

***The Colonel's Dream* and Charles Chesnutt's Afrofuturist Vision of a Utopian South**

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Abstract: This essay reads Charles Chesnutt's final published novel *The Colonel's Dream* as an early work of Afrofuturism because of its speculation of the South as the site of a possible utopia for African Americans. The novel's protagonist, Colonel Henry French, dreams of creating a capitalist utopia in his hometown of Clarendon, North Carolina, where both white Americans and African Americans who are eugenically fit can rise both socially and economically. However, in the end, the Colonel's dream fails because he finds that the South has not progressed from the psychological hold that racism has on the mindset of white southerners.

African American literature and culture is replete with utopian ideas and images as black people in the New World have continued to search for a "good place" where they could escape from the physical bondage, socioeconomic limitations, and brutal violence to which they have been historically subjected, ideas which are reflected in the literary tradition of Afrofuturism. In the antebellum period, the North was figured as a utopian space, but this idea was destroyed with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. At that point, the potential African American utopia necessarily shifted to places outside of the confines of the United States such as Canada or Europe. Very rarely has the South figured in these utopian longings, as the South was figured instead as a dystopian space, a nightmarish environment from which African

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Americans fled either through organized flight such as the Underground Railroad in the antebellum period or the more informal yet wider-scale escape that occurred in the early-to-mid-twentieth century that has been called the Great Migration. The few texts, such as Sutton E. Griggs's radical novel *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), which imagines the creation of a southern empire formed by black male radicals, portray a vastly different South as a potential utopian space.

Therefore, African American writer Charles Chesnut's decision to situate his novel *The Colonel's Dream*, published in 1905, in the South and consider the possibility of this region as an African American utopian space is a striking and forward-thinking act, one that is decidedly Afrofuturist. Indeed, Chesnut is often mentioned as an important early voice in this artistic tradition. In her essay "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," in which she traces the development of Afrofuturism, Lisa Yaszek relates that Afrofuturism spawned from the development of science fiction in the nineteenth century. She notes that "Afrofuturist stories also begin to appear in this period, and, more often than not, were also written by respectable mainstream writers including African Americans Martin Delany, Charles Chesnut, and Edward Johnson... Chesnut's 1887 short story 'The Goophered Grapevine' combines elements of gothic and trickster narratives to examine the relations of northern whites and southern blacks"(44). Despite acknowledgement by Yaszek and other scholars of Chesnut's place in the development of Afrofuturism, in-depth analysis of the Afrofuturist elements present in his writings has not been given enough scholarly attention.

Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to do just that, for it is important to explore how one of the earliest writers in the genre of Afrofuturist literature set up themes and ideas that would later influence other writers in the tradition. However, instead of analyzing Chesnut's

Conjure tales, I would like to focus attention on his final published novel, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), for two reasons. The first is because *The Colonel's Dream* is never mentioned when scholars discuss Chesnut as an Afrofuturist writer though it bears many markers of this literary tradition. Furthermore, reading the novel through this lens both gives credit to Chesnut's vision in the text and helps to broaden our horizons of what Afrofuturism is. I argue that we can read *Colonel's Dream* as Afrofuturist because of his attempt at utopian world-building, a common theme found in Afrofuturist literature as writers envision ways out of the dystopian reality that has often characterized life for African Americans. Chesnut's novel relates the attempt of its protagonist, Colonel French, to create a New South as a site for an African American utopia. In the end, however, this utopian dream turns into a dystopian nightmare because the Colonel overestimates that the South has progressed enough socially and psychologically from the history of slavery to freely imbibe in French's vision.

