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### Valerie B. Edmonds Student Research Award 2010

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#### Project Information

Course number and title of course for which project was completed (if applicable):

English 357 - Literature of the South to 1900

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Title of Project:

Thomas Nelson Page's Cultural Theft: "Marse Chan" and "Meh Lady" as Blackface Performance

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*(Attach a separate sheet if needed for any additional applicants.)*

## Project Abstract

This paper will examine the use of what I call literary blackface in late nineteenth-century local color author Thomas Nelson Page's short stories. Page, a white author, assumes the narrative voice of ex-slaves in his works "Marse Chan" and "Meh Lady." By relinquishing narrative control to black characters, however, Page does not empower the black voice. Rather, he uses it merely to reinforce Southern white aristocratic values. Thus, Page engages in symbolic blackface in order not only to perpetuate negative stereotypes about blacks, but to defend the Southern code to skeptical Northern readers and ultimately promote white supremacy.

## Research Strategies

Research allowed me to turn this project from a simple in-class observation into a forceful, detailed analysis of literary works. But researching this topic was not necessarily an easy or a straightforward task. Because of the special literary nature of my argument—that local color author Thomas Nelson Page engages in symbolic blackface in his writings—much of my evidence had to rely upon primary sources, that is, the writings themselves. Also, because so few people have analyzed local color fiction through the lens of blackface minstrelsy before, and even fewer have looked at it concerning the specific works of Page, little secondary commentary exists on the subject, making the task of research doubly difficult. While significant scholarship has focused individually on either the stage tradition of minstrelsy or on the literary tradition of local color, rarely has anyone sought to view the two traditions through a related framework. The key to my research, then, came in synthesizing these two fields of scholarship and seeking to connect them through logical argument. The results did not disappoint.

The idea that local color authors could engage in literary blackface by assuming and robbing the black narrative voice first came about during a class discussion on Page's most famous short story, "Marse Chan." At first, it seemed to be a bit of a stretch. After all, the term 'blackface' has been traditionally reserved for the visual medium, as it relies upon the imagery of darkened skin, exaggerated lips, and oily skin in order to succeed in mocking the black caricature. But as I considered a more encompassing view of blackface—one in which the expropriation of black identity for white purposes acts as the only prerequisite—I began to become more and more convinced that Page's writings reflect a purposeful attempt to steal and lampoon

black identity. At the recommendation of my professor, I consulted literary scholar Sarah Meer's book *Uncle Tom Mania*, in which she views Harriet Beecher Stowe's celebrated novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in light of the minstrel tradition. Meer's argument that Stowe's book represents a rhetorical form of blackface proved convincing enough, and it began to seem even more obvious that local color authors such as Page who adopt a black narrative voice and assume a heavy 'black' dialect hark back directly to the minstrel stage.

Before proceeding any further in my research, I needed to find a definitive account of the historical and social implications behind blackface as a rhetorical mode. After searching through dozens of sources, I finally came upon Eric Lott's brilliantly composed and thoroughly researched work *Love and Theft*, in which he details the complex nature of cultural exchange that went into the minstrel tradition. I then set about the inevitable task of analyzing the primary sources, starting with the works of Page. Page's entire literary collection can be found in a dusty but reliable volume of writings in Tarver Library. Almost all of Page's short stories employ a similar structure of an ex-slave reminiscing about life before the war in exaggerated dialect, so it became necessary to choose only the most representative two or three stories to analyze in my project. I also looked at the works of other white local color authors who seemed to expropriate the black voice, namely Joel Chandler Harris and George Washington Cable, but because of physical constraints of my project I decided it best to focus on Page alone.

Then came the hard part: Finding others to justify my interpretation. I was mostly able to do this using Tarver's online database search. I found a small handful of scholars who had written about Page's narrative structure in literary journals, namely Taylor Hagood and John Lowe. Following their research tracks, I was able to locate copies of other monographs and es-

says on the topic, including works by Janet Gabler-Hover and David Blight. Gabler-Hover's work proved particularly hard to find, as the closest library that contained the book was Emory University in Atlanta. Luckily, however, I was able to receive the book quickly through Inter-Library Loan. By this point, I had gained sufficient primary analysis and secondary commentary in order to make a coherent argument that Page did, in fact, engage in literary blackface. Research bolstered what was already a strong argument and gave credence to my assertion that the use of the black narrative voice by white authors constitutes a form of cultural theft not unlike that of the minstrel stage.

