

A Web of Circumstance

Black or white? Black and white? In the 1850s, the color lines had been drawn. Many Northerners believed that black people should be free to pursue their dreams. Most Southerners believed that blacks should continue to work as slaves. What about people whose parents were both black and white? In some states, even people who had African-American great-great-grandparents were legally black. In this black-and-white world, many freed blacks couldn't vote, learn to read and write, own land, buy their own homes, or work outside their confines without permission.

In 1856, a group of freed blacks left Fayetteville, North Carolina, in search of a better life. Two of these travelers, Andrew Jackson "Jack" Chesnutt and Ann Maria Sampson, were married in Cleveland, Ohio on July 26, 1857. Jack was the son of a mixed race housekeeper, Anna Chesnutt, and possibly Waddell Cade, a white landowner. Ann Sampson was the daughter of Chloe Sampson (mixed race) and possibly Henry E. Sampson, a white slaveholder. On June 20, 1858, their first son, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, was born. Over the years, Charles was joined by siblings Lewis, Andrew, Clara, Mary, and Lillian. Little did Jack and Ann know that their oldest son would become a famous African-American writer! Although he was legally considered to be black, Charles could have "passed" as white with his light complexion and blue eyes. Because he was proud of his African-American heritage, though, Charles spent his entire life persuading people to accept and celebrate ALL people, regardless of their color.

The Chesnutt family moved several times. First, Jack worked as a wheelwright's assistant in Oberlin, Ohio. Then he worked as a horse-car driver and Union Army teamster in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1866 the family opened their own grocery store on Gillespie Street in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

Meanwhile, the black-white color lines had become battle lines. In 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected President. South Carolina left the Union one month later. On May 6, 1861 the Confederate Congress declared war on the United States! In 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation to free the slaves. After

the Civil War ended in 1865, the Freedman's Bureau was created to provide food, land, and education to freed slaves. Jack Chesnutt and six other men bought and donated some land to the Freedman's Bureau so they could build Howard School, which Charles began attending when he was eight years old.

After Chesnutt's mother died in 1871, her cousin, Mary Ochiltree, came to care for Charles and his siblings. Mary and Jack Chesnutt were married a year later and had several more children together. When their grocery store failed in 1872, they moved to a farm two miles outside of town. To help make money for the family, Charles was hired as a pupil-teacher at Howard School. Later, he became an assistant principal at Peabody School in Charlotte. Meanwhile, Charles continued to study languages and stenography, often teaching himself. He even learned how to play the organ! Charles became the assistant principal and eventually the principal of Fayetteville State Normal School for Negroes, a school for training African-American teachers. He also was the superintendent of his church's Sunday school program.

On June 6, 1878 Charles married another teacher, Susan W. Perry. She was the 19-year-old daughter of Edwin Perry, owner of a barber shop in the Fayetteville Hotel. Susan and Charles had four children together: Ethel, Dorothy, Helen, and Edwin. In 1883, Chesnutt moved to New York City, where he worked as a reporter for the Dow, Jones and Company news agency and wrote columns for the *New York Mail and Express*. The family soon moved to Cleveland where Charles worked for the Nickel Plate Railroad Company's accounting and legal departments. After studying for several years, Charles passed the Ohio law exam in 1887 with the highest score in his class!!! Instead of setting up his own practice, Charles worked as a stenographer at a local law firm. By 1890, Charles had opened his own court reporting (stenography) business and was writing stories at night. On September 30, 1899, Charles closed his stenography business to become a full-time writer and speaker. He felt it was time to help educate Americans about the importance of treating all people equally, regardless of their color.