It may seem surprising on the surface to read *The Colonel's Dream* as Afrofuturist, because it does not bear many of the more obvious markers of the literary tradition, as some scholars of Afrofuturism have focused on its connections to science fiction. For instance, Mark Dery, who is credited with inventing the term Afrofuturism, defines it as "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically-enhanced future" (180). Thus the texts that have been largely viewed as Afrofuturist heretofore are those that contain science-fiction conventions such as time travel, robots, aliens, and space ships, as featured in the writings of late twentieth-century and twenty-first century texts authors such as Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, Nalo Hopkinson, and Steven Barnes. However, these works did not develop in a vacuum, and

more recently critics of Afrofuturism have started looking back to search for the roots of Afrofuturism in earlier African American literary works and have also expanded our ideas of what the tradition is. In *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack explores the diversity of Afrofuturism's modes of expression, stating that it "combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs" (9). In addition, Isiah Lavender very astutely reads Zora Neale Hurston's classic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) as "an Afrofuturist romance" even though "most scholars believe that Afrofuturism only concerns black uses for technology" (214). He argues that the novel is Afrofuturist because Hurston "directly taps into black people's desire for a better life and a better future. She therefore provides an essential psychic drive to resist oppression—which is essential to Afrofuturism" (214). Other critics have seen the writings of Sutton E. Griggs (*Imperium in Imperio*) and Martin Delany (*Blake, or The Huts of America*), which also do not display overt science fiction conventions, as early exemplars of the Afrofuturist tradition, especially as these authors use their writings to speculate upon alternative utopian worlds for African Americans.

Thus, while *The Colonel's Dream* also does not focus heavily on science fiction conventions like space ships and robots, it does, like other early Afrofuturist texts, speculate upon the possibility of alternative worlds for African Americans. In fact, Chesnutt positions the novel as a speculative vision of a New South as the site of a possible African American utopia. Colonel French dreams to create a utopian South that is a combination of the best elements of the southern past with the optimism of the future, a New South in which both eugenically-fit white Americans and African Americans, or "New Negroes," can rise on the social and economic hierarchies and live up to their full biological potentials. However, ultimately the Colonel's

utopian dream fails because the South has not progressed enough socially and psychologically from the legacy of slavery to freely create this new world of African American empowerment. At the end of the novel, then, Colonel French becomes an alienated figure who is both out of time and out of place in his contemporary American existence, causing him to flee the South to settle in the more socially and economically progressive and promising North.

There are, as mentioned above, literary precedents for Chesnutt's vision of a utopian South such as Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899). However, Grigg's novel offers a more revolutionary vision of what this new southern landscape would look like, as his characters intend to secede from the larger United States and form an African American nation located in states of Louisiana and Texas. Therefore, Charles Chesnutt's decision to situate his novel *The Colonel's Dream* in the South as it really was during his time and still consider the possibility of this region as an African American utopian space is a striking and forward-thinking act. At the same time, however, Chesnutt's novel critiques how contemporary white southerners' nostalgia for the past as well as their investment in white racial superiority undercuts the potential of the South as a utopian space for African Americans, justifying why so many of his compatriots were leaving the South to move to the North. These competing impulses in the text make it what Chris Ferns describes in *Narrating Utopia* as a "meta-utopia," a work that "notwithstanding the authoritarian character of [its] imaginary sociopolitical [structure, is] designedly open to multiple and contradictory readings" (9).

This idea of multiple and contradictory readings of the utopian intentions in Chesnutt's text is best embodied in the novel's protagonist, Colonel Henry French, whose dreams of reforming his hometown of Clarendon, North Carolina, form the core of the novel. As a character, Colonel French is something of an anomaly, as he combines more positive elements of

the southern past and its emphasis upon communal interdependence with the more modern and progressive thought processes that have derived from the Colonel's experiences as a businessman in the more industrialized and capitalistic North. In the novel, Chesnutt questions what type of environmental changes would need to occur to create his Afrofuturist vision of the South as a place for African American social, economic, and political growth. The Colonel attempts to revitalize Clarendon into what essentially would become a capitalist utopia where, because their labor is essential to the economic underpinnings of this proposed society, African Americans would be freed from the shackles of racism that constricted them in the Jim Crow South, a vision that ultimately fails.

