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Introduction

Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1997) once wrote: "Speaking of dialect, it is almost a despairing task to write it." His supposed frustration with the treatment of dialect, specifically the black plantation dialect of the 19th century, presents a view of Chesnutt's own treatment of written dialect in regards to lexical choices he made in his fiction. Within the constructs of 19th century America, Chesnutt's ability to employ black dialect as a metaphor for social change contrasts with his ambivalence in using traditional diction as a weapon to affect this transition. Many critics have postulated that the historical context of Chesnutt's time relegated him to the realm of Plantation Fiction, that is, a genre of framed narratives that glorified the pre-Civil War South and its fractured cultural values. Other critics herald Chesnutt as the founder of African-American fiction, arguing that he was forced by societal context to accomplish this goal through non-offensive lexical choices that nonetheless proved effective in creating an African-American opposition to a lesser caste status. My study examines how Chesnutt not only operated within a

sphere of literary racism, but that he further used his alleged "place" within this system to create a body of dialectal diction that actually subverted 19th century white values and stereotypes, even while he maintained his marketability to his predominately white readers. His juxtaposition of white and black dialects and lexical choices provide a framework for the very real cultural metaphor of white man as master and black man as servant.

Because no writer scribes words, but that he or she has a purpose, and that purpose relates to a chosen audience, all writers subscribe to this triad of composition devices. Diction, also known as lexical choice, may be defined as the words used by a writer to attain his or her purpose, or reason, for writing. Writers employ diction and purpose in regards to a specific, target audience. Accordingly, authors make lexical choices based on what they want the audience to glean from a text. This creates a rhetorical triad. Because this elemental triad does not occur in a vacuum, authors must maneuver within a historical context as well. For pioneering author Charles Chesnutt, this meant that he straddled a metaphorical line between his mixed African-American and white cultural roots and 19th century white America's non-acceptance of those roots. His works of fiction speak to his struggle as an author to use diction for a culturally relevant purpose and to relay that purpose to a society of mostly white readers in order to affect change. Through critical examination of lexical choices in one of Chesnutt's stories, "The

Deep Sleeper," my study will employ the works of fellow literary critics and linguists, as well as my own observations to analyze Chesnutt's dialectal features in the characters of Uncle Julius and the Narrator as they relate to diction, purpose, and audience within 19th century American societal castes.

Dialectal Accuracy in Relation to Purpose and Audience

In his book *Speaking of Dialect*, Erik Redling (2006) examines Chesnutt's use of dialect and its accuracy in depicting actual southern black dialect of the 19th century. Drawing on evidence presented by the linguistic studies of Charles Foster, who traced Chesnutt's dialect to its linguistic home of Fayetteville, North Carolina, Redling asserts the literary accuracy of the Uncle Julius character's dialect in Chesnutt's short stories. To Redling, this dialect represents not only a regional variation, but a caste variation as well. The importance of an accurate black dialect is notable in the reader's understanding of not only the Uncle Julius character, but also of Chesnutt's purpose in his character's lexical choices. Through contrasting literary and linguistic treatments of dialectal diction, Redling notes that: "literary approaches to dialect writing differ from linguistic approaches in that they tend to avoid a close phonetic investigation of dialect grapholects, but nevertheless, favor speech, especially black speech, as a carrier of preferred characteristics" (p. 26). So as I understand it, literary studies do not necessarily treat inaccurate dialect lexicon differently than accurate lexicon. To this end,

dialect and its lexical choices become metaphors for cultural traits. Julius' black dialect, then, becomes "an African-American cultural voice, or a black cultural language, which opposes and undermines the dominant white cultural voice or language" (p. 28). Redling further warns scholars not to ignore Chesnutt's lexical choices and thus focus only on the spoken dialect. He argues that spotlighting only spoken dialect leads literary critics to " predetermined and distorted readings of literature" (p. 29). Consequently, linguistic accuracy becomes paramount for a balanced understanding of Chesnutt's purpose of identifying caste variation and cultural differences within the historical context of 19th century America. I would further argue that Chesnutt's accurate, written diction lends credibility to his purpose of challenging racism within its historical context. By giving readers a story that contains diction pointing to marked cultural differences between former slaves and former masters, Chesnutt provided a poignant statement against these cultural conventions. As noted in Julius' word choice, the African-American cultural heritage differs greatly from that of whites. Examples of Julius' diction to prove this include "Marse" (Master) "spect'n fer ter ketch forty" (a slave would expect to be whipped extensively for running away). In concordance with this diction are the Narrator's lexical choices to this end: "served our family" (elite vs. working class conflict) "rod (legal unit of measurement insinuating education)" "Colonel Pemberton" (symbolic of authority and caste) "colored" (generic