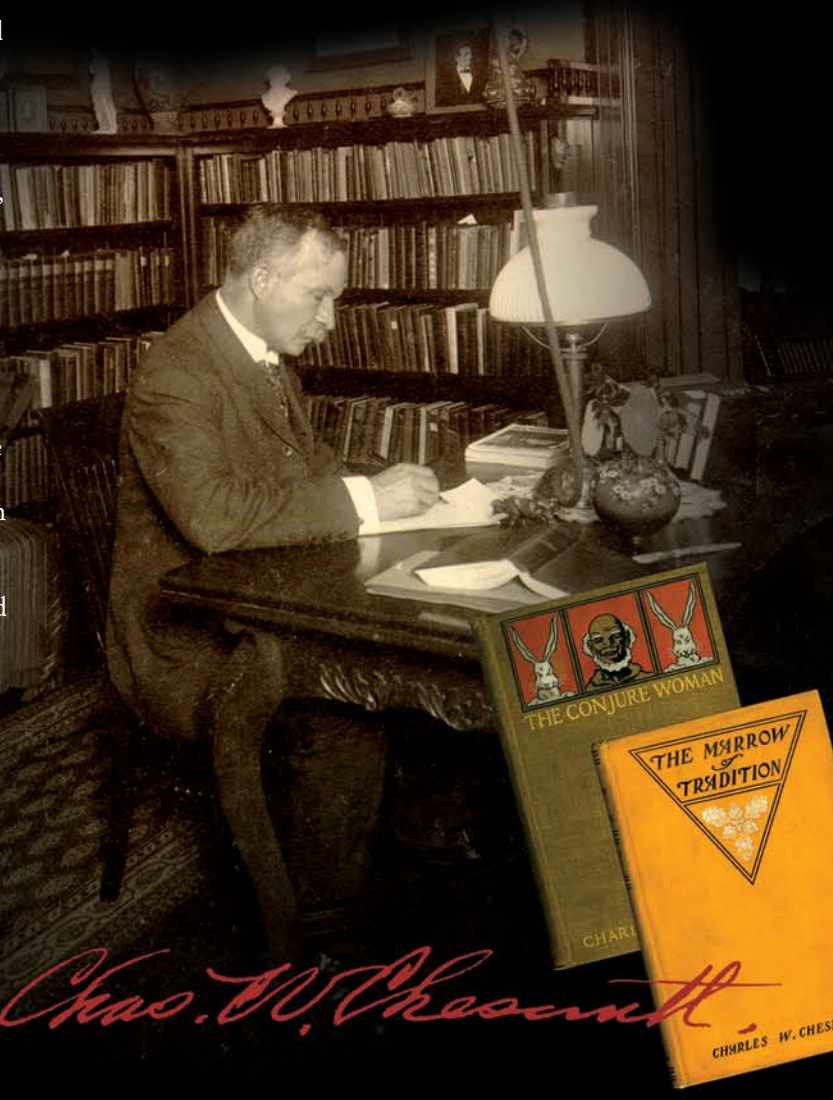
An Eloquent Appeal

Throughout his life, Charles was an avid reader, writer, and observer of people. He felt strongly that people of mixed heritage – indeed, all people – should be accepted the same as whites. Furthermore, Charles wanted people to see beyond the issue of race and learn to fully experience life. He felt the way to persuade people to change their views was by writing about the racial realities and prejudice of the post-Civil War South. That was his dream; that was his passion. Writing was his tool.

When he was 22, Charles had written in his journal: "I think I must write a book. I am almost afraid to undertake a book so early and with so little experience in composition. But it has been a cherished dream, and I feel an influence that I cannot resist calling me to the task." Charles immediately began pursuing this dream by writing sketches, essays, and short stories for national newspapers, humor magazines, Sunday supplements, and journals such as *Family Fiction*, *Puck*, *The Overland Monthly*, *The Southern Workman*, *Youth's Companion*, and *Atlantic Monthly*. Because Charles kept a journal and saved everything he had ever written, people today are able to learn about his inner feelings and dreams.

Charles's short story, Uncle Peter's House, was published in the Cleveland News and Herald in 1885. He became famous, though, when his story, *The Gophered Grapevine*, was the one of the first works written by an African American to ever be published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. These were the first in a series of stories Chesnutt wrote about Southern life. They used Southern folklore and dialect to deal with the issues of racism, prejudice, and slavery. In 1899, *The Conjure Woman* was published by the Houghton, Mifflin Company. It was a collection of seven tales of clever slaves who outwitted their cruel masters. This book was so popular that Charles wrote another collection of stories, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*. These nine stories, which focused upon mixed race marriages, were not as popular with the readers. Charles also published a biography of Frederick Douglass, a famous African-American leader, in 1899.

Charles's first novel, The House Behind the Cedars, was published in October, 1900 by Houghton, Mifflin. It tells the story of a brother and sister who "pass" for white although they have a mixed heritage. His second novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*, was published in late October of 1901. It was a fictionalized story of the 1898 race riots in Wilmington, North Carolina. *The Colonel's Dream* (1905) and *Mrs. Darcy's Daughter*, a play written in 1906, were unsuccessful. People just weren't ready to accept Charles's dream of racial equality and tolerance. Therefore, Charles began writing entertaining, non-threatening stories about northern high society, such as "Baxter's Procrustes."



A Matter of Principle

To support his family, therefore, Charles Chesnutt reopened his court stenography business and eventually added a white business partner, Helen C. Moore. He decided to become a speaker and political activist to further his dream of persuading society to look beyond people's color. He became one of the era's most famous activists and speakers. He even spoke at a memorial service for President William McKinley.

Charles worked with Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and political leaders to protect the rights of African Americans. In 1905, he became a member of the Committee of Twelve, a group organized by Booker T. Washington to protect African Americans' interests. He also went to Mark Twain's 70th birthday party in New York City (Mark Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*).

In 1908, Charles wrote an article criticizing the United States Supreme Court's rulings against African Americans. He also spoke to the Niagara group, which was begun by W.E.B. DuBois to fight for African Americans' rights. A picture of Charles, taken in 1908, was used by Kazuhiko Sano to paint the portrait used for the USPS stamp! In 1910, Charles spoke before the National Negro Committee, which later became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He became a member of the General Committee of the NAACP. He also became a member of a special Cleveland group, the Rowfant Club (after waiting for eight years). He suffered a stroke in June, 1910.