Thomas Nelson Page's Cultural Theft:

“Marse Chan” and “Meh Lady” as Blackface Performance

Virginia author Thomas Nelson Page deeply feared the South might lose touch with its true history. In his 1897 essay “The Want of a History of the Southern People,” he derides northern historians for having hijacked and distorted the memory of the South in popular imagination, saying:

Contemporary history is being recorded by writers organically disabled to comprehend the action of the South . . . . We are not a race to pass and leave no memorial on our time. We live with more than Grecian energy. We must either leave our history to be written by those who do not understand it, or we must write it ourselves. (*The Old South* 363-364)

Page never understood the hypocrisy of his stance—he had committed essentially the same cultural theft of which he accuses northerners in his own writings. But Page's robbery possessed far more treacherous significance, for it subjugated the entire African American race, which at the time was unable to speak for itself. Put simply, Page wore blackface.

Page never actually painted his face black or appeared in a minstrel show. His incarnation of blackface assumed a much more subtle form. In his writings, Page often adopts the voice of a black narrator, waxing nostalgic about the olden days of antebellum plantation life in a heavy ‘black’ dialect. Written by a white man hidden behind a black narrator's mask, stories such as “Marse Chan” and “Meh Lady” epitomize what historian David W. Blight has called Page's “silky brand of genteel minstrelsy” (Blight 227). At first glance, Page's use of blackface

could be read as an act of empowerment to the African American experience, as scholars such as Taylor Hagood and Keith Byerman have suggested. Page is, after all, relinquishing apparent control over his narrative to the voices of former slaves, whose mere presence threatens to subvert Page's carefully constructed plantation tradition. But by using the black voice to reinforce his own *white* aristocratic value system, Page ultimately exploits and steals the African American narrative even as he assigns it a slight level of visibility. He dons the mask of blackface in a process that is simultaneously a celebration and a denigration of black culture, not unlike the minstrel stage itself. He further offers the ex-slave narrator up as what he calls an "olive branch" to the North in an attempt to engender a sectional reconciliation mediated along the ideology of white supremacy (Hagood 428).

Page knew that if he wanted to impersonate a black man successfully, he had to cloak himself in a convincing black dialect. He had to make his white northern readers believe they were actually hearing words from the mouths of former slaves. So, in "Marse Chan" and "Meh Lady," Page assigns an "indescribably suggestive," almost lyrical, negro dialect to his former slave narrators in order to certify them as genuine representatives of the black race ("Meh Lady" 79). In a brief note to the reader at the beginning of *In Ole Virginia*, Page defends his linguistic style as a "fair representation of the peculiarities" of "the dialect of the negroes" (*In Ole Virginia* I). Whether accurate or inaccurate, Page's use of dialect unfailingly amounts to little more than an expropriation of the African American voice, given the fact that it typecasts blacks as both unintelligent and morally lacking. As Janet Gabler-Hover has suggested, Page's borrowing of "black" language "was invariably patronizing in an age that equated grammaticality with social and moral stature" (Gabler-Hover 247).



Page's use of dialect refers directly to the minstrel stage, setting up what Sarah Meer calls the "end man-interlocutor dialogue" (Meer 12). In minstrel acts, a sophisticated white interlocutor predisposed to exaggeratedly complex and Latinate diction would often converse on stage with a blackface end man who spoke in a garbled 'negro' accent. In both "Marse Chan" and "Meh Lady," Page makes use of this end man-interlocutor dialogue by having a verbose white interrogator engage in conversation with a poorly-spoken black narrator. Take, for example, the dialogue between Old Sam and the anonymous northern traveler which takes place in "Marse Chan." In smooth standard English, the white traveler, as interlocutor, uses phrases such as "I was aroused from my reflections" and "hardly perceptible lateral movement," indicating his relative level of linguistic mastery. But unlike his white counterpart, Old Sam is unable to string together such eloquent phrases, speaking instead in a crippled, at times undecipherable, African American vernacular. The traveler's curiosity about Old Sam's story and his tipping of "several spare eighteen pences" for the opportunity to hear it further bring to mind the minstrel stage, where white theatergoers would fork over cash to receive a glimpse into the exoticism of black culture ("Marse Chan" 38).