A common feature that recurs in Afrofuturist literature is the motif of the journey. The tradition is replete with stories where journeys involve movements in both place and time such as those made by characters in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Octavia Butler's *Parable* novel series, both works considered classics in the tradition. This motif is similarly depicted in *The Colonel's Dream*, as the novel begins with the relocation of Colonel French and his son Phil from the North, where Colonel French had been living after the end of the Civil War, to his North Carolina hometown. As he is on the train headed south, French feels "as one might feel who, after a long sojourn in an alien land, at last takes ship for home" (Chesnutt 16). Chesnutt's description of Colonel French's feelings at this moment also picks up another theme commonly found in Afrofuturist literature: alienation. As a Southerner, French feels like an alien during his time in the North and that his journey to his home in North Carolina is a return home. In fact, French reads the landscape he views during his train ride as a pastoral utopia, an Edenic environment that offers him a refuge from the stress and illness he and his son experience in their

northern lives. Yet the South he views is read through the lens of what he remembers of his boyhood there, a nostalgic dream world that belies its contemporary, dystopian reality.

Colonel French first comes to an awareness of the inherent problems with his initial visions of the South as a pastoral utopia when he meets up with Peter, his former slave, who has been physically broken by overwork in the turpentine industry after being freed from slavery. French ignores his own role in the ignoble way Peter's life has turned out, instead rationalizing that Peter is a man out of time, a relic of the southern past who does not fit in with the modern world. Ironically, in his rationalization, the Colonel feels that emancipation freed him but in a sense only further oppressed Peter because of Peter's biological unfitness for this new modern world:

Had Peter remained a slave, then the colonel would have remained a master, which was only another form of slavery. The colonel had been emancipated by the same token that had made Peter free. Peter had returned home poor and broken, not because he had been free, but because nature first, and society next, in distributing their gifts, had been niggardly with old Peter. Had he been better equipped, or had a better chance, he might have made a better showing. The colonel had prospered because, having no Peters to work for him, he had been compelled to work for himself. (Chesnutt 32-33)

The Colonel displays eugenicist thinking, as he configures himself as biologically superior to Peter and thus physically and mentally better able to adjust to the post-slavery world of the South than his former slave. Additionally, the Colonel's thoughts also illustrate his capitalist ethics and beliefs, for he feels that the agrarian feudal system of southern slavery ensnared the white slave

owner so he too in a sense was a slave because he was beholden to care for the slaves that toiled for him. In the colonel's mind, the capitalist system of the North, as the system where white men like him had to work for themselves in order to profit, was vital to his success. Viewing Peter's devolution as a result of Peter being freed from slavery without the biological constitution to make freedom work to his benefit helps lead to the Colonel's eventual decision to infuse a capitalist viewpoint in the town. In his opinion, Clarendon has been lagging behind in time. Through the Colonel's thinking, Chesnutt makes the point that the South is in essence pre-modern and stuck in a time warp. The Colonel's journey to the South can be read as a trip back in time, another convention often found in Afrofuturist literature. Clarendon is depicted in the novel as physically existing in the modern world yet its inhabitants are still living an essentially pre-Civil War existence. It has been unable to engage in the modern American capitalist enterprise centered in the North, the Colonel believes, because the town's inhabitants are unmotivated to work. French, thus, thinks that capitalism can free both the white man and the black man in a way that he had been himself freed from the hold that the southern agrarian feudal system of slavery also had upon him until he moved North.

French, then, intends to create Clarendon as a capitalist utopia, one that would serve to uplift both the black and white races. To do so, he plans to revitalize the local cotton mill industry and "to shake up this lethargic community; to put its people to work, and to teach them habits of industry, efficiency and thrift. This, he imagined, would be pleasant occupation for his vacation, as well as a true missionary enterprise—a contribution to human progress" (Chesnutt 109). He, thus, plans to move the town forward in time by making it adhere to the modern, progressive ideas of the North.

Part of his plan of bringing the town into the future includes supporting the local schools, including the one for African American children, and building a public library. He envisions “A public library . . . housed in a beautiful building, in a conspicuous place, and decorated in an artistic manner—a shrine of intellect and taste, at which all the people, rich and poor, black and white, may worship” (Chesnutt 166). Thus the African Americans of Clarendon, through his generosity and liberality of spirit, would avoid the fate of his former slave Peter, and instead become “New Negroes,” in line with the ideologies espoused by contemporary African American intellectuals such as Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois. In addition, to ensure the educational progression of African Americans, he also attempts to provide for their economic growth by hiring black workers at the cotton mill at the same wages as his white workers. He also eventually replaces the white foreman with an African American man whom he feels will better guarantee the mill’s success, stirring up the resentment of the Clarendon’s white population, especially those who work at the mill. But the Colonel feels justified in his actions because capitalism demanded good workers, including those of all races, and hiring good workers was necessary to creating his capitalist utopia. In response to the white townspeople’s objections to his hiring of black workers under these fairer conditions, he thinks to himself in the novel:

