

Amber Thomas
Literature Review
ENGL 444
9 December 2020

Thomas Page's Dialect of *In Ole Virginia* Literature Review

In Thomas Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia* there is an ever present, strong black voice within the first two, arguably most well-read, short stories of the collection: "Marse Chan: A Tale of Old Virginia" and "Unc' Edinburg's Drowndin': A Plantation Echo". However, as the stories progress, Page rhetorically chooses to have less and less of a strong, black voice and moves into a third person narration of someone that speaks more standard English, like an aristocratic white person. But, why would he do that when his rhetorical strategy of using a black voice is the foundation of the framed narratives he uses to rhetorically illustrate an idyllic Old South? In reading his later stories, particularly "No Haid Pawn", Page's rhetorical arguments of *In Ole Virginia* become more ambiguous and blurred as some scholars believe Page struggled to continue to bend black voices in his illogical way. The sources discussed in the following pages all indicate the significance of why Page chose to use black dialect and later moved away from it.

Historically speaking, Page was a very well known aristocratic Virginian. According to Fred Bailey's biography of Page in "Thomas Nelson Page and the Patrician Cult of the Old South", Page had built a sort of image of himself in the South as a history truth teller or an Old South apologist (110). As *In Ole Virginia* obviously represents a mythic version of the antebellum and even post Civil War South, Page works to retell the South's history in a much more flattering light; a light that Page is more familiar with than most others Virginians. As Bailey writes, Page was working to rewrite history as a pivotal writer of the Lost Cause ideology in literary narrative form and, as Bailey's title suggests, the aristocratic elites of the South were a sort of cult. The cult-like mentality allowed Page to see himself as telling the 'true history' of the

South despite recognizing it was a gross misrepresentation of it. Bailey indirectly claims that Page's upbringing on Oakland Plantation is what led Page to hold such romanticized, nostalgic views of the Old South (110). Yet, Bailey does not connect his comfortable upbringing to his black and white, enslaved and enslaving, characters' familial relationship which Page creates in "Marse Chan" and "Unc' Edinburg's Drowndin". Bailey also alleges that Page thought of Slavery as institution to be a "... paternalistic system characterized by the mutual affection of bond and free" (115). I would ask, though, why would Page make these claims unless he had personal, close relationships with his family's enslaved? Without being raised on such an idyllic plantation, then where would Page have these notions? After the Civil War, Page wanted to reclaim his aristocratic title, yet he was unable to continue the oppression of others so he was unable to live his elitist, lavish life style quite the same. Due to this negative impact on his life, he villainized Northern white abolitionists for disrupting the Old South and causing division within the Union - making them his target audience for the rhetorical strategies of *In Ole Virginia*. Fred Bailey does an excellent job at presenting the rhetorical situation surrounding Thomas Page's role in writing Southern Literature and history, but he does not ask the critical questions or draw the many critical connections that can be made from Page's life to his stories of *In Ole Virginia*. Bailey's article would have been significantly more critically useful and interesting if he had drawn more conclusions based on the biography he supplied. Although his biography is useful, there seems to be blatantly obvious connections he could have made to the text that he missed or left out. Using what he did provide, it is clear that Page used his personal life experience, and possible obsession, with enslaved people's culture to create his appropriation of black dialect in his stories.