Central to blackface's popularity as a rhetorical mode was the artistic liberty inherent in actually *being* black. That is, white actors believed that if they could assume the physical appearance and perceived behavior of black people, they thereby could gain the authority to speak to and distort the black experience in the popular imagination. Minstrel actors portrayed African Americans as either carefree, dumb, lazy, cowardly, or selfish on stage, almost always serving the purpose of denigrating blacks as 'childlike' in order to reinforce their status as second-class citizens. While Page's writings are not as blatant in creating such exaggerated caricatures,

they do serve the ultimate goal of maintaining white supremacy, just as the minstrel show did. By creating loyal black narrators who long for a return to slavery and who cannot thrive without the paternalistic care of their white masters, Page cements the idea of African American inferiority in the minds of northern readers.

Blackface clearly constitutes cultural theft, but to label Page and other minstrel performers as merely trying to impugn the minority race runs the risk of oversimplifying the complex process of cultural exchange at work in racial imitation. As Eric Lott asserts in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, “the minstrel show was, on one hand, a socially approved context of institutional control; and, on the other, it continually acknowledged and absorbed black culture even while defending white America against it” (Lott 40). In other words, the use of blackface could not only work to hijack African American identity, but also in the process highlight its very existence. Even Frederick Douglass—who labeled minstrel performers as “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature”—recognized that minstrelsy could sometimes work to undermine racism and that it might “yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race” (Meer 71).

Page’s characteristic use of blackface takes on the clear minstrel structure in “Marse Chan,” his first and most popular story, published in his 1887 book *In Ole Virginia*. The story is told by Sam, a former slave, who reminisces to a white passerby about the era of slavery “befo’ de war,” before he lost his beloved master and before freedom left him lonely and bewildered. In what are perhaps the story’s most famous lines, Sam sums up his nostalgia for a return to a life of slavery:

Dem wuz good ole times, marster—de bes’ Sam ever see! Dey wuz, in fac’!  
 Niggers didn’ hed nothin’ ‘t all to do—jes’ hed to ‘ten’ to de feedin’ an’ cleanin’  
 de hosses, and’ doing’ what de marster tell ‘em to do; an’ when dey wuz sick,  
 dey had things sont ‘em out de house, an’ de same doctor come to see ‘em whar  
 ten’ to de white folks when dey wuz po’ly. Dyar war’ no trouble nor nothin’.  
 (“Marse Chan” 10)

Sam reinforces the white aristocratic cause in the minds of Page’s skeptical northern readers and defends the very institution which enslaved him in the first place. In another of Page’s memorable stories from *In Ole Virginia*, “Meh Lady,” Page presents Uncle Billy, a similarly wistful ex-slave character who eulogizes the Old South. Recounting fondly how much better life was before war ravaged the southern landscape, Uncle Billy says: “We wuz rich den, quarters on ev’y hill, an’ niggers mo’ ‘n you could tell dee names; dee used to be thirty cradlers in de harves’-fiel’ an’ binders mo’ ‘n you kin count” (“Meh Lady” 80).

These sentimental voices in Page’s writings closely resemble minstrel characters. Take, for example, the following lyrics from an 1850s Stephen Foster minstrel song entitled “Old Folks at Home”:

All up and down de whole creation,  
 Sadly I roam,  
 Still longing for de old plantation,  
 And for de old folks at home. (qtd. in Lott 190)

Just as Page defended his plantation tradition by attaching a sense of nostalgia to the black voice, so did the minstrel show steal and distort the African American narrative by using it to

reassert the memory of the old order. The reasoning behind the use of such nostalgic imagery is simple: if blackface actors could portray ex-slaves as missing their plantation homes, then slavery would appear justified in the minds of northern readers and the South would achieve vindication in popular memory. Consider another popular minstrel tune reflecting this sense of homesickness, Henry Bishops's famous "Home! Sweet Home!" (1823):

Be it ever so humble there's no place like home  
 A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there!  
 Which seek through the world, is ne'er met with elsewhere  
 Home! Home! sweet, sweet, Home!  
 There's no place like home!  
 There's no place like home! (qtd. in Lott 176)

"Home," however, is almost always on the plantations of benevolent southern gentlemen and white aristocratic families below the Mason-Dixon Line. As Eric Lott asserts, these "nostalgic 'carry-me-back' songs" of minstrelsy were "discursive structures out of a long traditions of 'home songs' . . . however plaintively 'black' they seemed" (Lott 179).

