels about the South: Beecher Stowe's immensely successful *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) and Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* (1879):

> Judge Tourgée has sold the "Fool's Errand," I understand, for $20.000. I suppose he had already received a large royalty on the sale of the first few editions. The work has gained an astonishing degree of popularity, and is to be translated into the French. Now, Judge Tourgee's book is about the South, - the manners, customs modes of thought, etc., which are prevalent in this section of the country. Judge Tourgee is a Northern man… [n]early all his stories are more or less about colored people, and this very

2 Mark Elliott, "Justice Deferred: Albion Tourgée and the Fight for Civil Rights" In: *Chautauqua County Historical Society* 6: 3-16 (2008): 11.

3 Ryan Simmons, *Realism and Chesnutt: A Study of His Novels*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 174.

> feature is one source of their popularity. There is something romantic, to the Northern mind, about the southern negro.[4]

At this time Chesnutt was a twenty-one year old North Carolina colored grade school teacher and restlessly dissatisfied with his life in the South as well as his work as a teacher. He subsequently considers in his journal why he might not be better prepared to write a lucrative novel:

> [I]f Judge Tourgee, with his necessarily limited intercourse with colored people, with his limited stay in the South, can write such interesting descriptions, such vivid pictures of Southern life and character as to make himself rich and famous, why could not a colored man, who had lived among colored people all his life; who is familiar with their habits, their ruling passions, their prejudices; their whole moral and social condition; their public and private ambitions […] why could not such a man, if he possessed the same ability, write a far better book about the South than Judge Tourgee or Mrs. Stowe has written? Answer who can! But the man is yet to make his appearance […][5]

Although the financial rewards Tourgée reaped interested him, the message of justice for the recently emancipated race likewise appealed to Chesnutt as well. As Eric Sundquist has written, Chesnutt had a "fixation on the success of Tourgée's novel."[6] Chesnutt notes that Tourgée's writing about the status of African Americans, following Beecher Stowe's protest novel against slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published nearly three decades earlier in 1851, could still gain a substantial audience during Reconstruction.

Eight years after writing this journal entry, correspondence between the two writers began. Tourgée especially warned Chesnutt in a letter (dated 8 December 1888) that he should not emulate the realism of William Dean Howells but encouraged him to instead carry on with his own variety of realism (as depicted in "The Goophered Grapevine") which is "true to nature" by staying away from "the fettering ideas" and "narrow rules" resulting in the "falsest and sorriest" fiction.[7]

The lively correspondence between Chesnutt and Tourgée was initially linked more closely with his short fiction. In his articles, Tourgée frequently published positive reviews of Chesnutt's conjure tales, including the lesser-known conjure story entitled "A Deep Sleeper."

Revising Tourgée's 'Carpetbagger' in *The Colonel's Dream*

In the final novel that Charles Chesnutt saw published in his lifetime, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), there are continual revisions of *A Fool's Errand* (1879). There is a quarter

4 Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, Brodhead, Richard (ed.). (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 124-5.

5 Chesnutt, *The Journals*, 125.

6 Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 361.

7 Charles W. Chesnutt, *To Be an Author: Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt 1889-1905*. McElrath, Joseph R. and Leitz, Robert C (eds.). (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 45n.

of a century gap between the publications of these two novels; indeed, Chesnutt's novel was published the same year as Tourgée's death. On the surface, both novels have a post-Civil War North Carolina setting, and both plots revolve around a reform-minded military hero who impetuously attempts to revive the Southern economy and generally bring about egalitarian political and social changes thereby rendering the respective communities harmonious with the democratic principles of the U.S. constitution. Both heroes are maligned and threatened publicly by white Southerners. Whereas Tourgée's narrator is a detached quipster, Chesnutt shows little of the humor in *The Colonel's Dream* that he exhibits in his shorter fiction. While Tourgée's omniscient narrator repeatedly calls the hero a fool and his benevolent actions naďve, in Chesnutt's revision Colonel French's scrupulous business plans (which benefited both blacks and whites) receive polite criticism expressed by his skeptical friends in the town of Clarendon, including the woman he woos. Both heroes are conscientious but ignore warnings and precipitously carry on with their futile attempts at reforming the South.

Little has been written by critics of the literary relationship between these novels. William Andrews refers to the fact that Tourgée's bestselling carpetbagger novel inspired Chesnutt while composing *The Colonel Dream*.[8] Other scholars such as Simmons (2006) and Duncan (1998) simply repeat the idea that "Chesnutt seems to echo […] Tourgée"[9] without further explication.

