



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

PhD Dissertation
Signifying in the Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt
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Christopher Koy's dissertation aims to "produce a new and meaningful interpretation of the fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt by both recognizing and analyzing the intertextual context in which he composed his writings" (9). After a brief discussion of intertextuality, particularly Gates's theory of Signifyin(g), and an informed overview of available Chesnutt criticism, Koy establishes connections between Chesnutt's short stories and the fiction of Ovid, Apuleius, Thackeray, Scott, Cable and Tourgée. On the whole, the dissertation is well-researched, persuasively argued and clearly written; its greatest strengths lie in the sharp close-reading of the chosen primary texts. I recommend it for the defense without reservation, although not without some questions.

To start with, the dissertation could have discussed intertextuality and Gates's Signifyin(g) in more detail. Koy aims to "explore selections of Chesnutt's literary production by applying the Gatesian theory of signifying at length" (15), but while Gates emphasizes the specificity of African-American Signifyin(g), Koy for the most part resorts to the term "signifying." Why? Koy's understanding of Signifyin(g) also seems broader, or at least the critical edge of Gates's theory seems blunted, because Koy continually returns to "influence" (e.g. "Ovidian influence" on p. 51 or Cable's influence on p. 147) and "resemblance" (e.g. the similarity between the "miserable fate" of Rebecca from *Ivanhoe* and Rena's "mortal end" in *The House behind the Cedars* [94]). My understanding of Gates's theory is that black writers *actively* Signify on others, and that especially in relation to white writers, their engagement would be largely "motivated" (i.e. critical). The dissertation places passive influence and unmotivated Signifyin(g) more at the center. And the reason is not always clear. For example, in the first chapter, why is Chesnutt's "Lonesome Ben" a "story of multiple unmotivated signifying" (46), presumably on Ovid (?), and "motivated signifying" (49) on Shakespeare? Elsewhere, it is argued that "[s]tylistically, Chesnutt emulates Thackeray, especially in his so-called northern 'Blue Vein Society' stories, and his letters appear to share much in style with Thackeray as well" (115) and the fact that "Amelia weds Dobbin and Ryder re-marries 'Liza Jane [is considered] an example of Chesnutt's unmotivated signifying" (138). But would not these repetitions be a part of the process of Chesnutt's revision? Also, what about irony?

The second question is the choice of Chesnutt's literary kin. Koy relies on textual analysis at times supplemented with evidence of the author's intention, which comes largely from Chesnutt's library and his journal. It is argued that "Chesnutt sedulously read the classics of Western thought and many works he read in the original Latin, German and French (13) but that he did not read African-American fiction; thus "as to those novels and short stories published in his lifetime, none show influence of the minor African American fiction writers who preceded him" (197). Gates is again cited as evidence—yet Gates himself also hints at the anxiety with which Chesnutt tried to avoid his fellow African-Americans. Is there really no ground for establishing intertextual relations between Chesnutt and the fiction of Paul L.



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Dunbar, Pauline Hopkins, or Frances Harper? Certainly critics have established connections with the gothic, with Twain, Chopin (?), or James (given Chesnutt's determination to produce a "psychological study a la Henry James"). My intention is not to dispute the validity of the choices made in the dissertation, but rather to ask for a reflection on these choices and on the consequences of placing Chesnutt in this particular Anglo-American white male tradition. Ultimately, though, again without intending to question the validity of the approach, one is tempted to ask what Chesnutt would have thought about Signifyin(g), given the fact that he accused his contemporary Harry S. Edwards of plagiarising Chesnutt's story "How Dadsy Came Through" in his "How Sal Came Through," which perhaps suggests that Chesnutt himself did not rejoice in mimicry and parody (?).

It is argued that Chesnutt in his "Blue Vein Stories" undermines "the expectations of the societal conditions which he himself had help [sic] to cultivate among the upper crust African American crowd" (139). What explanations are there for this inconsistency?

Finally, there are occasional typographical errors, which I point out just in case the text were to be revised for further publication: p. 14 roll → role; p. 29 paper → dissertation; p. 69 Klu Klux Klan → Ku Klux Klan; p. 131 eduification → edification; p. 150 1989 → ???; p. 172 he captured at → he was captured at; p. 173 to would Raoul's left cheek → to wound; p. 200 dedicated to to manner → dedicated to

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