Page's depiction of the freed slave yearning for a return to the harmony of the Old South may seem fairly innocuous on the surface. After all, Page may not be entirely inaccurate in his caricature—many slaves likely did enjoy better living conditions under the "peculiar institution" than in the violent, racially segregated Jim Crow South that came after. But the ideological underpinning of this interpretation—and the dangerous assumption it gives rise to—is that slaves neither wanted nor needed their freedom, and that America never had a race problem in the first place. The Sams and Uncle Billys of Dixie lived blissful, pastoral lives on the plan-

tation together with white families before the war, and the unwarranted arrival of Yankee soldiers shattered their peaceful world. This whitewashing of racial struggle serves to vindicate the Confederacy in the popular imagination, while it simultaneously indicts the North for invading and desolating the South over an “issue” that was never really an issue at all.

The former slave’s romanticization of slavery and antebellum life exonerated the South, but it almost invariably posited the North as the enemy. Page recognized this threat, and he knew that a narrative which did not offer a reconciliatory portrait would fall on deaf ears in northern literary circles. Thus, in an effort to compensate, Page uses the same black characters in his stories who valorize the South and impugn the North in order to facilitate a sectional reunion. At the end of “Meh Lady,” for example, Uncle Billy plays matchmaker by giving away the southern bride (Meh Lady) to a good northern suitor (Captain Wilton) in a poignant stock North-South wedding ceremony. Embodied through marriage vows, the literary reunion of North and South in “Meh Lady” does not signal a compromise on either side, but rather the “adoption of southern values by ‘educated’ northerners” (Lowe 237). The white Union soldier (Captain Wilton) quite literally becomes a southerner. By the story’s end, he has abandoned his northern identity, moved to Virginia, and reunited with his long lost southern family on the plantation of the New South. As Blight has noted, “How better to forget a war about slavery than to have faithful slaves play the mediators of a white folks’ reunion?” (Blight 225).

African Americans, on the other hand, possess hardly any semblance of actualized identity in Page’s writing. Not only does Billy in “Meh Lady” express his obvious lack of racial selfhood by sympathizing with his former enslavers and denigrating his fellow African Americans (“Meh Lady” 117), as Gabler-Hover has noted, but he actually identifies himself as white,

saying “We all white folks al’ays set a heap o’ sto’ by one nurr” (“Meh Lady” 105). He shows little evidence of concern for his own wife, Hannah, and instead spends his days spying on and playing matchmaker to the white plantation family. Sam in “Marse Chan” seems similarly devoid of racial identity, as he is ultimately unable to break free from his own ingrained sense of servitude to his master, worrying about Marse Chan’s dog long after his death (“Marse Chan” 38). The absence of the African American voice comes to full light in the final scene of “Meh Lady” in which Billy refuses to entertain the notion that Captain Wilton and Meh Lady have named their son after him: “Go way, Marster . . . who gwine name gent’ man after a ole nigger?” (“Meh Lady” 139). As Blight puts it, Billy acts in this scene under the code of the “sensible freedmen,” who “made no demands of their own” and “did not even have real lives of their own to be remembered” (Blight 224). Page employs Sam and Billy’s narratives for his own white purposes and renders the African American story as an almost nonexistent shadow.