In order to make *The Colonel's Dream* avoid the controversial issue Tourgée incorporated into his autobiographical novel with a carpetbagger hero (or Northerner emigrating South after the Civil War), a Union soldier named Colonel Comfort Servosse, Chesnutt revises Tourgée's carpetbagger by making his novel's hero a benign former Confederate officer who before the end of the Civil War had owned slaves and fought loyally for the South. However, Chesnutt's Colonel Henry French returns to his Southern home after two and a half decades away up North where he made a successful business career in New York and Connecticut. Also, as Colonel French is a recent widower, Chesnutt incorporated an element of romance absent in Tourgée's plot. In addition, there is a difference of some 15 years in the plot of the two novels: Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* runs from the Civil War experience of a Michigan lawyer through to his relocation (with his wife and young daughter) down to North Carolina in 1865, a career in farming and then as a judge, followed by his departure from the South after 14 years, reflecting Tourgée's own career in the South ending in 1879. In contrast, Chesnutt's novel begins and ends in the 1890s.

In both works, the heroes are tricked into paying higher prices for the property they wish to buy. Tourgée's Comfort Servosse overpays for an estate he purchases from the same man he arrested and imprisoned at the end of the war. This trickster, a mild-mannered Southern racist who feigns empathy for the "weaker race," acts foolishly and stupid in front of Colonel Servosse in the process of pulling a fast sale of a run-down plantation named "Warrington." In Tourgée's novel, the business deal is questionable legally, without proper papers. In contrast, Chesnutt's admirable and prosperous African American character William Nichols in *The Colonel's Dream* is based on Chesnutt's father-in-law, a prosperous Fayetteville barber. Nichols bought the old house Colonel French used to live in twenty-five years before French returned to Clarendon. Nicols makes

8 William Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) 254.

9 Charles Duncan, *The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), 4.

a huge profit when he sells it back to Colonel French for $4000. In both cases, sellers take advantage of Northern capital and ignorant buyers.

Outside the issues of voting rights and party politics, in both novels most white Southerners are utterly impervious to the necessary reforms that will improve the economy. In Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand*, much greater political ambition is demonstrated in the carpetbagger; Southern whites vociferously argue and fight at political meetings against his reform opinions, especially when it comes to the rights of blacks to gain citizenship rights, not to mention the sweeping economic changes planned in Reconstruction by Republicans. In Chesnutt's novel, one Southerner understands the importance of economic reform in the South: General Thornton tries to convince Colonel French to run for Congress as a Democrat. He had earlier been so disgusted with the economic "idiocies" of his party that he considered voting for Republicans except for the fact that it was the party of the blacks:

> "There was a clean-cut issue between sound money and financial repudiation, and I was tired of the domination of populists and demagogues [of the Democratic party]. All my better instincts led me toward a change of attitude […] When I went to the polls, old Sam Brown, the triffingest nigger in town […] was next to me in line. 'Well, Gin'l,' he said, 'I'm glad you is got on de right side at las', an' is gwine to vote *our* ticket.'"[10]

The general admits that he could not see himself allied with members of the race he formerly owned as slaves: "the race question assumes an importance which overshadows the tariff and the currency and everything else."[11] With his political sentiment resolutely altered back to the Democrats, General Thornton finally reflects: "We had to preserve our institutions, if our finances went to smash" and concludes that prejudice is human nature, and so will Colonel French soon likewise conclude.[12]

In Chesnutt's novel, a single antagonist, Bill Fetters, the opprobrium of Clarendon, is surrounded by obsequious whites, in stark contrast to Tourgée's carpetbagger who in contrast has fawning followers (mostly blacks, but some white Southern "scalawags" or Southern Republican Unionists). The intrepid Colonel Servosse is surrounded by many more white, independent, and strong-willed racist opponents than Colonel French ever encounters. Never is French threatened, but just verbally maligned, often in "Clay Jackson's saloon" in town while Servosse narrowly escapes a deadly ambush.

In both novels, the anger of whites in their respective North Carolina communities is raised when the heroes support educating freedmen. Servosse and his wife even socialize with black teachers (as well as Northern white teachers who have dedicated themselves to educating black children). Chesnutt's Colonel French defends the blacks' right to raise themselves up through education and hard work with his white neighbors, but his reasonable arguments fall on deaf ears.

Central to *A Fool's Errand* is the behavior of violent white mobs active in the Ku Klux Klan. Murdering both black and white political activists, the KKK puts significance to the manner of murder: a white activist who assists blacks in their fight to gain the right to vote is killed inside the courthouse. A black is lynched just outside the same

10 Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*. (New York, Random House, 2005), 169.