These people have got to learn that we live in an industrial age, and success demands of an employer that he utilize the most available labour. . . . every dog must have his day, so give the Negro his. . . . Matters of feeling were all well enough in some respects—no one valued more highly than the colonel the right to choose his own associates—but the right

to work and to do one's best work was fundamental, as was the right to have one's work done by those who could do it best. (Chesnutt 195)

Thus, Colonel French's mindset are indicative of Chesnutt's Afrofuturist vision of how capitalism could potentially lead to the upward social, economic, and educational mobility of African Americans. For Chesnutt, if the white South would truly commit to moving to a capitalist state and get rid of the vestiges of the South's feudal, agricultural past that mired it in racist socioeconomic oppression of African Americans, it truly could become the "New South." However, the Colonel also represents Chesnutt's commentary on why this ideology is failing the South.

For, despite the Colonel's ostensibly good intentions, scholar Wiley Cash describes Colonel French as a "liberal racist who, under the cause of empathy and white paternalism, tries to better the lives of black people in Clarendon through a form of liberal racism inherent to the construction of the New South" (24). Cash's description of French is an accurate one. His progressive vision of the South as a potential capitalist utopia, where all can thrive through the cooperative energies of labor to ensure economic prosperity, influenced by the time he spent in the North, is undercut by his feelings of racial and class superiority, influenced by his Southern past. Thus, the novel then becomes social science fiction, as Chesnutt shows the ways in which the views of the Colonel, and "New Southerners" like him, are startlingly eugenicist and social Darwinist.

This is best illustrated through Chesnutt's depiction of the antagonistic relationship French develops with Mr. Feters. Feters is a poor white man who uses the wealth he gained after the Civil War to economically exploit the townspeople. He has in effect reinstated slavery

as an economic system in Clarendon by taking advantage of the convict labor system to trap African Americans into working for him. In his essay “Peonage, or the New Slavery,” published in 1904, a year before the appearance of *The Colonel’s Dream*, Chesnutt discusses how slavery has recurred as a socioeconomic system in the postbellum south. He writes, “at the worst the Southern labor system presents peonage, or the new slavery. The old habit of making the Negro work for the white people for their board and clothes has in large measure survived” (395). In addition to trapping African Americans into peonage, Feters also loans money to Clarendon’s whites at such outrageous interest rates that they become indebted to him. Through these machinations, Feters controls a good portion of both the black and white population of Clarendon. Colonel French views Feters as a eugenically unfit poor white man who exploits others through his wealth. In the Colonel’s mind, Feters has made Clarendon a dystopia that allows him to exploit and dehumanize the population.

French conceives of his proposed capitalist utopia as the best way to fight against Feters’ hold on the town. Yet the Colonel is blind to how he too has exploited others as well as his antagonistic, eugenicist attitude toward Feters. French himself similarly participates in the trafficking of African Americans when he buys his former slave Peter and another black man, Bud Johnson, who is one of Feters’ laborers, to oppose Feters. Though his efforts are more altruistic than Feters’, French too participates in a socioeconomic system that mirrors antebellum slavery.

Additionally, the Colonel’s progressive ideas are not actually built upon a true desire for African American equality but rather upon his nostalgic paternalistic views of white southerners’ obligations to take care of their former slaves. He demonstrates this thinking in a conversation he has with his white peers about the future of the African American race. When Doctor Price

asserts his eugenicist viewpoint that African Americans, being a weak race, are doomed to extinction, gleefully looking forward to a day when they will no longer be a problem for the southern white man, French reveals the real reasons behind his desires to improve the lot of African Americans:

I am rather inclined to think that these people have a future; that there is a place for them here. . . . they will not disappear from our midst for many generations, if ever; and that in the meantime, as we make or mar them, we shall make or mar our civilisation. . . . I think our land would have been far happier had none but white men ever set foot upon it after the red men were driven back. But they are here. . . and they should have their chance—at least some chance. (168-169)

