

Literature/Fall

Abstract:

Charles Chesnutt is a late 19th early 20th century Southern author who pushes the boundaries of race in literature. Because his literary career was short lived in that he only published during the years 1887-1905, much is still left to be discovered about both his writings, and the author himself. Visiting the collection at Fisk University would allow me to study original manuscripts as well as unpublished scrapbooks and other personal materials, adding historical context to the literature that Chesnutt produced in the Jim Crow South. Examining materials in the archive would help me learn about why Chesnutt identified as a “voluntary Negro” and about his ideas concerning race relations during this time. Having this kind of historical grounding would help me see how he was able to relay serious issues of slavery and race through characters like Uncle Julius in his *Conjure Tales*, a creative act that aimed unflinching criticism at his primarily white readership. In preparation for my senior thesis on Chesnutt I hope to investigate how—and why—he achieves this feat, an investigation that I can launch only at the Fisk archives since they house materials I cannot otherwise access.

Description of Research:

This semester I am conducting an independent study on the writing of Charles Chesnutt, an important figure in the American literary canon whose most successful works were published between the late 1880s and early 1900s (Hobson 335). I first learned about Chesnutt’s work in a Southern Literature course here at UNC Asheville and am grateful to be able to extend my study of his work by way of my current independent study. Considering both Chesnutt’s life and writing pushes researchers to examine the shifting boundaries between black and white, continually questioning where these lines of demarcation begin and end; I plan to address similar questions during my research (Simmons 143). This semester I am reading two of his short collections, three of his novels, and multiple scholarly sources that focus on his work. Next semester I will continue my focus on Chesnutt by writing my senior thesis on one of his works.

When I wrote my proposal for this semester’s project on Chesnutt, I learned that Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee houses a Chesnutt archive that contains many unpublished pieces of fiction, essays, and photographs. I have contacted staff at Fisk’s Special Collections, verified the contents of their holdings, and reserved two archival research days in December if I am funded to travel there.

Chesnutt, though not new on the literary scene, is also not the most researched author in Southern studies. Fisk University in Nashville, TN is one of the very few places in America with an archived collection of original Chesnutt material. Their holdings are essentially a gold-mine of unpublished private material including personal journals, as well as original manuscripts to many of his short stories and novels. With access to these materials, I will be able to piece together the writing process that Chesnutt went through, as well as gain contextual knowledge of the time period between the late 1880s up until his death in the early 1930s. Learning about his perspective will give me insight to the overarching themes of his work. More specifically, during my readings of Chesnutt’s work, I have noticed an extended metaphor that he uses vines to tie not only the southern landscape to the events of slavery, but also to represent a tangled mess of race relations during the Jim Crow era. This metaphor is especially prominent in his story, “The Dumb Witness.” Notably, it was also the only story in *The Conjure Woman* to not be published on its own (Stephens 67). With access to Fisk University’s archives, I will be able to examine unpublished materials in which Chesnutt discusses those race relations to provide the kind of historical context needed to make a convincing literary argument about the metaphors Chesnutt employs to comment on the state of race relations in the South around the turn of the century.

If awarded this funding, I am especially looking forward to Boxes 6 through 11 because these contain original manuscripts to published and unpublished materials on some of the works that I will be reading during the course of my independent study. I am also really interested in Boxes 15 and 16, which

contain many miscellaneous items including information on Mark Twain's birthday party in which Chesnutt was invited.

Methodology:

Having obtained the Charles Chesnutt Collection Survey that contains the information of what is in each box of the collection (there are sixteen boxes total) from Mr. Jason Harrison, I plan to map out a plan of which boxes to focus on each day. Beginning with Chesnutt's unpublished works in Box 7 and gradually moving through the remainder of the manuscripts through Box 11(Brodhead 172). I will take copious notes, as well as photocopy the documents I plan to take back to UNCA to use for my research.

Time Period:

Due to the distance that I will need to travel, I have allotted three days for my research. On Wednesday, December 12th, I plan to drive to Nashville which is roughly five hours away from Asheville. When I arrive, I will check into my hotel and set up my materials that I need to take notes with while at Fisk the following two days. On December 13th is when I plan to do most of my research, as the Special Collections is only open between 9 am and 4 pm during the week. On the 14th I will finish my research, making final notes and revisit documents from the previous day, leaving Nashville by the early afternoon. These dates have been approved and confirmed by Fisk University Library Administrative Assistant to the Dean of the Library, Jason Harrison.

Publication and Presentation:

After conducting this research I would like to not only present my findings at the Undergraduate Research Symposium in the Spring of 2013, but also submit my research for publication in the UNCA Journal of Undergraduate Research.

Budget:

Amount:

\$183.75

\$200.00

\$116.25

Total:

\$500

Rationale:

Cost of two nights stay at the Alexis Inn and Suites in Nashville

Gas money for driving from Asheville, NC to Nashville, TN, a total travel distance (round trip) of 600 miles according to Mapquest, at a rate of \$0.30 per mile

Cost of 3 days worth of meals at \$38.75/day

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