reference). Diction is not an accident. Chesnutt precisely places words and phrases to affect his purpose on his audience, this purpose of course to affect change in the way that whites viewed former slaves within a caste system.

Dialectal Diction and Marketability Within Historical Context.

In her article "Reading, Race, and Charles Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius' Tales," Heather Gilligan (2007) discusses Chesnutt's use of dialectal diction within the plantation literature genre of the 19th century. Using several "Uncle Julius Tales" as examples and evidence, Gilligan asserts that these tales "challenge the epistemology of racism on its own terms" (p. 211). As an inversion of the societal tropes of the mid to late 1800s, the Uncle Julius character becomes an inversion of the supposedly "knowable black subject" that white readers had come to condescendingly enjoy. Here is where we can put Chesnutt's language and dialectal form into a function that challenges racial stereotypes through its treatment of sentimental language that was popular in the elite, primarily white-read magazines of the late 1800s. Gilligan supplements her argument with a dichotomy of black and white marketability. She analyzes Chesnutt's lexical choices in his stories through the filter of his marketability in both black and white reading markets. She defends Chesnutt's lexical choices as necessary to both entertain white readers while educating them on the plight of former slaves. In addition to this, I would assert that Chesnutt's lexical choices provided relevant

ideological hope to black readers, in a necessary non-white offensive style. I believe that the subtlety employed in Chesnutt's diction actually enabled him to get his message heard. To argue this point, I would add a few examples from the story "A Deep Sleeper." For instance, the Narrator in this story uses diction that is reminiscent of the white man's view of the plantation South, while Uncle Julius uses language that filters a slave's view of this culture. So here we have a white narrator and a former slave within the frame narrative. Table 1 explains and lists these examples as they relate to Chesnutt's purpose.

Table 1

Comparison/Contrast of 19th Century Southern Black Dialect with Standard American "White" English in Historical Context Using Diction from "A Deep Sleeper"

	Black Dialect (Uncle Julius)		*Standard "White" English (Narrator)*	
Comment		**Author's purpose (Character)**		**Author's purpose (Narrator)**
Caste System	" po' w'ite trash…none too good fer ter steal."	Distaste, distancing from this caste	"poor whites…listless race…product of a system…they did not know enough to resist."	Indifference and non-distinction from black caste
Literacy	"Hit ain' my fault dat I ain't able ter read de Bible."	Literacy not allowed by society	"Could you give me chapter and verse"	Expectation of literacy in society
Cultural Background	"Marse" "nigger" "spect'n fer ter ketch forty"	Denotes assumed inferiority and fear of authority	"served our family" "rod" "Colonel Pemberton" "colored"	Denotes assumed superiority, authority, education

Diction as Subversion in Character Development

Another critic who places Charles Chesnutt in a position of language puppet master is Tynes Cowan in a critical essay, "Charles Waddell Chesnutt and Joel Chandler Harris: An Anxiety of Influence (1999)." Citing differences in language use and purpose between Chesnutt and Harris, Cowan analyzes Chesnutt's development of his Uncle Julius character and how the character embodies Chesnutt's literary purpose of using subversive language to highlight public awareness of caste variation that existed in American during the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact, Cowan asserts that before Chesnutt, "we viewed the plantation Negro from every side but his own, which is here [Chesnutt's writing] shown in a manner that furnishes evidence of its truthfulness" (p. 234). While acknowledging the Uncle Julius character as similar to Harris' Uncle Remus, Cowan challenges the stereotyped "Black Sambo Mask" that plantation literature forces these characters to wear. In contrast, Cowan asserts that Chesnutt's Uncle Julius is a truthful, historical example of how "slaves learned to turn the Sambo character on and off to manipulate whites by giving them what they wanted on a surface level" (while granting no concessions on deeper, symbolic levels) (p. 237). Chesnutt uses dialectal diction in the characterization of Uncle Julius not as a concession to white readers' expectations, but as a rhetorical device to play on [19th century]white readers' "love of closure and determinate meaning" (p. 239).