In the Colonel's imagination, the future capitalist utopian South is one where not only African Americans are present, but also where they are given a fair "chance" at life. In an effort to ensure this, the Colonel plans to build both a school for African American students and a public library that African Americans can use. He also intends to hire blacks to work in his mill and pay them the same wages as the white mill workers. For the Colonel, the uplifting of the African American race is a necessary aspect of the growth of the capitalistic New South, as it will ensure a better labor market for businessman like himself. His words reveal, therefore, that he has no inherent desire that African Americans should have equal civil rights because it is a moral necessity, but rather because it is, in his mind, an economic one.

Thus yet again through his depiction of the Colonel's dream Chesnutt shows how the proponents of the New South and their ideas of the "racelessness" of the New South is a false

one. As Matthew Wilson writes in his study *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles Chesnutt*, “New South ideologues, proponents of southern economic development in this period, would have had Americans believe that the South had cast off its past and that the status of the former slaves presented no insuperable regional or national problem. Chesnutt wanted to demonstrate through his protagonist, Colonel Henry French, that the past was inescapable in the New South” (152-53). Writers such as Henry Grady, the newspaper editor known as the “Spokesman of the New South” (Grem, “Henry W. Grady”) promoted the idea that the postbellum South would rise from the ashes of the Civil War to become a modern, industrialized region. Yet southerners, even those who saw themselves as progressives like Colonel French, still hesitated to throw off their racist attitudes about African Americans to make this utopian dream come true.

At the close of the novel, the war between north and south, progression and regression, capitalism and agrarian feudalism, and utopian dream and dystopian reality comes to a head when the Colonel attempts to bury Peter in the town’s white cemetery to fulfill his son Phil’s dying request. An anonymous “Cummittity” digs up Peter’s coffin and deposits the coffin on the front porch of his house. The committee advises him in a note written on the coffin’s lid to bury his “ole nigger somewhar else. Niggers by there selves, white peepul by there selves, and them that lives in our time must bide by our rules” (294). Though the grammar and spelling mistakes made by the letter writer lead the reader to infer that the “Cummittity” is made up of lower-class, poorly educated whites, whom the Colonel previously would not have been afraid of, this act makes him realize that he is fighting against larger forces than merely economic ones. In a conversation with his fiancée Laura Treadwell, he describes the problematic dynamics that subvert change in the South. Even the “good” southerners participate in the oppression of African Americans: as he tells Laura, “The best people. . . are an abstraction. When any deviltry

is on foot they are never there to prevent it—they vanish into thin air at its approach. When it is done, they excuse it; and they make no effort to punish it. . . My dream of usefulness is over. Tonight I take away my dead and shake the dust of Clarendon from my feet forever” (297). As the lone white southerner in his town who is willing to go against the racist mob mentality of the South in order for the end result of revitalizing Clarendon’s socioeconomic situation, he is yet again an alien. He comes to understand that he is both out of place and out of time in the South, and he must return to the North to escape the failed utopian space that he has created.

In the end, Colonel French as a character is an oxymoronic and at times conflicting one. Upon finishing the novel, the reader is left questioning why Chesnut uses him as the protagonist of *The Colonel’s Dream* and the central figure in his proposed idea of the South as a potential utopian site for African Americans. One answer to this question is that it illustrates how the power of Old South thinking will doom the quest of the New South to revitalize itself as a capitalist utopian enterprise if the South fails to rid itself of its ideas of white racial superiority. While French’s progressive capitalistic viewpoint could have potentially led to a better existence for all people, black and white, men and women, southerners, including French himself, were too invested in their romantic attachment to the South’s feudal past and white supremacist ideas for this dream to succeed. In a sense, Chesnut’s choice to write the novel from the perspective of an aristocratic Southern white male is itself an Afrofuturist act, as he forecasts an audience that would be receptive to his visions about how to revise and revitalize the South. Unfortunately, his Afrofuturist fantasy also failed as *The Colonel’s Dream* did not get the positive critical reception his previous writings did, causing him to abandon his career as a fiction writer. Thus, the world lost one of its most creative and visionary voices in the fight for the social, political, educational, and economic rights of African Americans.

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