11 Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 169.

12 Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 170.

courthouse. Quite the opposite, in the plot of *The Colonel's Dream* there are no political meetings attended by Colonel French or any elections taking place.

In the classic book of African American literary theory, *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates refers to the African American "tropological revision…[which] recurs with surprising frequency."[13] Among these tropes is the vertical "ascent" up from the South to the North (again slave narratives following the North Star as well as the post WWI migration of millions of African Americans to the North).

In *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt's tropological revision of the slave narrative tradition as well as Tourgée's carpetbagger does indeed consist in the vertical ascent up from the South to the North. Chesnutt's revision is unusual, as the main protagonist, a white Southerner who used to "own" slaves, migrates North to escape Southern poverty of prospects twice. First, after the war which his army lost, Henry French goes north to New York to seek and acquire his fortune. His ascent is material, spiritual as well as intellectual. When he returns south, the original purpose of his "descent" was to "come back to his old home for a brief visit, to rest and to observe"[14] in Clarendon, North Carolina after his wife's death. His interest in his Southern roots is intensified because of a conversation with his boyhood playmate and slave, Peter French, which his family used to "own." Now a broken down old man, the innocuous ex-slave is the same age as the returning Colonel French. He is hired as a servant after being arrested for breaking a vagrancy law.

Eventually Colonel French resettles with his son in Clarendon and tries to develop its resources and its people, who have declined substantially since the war. Chesnutt's fantastic tropological revision really does not concern Colonel French, his white protagonist, but instead consists in the humble African American former slave, Peter French, who "ascends vertically." His ascent is not for a better life, but for a peaceful death. After he dies in a train accident while attempting to save the life of young Phil French (the Colonel's son), the Colonel arranges for his servant to be buried in the family plot, next to his own son. Because the cemetery is reserved for white people only, local racists exhume his body and place it near the Colonel's house after he fails to uphold the racial code of segregation in the South. The Colonel decides to rebury both his former slave and his son in the North.

Chesnutt's grotesque tropological revision of the "vertical ascent" to the north in *The Colonel's Dream* brings the ex-slave's migration North only after death. For the abysmal racism in the South follows this black man even into his grave when local racists exhume his body in order to uphold the southern code of segregation. Hence, Peter French's corpse ascends vertically in Chesnutt's revision.

Both Tourgée and Chesnutt demonstrate not only the polite and thoughtful heroes as educated professionals in their respective fields of endeavor, but also show the Southern "Regulators" to be poorly educated. Colonel Servosse receives this threatening letter:

> Colonel Comfort Servosse. Sir, - You hev got to leeve this country, and the quicker you do it the better; fer you ain't safe here, nor enny other miserable Yankee! You come here to put niggers over white folks, sayin ez how they should vote and set on juries and sware away white folks rites as much as they damm please. You

13 Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxv.

14 Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 78.

> are backin up this notion by a sellin of em land and hosses and mules, till they are gittin so big in ther boots they cant rest […][15]

Likewise, near the end of *The Colonel's Dream* the former Confederate office and hero of the novel receives a letter showing how the writer, ostensibly the leader of the mob engaged in this ghoulish deed of exhuming the remains of his faithful black servant, is barely literate:

> Kurnell French:
> Take notis. Berry yore ole nigger someware else. He can't stay in Oak Semitury. The majority of the white people of this town, who dident tend yore nigger funarl, woant have him there. Niggers by there selves, white peepul by there selves, and them that lives in our town must bide by our rules.[16]

Significantly for the plot, Tourgée's narrator presciently frames the Comfort Servosse's failure in reform from the start. Chesnutt however describes Colonel French's many difficulties with a constant illusion of hope that he may succeed, if not in his reform efforts, then at least within the romantic subplot (which nevertheless accompanies and is tightly linked with reform, as she and her enlightened Southern friends offer the Colonel strong alliances at difficult moments). All the more fervid is Colonel French's failure, which concludes not only with his failure at reform and in wooing a new wife, but also in the emotion-wrought death of his son and the black servant to whom he was quite close.