In claiming to be an Old South apologist, Page supposedly worked to study black dialect by observing many black Eastern Virginian residents which he clarifies in the opening note to *In Ole Virginia*. Here, Page is establishing his credibility and identifying his audience as literate (or well educated), standard English speaking, white people. James Christmann, in his article “Dialect’s Double-Murder: Thomas Nelson Page’s ‘In Ole Virginia’”, says that Page’s note is a direct indication of Page’s idea of there being a superior dialect, standard English, and by extension reflects his white supremacist views which is of course carried through in his defense of the mythic Old South (238). Most notably, Christmann criticizes Page’s appropriation of black voices. However, Christmann asserts that the retelling of black dialect by a Southern white aristocrat that Page uses to frame the narrative works against his rhetorical argument as it works to create a subjective image of the black narrators (234). Christmann also claims that as Page continued his observations of black dialect is when he wrote his stories; so, Page should have gotten progressively better at writing in black dialect, yet he strays away from it as he continued to write (235). In a modern lens, Christmann says Page’s use of a black narrator would be seen as an extremely risky rhetorical strategy to have the very same people that were oppressed by the Old South be defending it (236). Page’s appropriation of the black voice allows him to demonstrate rhetorically how he believed black individuals thrived in serving their masters and have lost their meaning by no longer being able to fully serve their masters in the New South (236-237). In the short story “Ol’ Stracted”, the plantation narrator and main character passes away - symbolizing the figurative death of the plantation narrative as the younger generation of free black people work towards liberation and Page’s progression into a new narration style of standard English from a third person perspective. This could indicate that as Page learned more about the racial injustices black individuals faced he grew more sympathetic. But using Bailey’s

biography, we know that Page had become a household name because of his great defense of the nostalgic, unified Old South that so many others romanticized. Christman notes how Page continues to explore the idea of the figurative death of the plantation narrative in “No Haid Pawn”. To summarize the story, a West Indies enslaver decapitates his slave after they retaliate in order to intimidate the other enslaved. Here, Page is working to demonstrate how he, as an appropriator of black voices, is a “... violent silencer of a resistant cultural voice” according to Christmann (240). “No Haid Pawn” also tells some of the most horrifying aspects of Slavery which Page “so carefully minimized in his other tales” (240). Although this an excellent and intriguing critique of “No Haid Pawn”, Christmann glosses over his analysis whereas Taylor Hagood gives a much richer, indepth critique that “No Haid Pawn” begs for.

In focusing on the theme of headlessness found throughout “No Head Pawn”, including in the title, Hagood finds a lot of illogical incongruities which he explores in his article “Ghosts of Southern Imperialism: Caribbean Space, Functions of Fiction, and Thomas Nelson Page's ‘No Haid Pawn’”. Like I said, Hagood gets into the nitty gritty of the story by examining the the symbolism in the recurring theme of headlessness as well as the setting. In playing devils advocate and giving a more pessimistic and more likely analysis of the short story, Hagood thinks that Page was writing more so to impress his readers with an entertaining horror story than to make a large rhetorical argument. Hagood says the headless idea was likely to mimick Washington Irving’s successful work “The Legends of Sleepy Hollow” (146). However, Hagood cannot resist all of the symbolism of headlessness found in the story. One of the main interpretations he makes is that Page is representing how blackness is appropriated by white people because blackness is inherently more full of heart or faith which is reflected in how the white narrator is raised by the black enslaved people that teach him to believe in ghosts (143).

Whiteness, on the otherhand, is representative of the illogical reasoning which ultimately fails, especially the explaining away of the haunting of the plantation by the headless enslaved ghost by the white slave owning family (143). Hagood finds the ending of “No Haid Pawn” to be the most disturbing part of the story as it leaves so many questions about the significance of the story. For one thing, the ‘dark waters’ Page describes overtaking the ‘white Big House’ at the very end means “Metaphorically... the slaves’ rising up to overtake their masters, cutting off the plantation’s authorial head” (148). Something Hagood fails to mention is that it could be representative of the fear that the elite white Southerners have that the Old South will be erased, a major aspect of the Lost Cause ideology. This is something we can critically conclude Page would be concerned with as he was a self-proclaimed Old South apologist. Continuing his analysis, Hagood believes that the location of the No Head Pond, the plantation the story takes place on, is geographically supposed to be located in the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia, but certain descriptions Page gives references a more Southern location like an island in the Caribbean (148). Hagood says that if this is what Page intended, which we cannot be sure of, then Page could be commenting on the ex-Confederates that moved further south after Slavery was abolished in order to legally continue plantation-style living (151). Meaning, Page is making a critique of imperialism. Hagood ends his article restating that Page was very sloppy with the rhetorical strategies used in “No Haid Pawn”, so we cannot be certain of what argument he was making if any (153). At the very least, however, it did evoke white fears of black liberation (156). Hagood did such an excellent job dissecting this lesser read work by Page to demonstrate how Page started losing his rhetorical leverage once he stopped using a black voice for his narration. This interpretation paired with Bailey’s biography of Page leads me to believe that Page was getting caught up in the fame and elite status that came with writing *Plantation*

Literature rather than truly defending the Old South in a more direct fashion like he does in his earlier stories.