Therefore, I believe that Cowan suggests that "Chesnutt's form was an attempt to wrest black from white writers the black cultural form: the story told in black dialect" (p. 244). When we look at the Uncle Julius tales in this light, we see that Chesnutt employed dialect to challenge color barriers of his time. In "A Deep Sleeper," we see examples of this precisely chosen diction in both the Uncle Julius and Narrator characters. Uncle Julius uses an alleged arthritic affliction to play on the white narrator's interest in "drawing out the colored people" and their stories. He then seizes the opportunity to manipulate the narrator's condescending interest and use it as a diversion. In this exchange, Chesnutt takes the typical plantation narrative and gives it an authentic black viewpoint, complete with realistic dialectal diction: "…it's dat mis'able rheumatiz. It ketches me now an' den in de 'lef knee…I doan' b'lieve I kin roll dat w'eelborrow out ter de watermillun-patch en' back." Upon reading the story, the critic sees that Chesnutt's contextual diction clearly points to a well-placed ruse perpetuated by Julius upon the Narrator. To do this, Julius uses black dialect to oppose predetermined white views of slave stories. So, we can see how Chesnutt uses an exact pattern of lexical choices to affect a deeper meaning than the one expected by white readers.

Lexical Choice and Post-Reconstruction American Expectations

Literary critic Stephen Knadler (1996), in his essay "Untragic Mulatto: Charles Chesnutt and the Discourse of Whiteness," provides a consistent theory for

Chesnutt's lexical choices. While acknowledging Chesnutt's desire to persuade his readers' to accept the flux of racial change in America, Knadler grants that: "while in post-reconstruction America sympathetic and liberal whites for the first time permitted the Negro to speak on the race question, they insisted that these native informants recount the 'correct' experience of the African-American community, one that did not upset the white folks' comfort in their sense of self" (p. 431). So, in creating the dialectal language used by the Uncle Julius character, Chesnutt accounts for the necessity of language diplomacy, which becomes paramount to understanding how he used dialectal language to create a separate black cultural identity in the "whiteness" of 19th century American society. The crux of this argument comes from a characterization of Chesnutt himself: "Neither a proponent of accomodationism nor of black nationalism, Chesnutt viewed both black and white identities as contingent historical constructs that had, within the logic of capitalist exchange, been refied as biological facts"(p. 444). Chesnutt's own genetic experience contributes to his unique position in this time period. One could further argue that because he was both black and white, Chesnutt could, better than others, capture the spirit of race relations in flux at the turn of the 19th century. The authenticity of the diction may be seen further in Uncle Julius' characterization of poor Southern whites: "" po' w'ite trash…none too good fer ter steal." By equating poor whites as thieves and trash, Julius seeks to distance

himself from them. This diction also signifies Chesnutt's belief in the equality of race. In his view, a society can hold poor and wealthy of both ethnicities. Also through the Narrator's words, Chesnutt seeks opposition to the racial tropes of post-reconstruction America: "this listless race [poor whites]…were [like Julius] a product of a system which they had not created and which they did not know enough to resist." The Narrator's words echo the sentiment of many educated whites during post-reconstruction. By analyzing Chesnutt's choice of words from both Julius' and the Narrator's perspectives, we see a conflict between Chesnutt's vision of racial equality and the harsh reality of racist America. Table 1 identifies these comments.

Conclusion

Charles Chesnutt proved himself a formidable voice for African-American culture and heritage during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition, he placed racial equality on the discussion table, envisioning both blacks and whites to have equal representation. Criticized by some scholars for being too accommodating to his white readers, Chesnutt has been underrepresented in mainstream dialectal analysis as both a harbinger of change and as the founder of authentic African-American fiction. Through analysis of his lexical choices within their historical context, however, the argument stands that he did indeed perform those duties to the greatest extent – not of his ability but of society's allowance. So, in his

traditional literary language, Charles Chesnutt enabled a social transition in America -- one that continues to influence readers today.

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