Revising Tourgée's "White Negro" in *The Quarry*

Hot Plowshares (1883), Tourgée's fifth novel which received neither critical interest nor popular acclaim, focuses on a young woman attending a private elite school for girls among very wealthy classmates in a small town in New York State. The conflict begins when Hilda Hargrove discovers that she is not pure Caucasian and then becomes despondent. Her teachers and fellow pupils react in a variety of ways about her ancestry, that she is allegedly "tainted" with some Negro blood. Tourgée offers a panorama of the racist thinking which finds expression among the "better" or supposedly more enlightened people of the North. After the initial response of horror, Hilda resolutely "bears the burden" of her mixed ancestry when concealed documents are found proving Hilda to be wholly Caucasian after all, enabling her to marry Martin Kortright, the longed-for lover with substantial wealth.

Chesnutt was critical of Tourgée's character Hilda responding to her erroneous understanding of her ancestry. In a letter to George Washington Cable dated June 13, 1890, Chesnutt gripes about the representations of black Americans in novels, and then directs some criticism toward Tourgée's *Hot Plowshares*:

15 Albion W. Tourgée, *A Fool's Errand*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 98.

16 Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 294.

Judge Tourgée's cultivated white negroes are always bewailing their fate, and cursing the drop of blood that "taints" – I hate the word, it implies corruption – their otherwise pure blood.[17]

While Chesnutt has a number of "white negroes" populating his stories and novels, none of them behave as Hilda Hargrove does in this sentimental novel. Only in one story, "A Matter of Principle" does Chesnutt come close to having a nearly white young African American express anything close to those sentiments – and they are stated once in the words of the omniscient narrator: "She was nearly white; she frankly confessed her sorrow that she was not entirely so."[18]

Chesnutt alters the gender and the predicament in the North for his "white negro" protagonist in *The Quarry* (completed in 1928, published posthumously 1999). The last protagonist penned by Chesnutt, Donald Seaton Glover is raised as a black after his adoptive white parents, the Seatons of Cleveland Ohio, reject him when as an infant he appears to possess physical appearances of a "negro." He is subsequently raised by a black family in the South whose means are limited but whose love and determination to get Donald Glover to help "uplift" the black race is insurmountable. Ambitious and brilliant, Glover eventually obtains a PhD degree from Columbia University where he engaged in "[…] discussions cover[ing] the whole field of race and race relations […]" with fictionalized intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Franz Boas who "[…] helped to fix Donald's determination to devote his life to the advancement of his people."[19]

Chesnutt's Donald Glover is in part a revision of the romantic subplot in Tourgee's *Hot Plowshares* which he had written grumblingly to Cable about in the letter cited earlier. When Donald learns that both his biological parents were white, he keeps this knowledge to himself. Without informing her of his ancestry, Donald marries Bertha Lawrence, the black daughter of an important Chicago church leader he had fallen in love with during his undergraduate days at Atlanta University. He senses "racial pride" in the African American construct he was raised in, since this community remained loyal to him, unlike the white community.

His first adoptive [white] family learns of Donald's background as a descendent of an esteemed family consisting of "a governor, a famous general in the [American] Revolution, college presidents, ministers, senators, authors […]" on the father's side and from "a noble but impoverished Sicilian family"[20] on his maternal side. Only then does Angus Seaton, a Scottish-American who had adopted and then abandoned Donald when he believed the baby was a light-skinned "white Negro," wish to "re-adopt" the protagonist, Donald Glover, as well as secure him financially. When he comes to inform him of his ancestry, Angus Seaton is described as welcoming Donald Glover "warmly, more warmly, Donald thought, than their previous acquaintance could account for."[21] Now that Donald is white, Seaton is so much friendlier!

17 Chesnutt, *Letters*, 66.

18 Charles W. Chesnutt, *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line,* William L. Andrews (ed.). (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000), 152.

19 Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Quarry*, McWilliams, Dean (ed.). (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 182.

20 Chesnutt, *The Quarry*, 259.

21 Chesnutt, *The Quarry*, 273.

Conclusion

Albion Tourgée influenced other writers besides Charles Chesnutt, but that influence was often like the response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's critics from the South with their anti-Tom novels; anti-carpetbagger novels by Thomas Dixon, for example, not only defended the Ku Klux Klan but celebrated their so-called defense of the white race and were well received by the public as evidenced by high sales. Chesnutt wrote a novel which served as a follow-up to *A Fool's Errand* by depicting the situation in North Carolina one decade after the plot of Tourgée's novel ended. By giving his hero the name "French" he alludes to both the ethnicity of the author Tourgée as well as that of Tourgée's hero Servosse. Chesnutt revised the common "tragic mulatto" trope of the "white negro" depicted by Tourgée (and other white novelists), the mulatto who despairs of her or his partial black ancestry. With the character Donald Glover, Charles Chesnutt places the black community in a better light than even Northern whites.

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