

Application to 2005 NINES Summer Workshop
Project Description
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Title: The Charles Chesnutt Digital Archive: Vision, Shape, and Update

Description: First launched in 1999 and last updated in 2001, *The Charles Chesnutt Digital Archive* needs to be fully conceptualized and realized in light of the most recent developments in textual and digital studies.

Why a Chesnutt Digital Archive?

Born in 1858 in Ohio, Charles Chesnutt grew up in the South where he attended a North Carolina school funded by the Freedman's Bureau and where he witnessed both the beginning and abrupt end of political enfranchisement for African Americans in the South. Chesnutt devoted himself to becoming an author early in his life, and in 1883 he published his first story in the *Atlantic Monthly*. By 1905, he had published three novels, one biography, and two collections of short stories, and by his death he had published over one hundred stories, essays, reviews, and poems. In short, Chesnutt was the first African-American fiction writer to see his works reach a national audience.

A recent renaissance in Chesnutt studies has made some of his published and unpublished works available in modern editions, and several e-text libraries include selected works. But there is no comprehensive digital archive for Charles Chesnutt, and one goal of the *CCDA* is access--to make works by and about Chesnutt widely available. Currently, the site offers thirty stories, sixteen essays, one novel, one biography, three poems, and five reviews by Chesnutt. In addition, the site offers over one hundred reviews of Chesnutt's works and other essays and notices about Chesnutt in both the black and white press.

A second goal follows from this first. As digital technology improves access to texts, we must make sure that texts and access are not "dumbed down," but rather informed by the latest insights of textual (print and digital) studies. With the rise of cultural studies, long-canonized authors are now read within political contexts of all kinds, readings often made possible by archives built, collated, sifted, mined, and interpreted over decades. Authors and texts more recently added to our syllabi and monographs often do not have the benefits of such archives, and so as we develop digital archives for these authors and texts they must include manuscripts, variant editions, diaries, letters, notes, and marginalia. For example, the next version of the *CCDA* will make visible the fluidity Chesnutt's first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*, a novel with a textual history that includes five extant manuscripts and spans 30 years from the earliest manuscript version of 1889 to the serialized version that appeared in the *Chicago Defender* in 1921 (twenty years after the first book edition).

Theoretical and Technical Opportunities:

The *CCDA* is currently an HTML site that must be converted to XML. Tagging texts that make extensive use of dialect will raise issues that I would like to engage in the context of a NINES workshop. Similarly, I hope to use the conversation of the NINES workshop to inform my work as I develop rationales and coherence for a wide-ranging

archive that may well challenge presumptions about primary and secondary sources. For example, the hundred-plus reviews already on the site must be tagged and arranged intelligently, with an awareness of the history, economics, and race politics of the U.S. magazine and newspaper marketplace and with an understanding of tagging principles and possibilities. These materials were collected by a graduate student who traveled all over the U.S. and they represent a unique collection of materials that cross and blur the turn-of-the-century color line.

Project Timeline:

The *CCDA* currently exists as a fully-accessible site: <chesnuttarchive.org>. In addition to the materials already posted, I have over a hundred digital images of manuscripts, and I have easy access to the extensive Chesnutt holdings at the Fisk Library in Nashville. Before the workshop, I will clarify standards for manuscript images and return to Fisk as necessary. At the workshop, I would like (1) to develop the TEI and XML guidelines for the archive and work through a variety of texts, and (2) to conceptualize the archive as a whole. By the end of the workshop I would like to have a clear sense of when I might launch an XML version of the site, a portion of work already accomplished, and also a work plan for an archive that will include a full fluid-text electronic edition of *The House Behind the Cedars*.

Digital Technology Needs and Current Support

I have already purchased Oxygen, but I am not conversant with XML beyond the basic premises. My home institution has supported this project with goodwill and dollars. I cannot expect extensive technological support, although server space has never been a problem.