When Page does ascribe his black narrators with distinctive personal characteristics, those characteristics usually only serve to confirm their status as members of the inferior race. For example, in “Marse Chan,” Sam embodies the minstrel character of the “happy darky”—not unlike the character of Sam in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—by maintaining a cheerful disposition throughout his narrative, even laughing out loud in numerous instances for seemingly no reason. This joyful caricature of Sam may at first appear harmless, but when juxtaposed against the immense outpouring of grief incurred by the story’s white characters, Sam’s laughter begins to seem almost shallow and animalistic. The implication Sam’s high-spirited nature carries with it is rather simple: The only real victims under slavery were white southern folks. Blacks had it good all along, and they continue to remain perfectly con-

tent with their social status after Reconstruction. Further, Sam's joyfulness serves the purpose of reinforcing the myth of white sacrifice for black blood. As the realities of war gnawed away at southerners, the myth goes, they remained brave and sacrificed themselves for the good of their beloved slaves at all costs, doing much as Meh Lady does by selling her prized family diamonds in order to feed the plantation's hungry blacks ("Meh Lady" 114). Uncle Billy perhaps illustrates the courage of the white southerner best when he recounts the composure Mistis and Meh Lady maintained when sending Marse Phil off to war: "[Mistis] ain' say a wud 'bout he goin', she nor Meh lady nurr—dee jes' dat ambitious 'bout it. De thorybreds goes wid dee heads up till dee drap you know" ("Meh Lady" 82).

Page's stories do little more than subsume black identity for the purpose of achieving white reconciliation, as Blight has noted. Yet even as Page distorts the narrative of the former slave, he entrusts the black voice with a regulated level of perceptibility in the national consciousness, much as the minstrel show itself did. Though Page is careful to ensure his black narrators always reflect and reinforce *white* aristocratic values, the very fact that he includes the black voice at all opens his texts to potentially subversive readings that threaten to undermine the validity of his intended message.

A number of scholars have identified such potentially subversive elements in Page's writings. As Kimball King pointed out in his 1969 introduction to *In Ole Virginia*, "Page revealed more in ['Marse Chan'] than he wished of the perilous nature of the old order. It is a eulogy to the past, but consciously or unconsciously the author included disturbing details that make his story deeper, and more interesting than he probably intended" (King xx). One such "disturbing detail" which King alludes to occurs in the opening scene of "Marse Chan," in

which Sam fusses at his master's aged dog and mutters, "Jes' like white folks—think 'cuz you white and I's black, I got to wait on yo' al de time" ("Marse Chan" 3). Although Sam quickly defends his dissonant statement as "jes' prodjickin'" when he realizes that the white traveler has overheard him, his apparent annoyance about the demands of servitude suggests that he may not be as supportive of the institution of slavery as the narrative taken as a whole implies.

Taylor Hagood has also noted such ambivalence in these stories, leading him to define Page's writings as "dually performative" in nature, "addressing the desires of and empowering not only Northerners and aristocratic white Southerners but even African Americans" (Hagood 423). By elevating the black voice, Hagood argues, Page creates a stage for his black characters to express their subconscious discontent with southern life. Likewise, Keith Byerman notes that there exists "deep ambiguities in ['Marse Chan']," such as Sam's transformation from a character of "simple obedience and loyalty" into one of "personal agency," nevermind the fact that such agency always remains in "support of white characters" (Byermann 100). All of this is not to suggest that Page consciously included a hidden message of black empowerment in his stories—he held far too closely to his aristocratic belief system to assume such a stance knowingly. Rather, it is to point out that his minstrelized narrative structure contained the power to emancipate the black voice even as it attempted to squash it. For example, in "Marse Chan," a class of educated white northern readers *could* have read Sam's rant to Marse Chan's dog about white expectations of him as expressing a hidden message of black discontent.

In 1897, Page voiced his deep fear that the South might be misrepresented in the scholarship of northern historians:



There is no true history of the South. In a few years there will be no South to demand a history . . . By the world at large we are held to have been an ignorant, illiterate, cruel, semi-barbarous section of the American people, sunk in brutality and vice, who have contributed nothing to the advancement of mankind. (*The Old South* 346)

The irony of Page's statement is obvious. As Lowe has pointed out, Page had used essentially those same words to disparage black culture in an attempt to shore up his own. For a man so concerned with defending his history from outsiders, Page worried surprisingly little about perverting the history of African Americans. He dons the literary face of a black narrator in his stories not only in order to perpetuate negative assumptions about blacks, but to defend the Southern code to skeptical Northern readers and promote white supremacy. By assuming the black voice, Page more easily transitions into black identity himself, as Lowe has noted. He becomes not a white southerner, but a blackface minstrel performer, simultaneously lampooning and celebrating the African American stereotype while protecting the white race against it.

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