In an article by Taylor Hagood from 2003, before the previous one by Hagood, he analyzes how Page's appropriation of black voices works to empower not only the Old South and aristocratic white people, but also black voices by putting black voices on the literary scene in the article titled "'Prodjickin', or Mekin' a Present to Yo' Fam'ly': Rereading Empowerment in Thomas Nelson Page's Frame Narratives". As Christmann also says, writing a framed narrative like Page's means he has less control over the rhetoric (423). However, it is just a part of the local color genre that Page's stories are defined by, which Christmann fails to make note of. By having a black narrator reminisce about the Old South, Hagood argues Page is lending the power he could have given to white narrators over to black narrators; inadvertently, Page has given power to black voices in this sense (423). I completely disagree with Hagood's interpretation of *In Ole Virginia* here, because Page is appropriating a black voice and reshaping it to fit his apologetic rhetoric of the Old South. In his more recent analysis of Page's work, that I synthesized earlier, Hagood clarifies that Frederick Douglass notes enslaved black people often feeding lies to visiting white people about how happy plantation life is so as to not to cause trouble (139). Although I understand that Hagood is arguing that Page is representing black voices and giving his black characters autonomy, which that aspect of it is empowering, Page is also misrepresenting the Old South and the oppression of black people so I do not think we can define *In Ole Virginia* as being at all empowering in the grand scheme of things. However, Hagood goes on to argue that the characters occasionally slipping and giving their own opinion, called a 'prodjickin' as defined by Sam's character in "Marse Chan" (3), proves that Page grants his black characters more autonomy than the usual Southern Literature that creates

stereotypically passive black characters (431). Hagood adds that having these occasional anecdotes in black narrations allows the story to seem more realistic while also showing how, although proving autonomous, their characters are harmless (439). Hagood creates a compelling interpretation of Page's appropriation of black voices, but I still believe it ultimately does not empower black people as, again, he is using their voices rhetorically to argue for their further oppression. It is clear from the other, more recent article by Hagood that his literary criticism has grown significantly over the years and I wonder if he would still defend his argument that Page is empowering black individuals.

In looking at these different interpretations of Thomas Nelson Page's rhetorical choice to use black dialect and later stray away from it in the short stories of *In Ole Virginia* there is a lot to analyze. More obviously, Page uses black voices to present a more compelling and credible defense of the Old South. His rhetorical silencing of the black voice as his writing progresses, however, indicates there is something more happening outside of the narration but these scholars do not give an answer for it. As I concluded based on Bailey's biography, Page was more than likely caught up in the attention and praise he received from Southern aristocrats that shared the same nostalgia for the Old South that he did, but he struggled to keep up the illogical rhetorical argument he created using black dialect and narrators to illustrate the mythic Old South as it was a flawed argument to begin with.

Works Cited

- Bailey, Fred Arthur. "Thomas Nelson Page and the Patrician Cult of the Old South." *International Social Science Review*, vol. 72, no. 3/4, 1997, pp. 110–121. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41882242.
- Christmann, James. "Dialect's Double-Murder: Thomas Nelson Page's 'In Ole Virginia.'" *American Literary Realism*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2000, pp. 234–243. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27746988.
- Hagood, Taylor. "Ghosts of Southern Imperialism: Caribbean Space, Functions of Fiction, and Thomas Nelson Page's 'No Haid Pawn.'" *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2013, pp. 139–160. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26467225.
- Hagood, Taylor. "'Prodjickin', or Mekin' a Present to Yo' Fam'ly': Rereading Empowerment in Thomas Nelson Page's Frame Narratives." *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2004, pp. 423–440. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26466982.
- Page, Thomas. *In Ole Virginia*, 1887.