Charles recovered from his stroke to continue his efforts. In 1912 he became a member of the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce and toured Europe. In 1913, he persuaded the Cleveland mayor, Newton Baker, to stop a bill against mixed marriages. By 1914 he was feeling so fine that he bought a new car and learned how to drive. He crashed it a year later, but survived that and an attack of appendicitis and peritonitis in 1920.

In 1923, Charles protested Harvard University's attempts to stop African-American students from living in the dormitories and eating in the dining halls. He appeared before the U.S. Senate in 1928 to talk against the Shipstead Anti-Injunction bill because labor unions were trying to keep African Americans from becoming

members. That same year, the NAACP gave Charles Chesnutt the Spingarn Medal for his work as an educator, writer, speaker, and activist.

Throughout these years, Charles Chesnutt celebrated his family and his writing. His daughters Ethel and Helen attended Smith College. Ethel married a librarian in Cleveland; Helen taught in the Cleveland public schools. One of her students was Langston Hughes, who later became a famous African-American poet! Chesnutt's daughter, Dorothy, graduated from Western Reserve University and served as a juvenile court probation officer before becoming a teacher. His son, Edwin, graduated from Northwestern and became a dentist in Chicago. His book, *The House Behind the Cedars*, was made into a movie in 1924 and remade as *Veiled Aristocrats* in 1932. Furthermore, Charles published two more essays, "The Negro in Cleveland" and "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem," in the early 1930s.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt died in his home at 5:30 PM on November 15, 1932 from arteriosclerosis and high blood pressure. He was buried at the Lake View Cemetery in Cleveland, Ohio. Because he was an outstanding Dreamweaver, Chesnutt's life's work has been recognized by several people. The January, 1933 issue of *The Crisis* contained an obituary written by W.E.B. DuBois. His name is written on the wall at the Cleveland Hall of Fame of the Western Reserve Historical Society. The people of Cleveland also named a street and a school after him! During his lifetime, Charles published 140 works. His writings are featured on the University of North Carolina's "Documenting the American South" website. In 2001, the Library of America added a major collection of his work to its series of important American authors. Fayetteville State University in North Carolina has a Charles W. Chesnutt Library.

Charles W. Chesnutt dared to share his dream of equality through his work as a teacher, writer, speaker, and activist. Because of his lifelong work to blur the color line, people grew beyond seeing the world in terms of black-and-white, and learned to embrace multi-colored cultural contributions. Today, more people of color are able to achieve their dreams. Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Achiever, Believer, Dreamweaver.



Charles W. Chesnutt

Dreamweaver



DREAMWEAVERS

MATERIALS NEEDED

computer with Internet access, colored paper squares, *Africa Dream* by Eloise Greenfield, life-size white outline of Chesnut's body (open-body portrait), white dream "bubble", construction paper, glue, scissors, rulers

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Quicktalk: What is the most interesting dream you've ever had? Invite student input. This week we are going to be learning about several historic and modern-day dreamweavers—people like Charles W. Chesnut who believed that ALL people should have an equal opportunity to achieve their dreams. Show them the USPS poster.

LITERATURE CONNECTION

In *Africa Dream*, a 1978 Coretta Scott King Award-winning book, a child returns to her ancestral homeland to rediscover her heritage. While reading the book, discuss how the illustrator, Carole Byard, captured a dream-like quality through her drawings. Invite students to share what they know about their ancestral heritage. From what countries did their families originally emigrate? What family traditions do they hold dear? How have these traditions impacted their modern-day lives and future dreams?

READING RESPONSE ACTIVITIES

1 Provide each student with five colored squares. As they read the biography, *Charles W. Chesnut: Dreamweaver*, students write one interesting word, phrase, or concept on each square. On the flip sides, they write their reactions to the selected quotes in the form of questions or opinions. Then they organize their cards so their most interesting or controversial quote is on top.

2 Form discussion groups of 3-5 students to participate in "Save the Last Word for Me" grand conversations. Student A shares a favorite quote. Other group members react to the quote. Then, Student A has "the last word" by sharing his/her original reaction to the quote. Rotate so that all students have a chance to have the "last word."

3 Students write what they've learned about Chesnut's life within the open body portrait. After visiting these sites, invite them to add new facts to the portrait:
 ❖ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_W._Chesnut
 ❖ <http://www.chesnutarchive.org/classroom/class.html>
 ❖ <http://www.charleschesnut.org/bio.html>
 ❖ <http://www.online-literature.com/charles-chesnut/>
 ❖ <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chesnutcolonel/bio.html>

4 **Quickwrite:** Students write their responses to these prompts: How did events during and after the Civil War affect Mr. Chesnut's life? How did his mixed heritage impact his life and writing? Would Mr. Chesnut's life have been the same or different if he had lived in today's world? Share with partners before discussing in class.



Charles W. Chesnut based his 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition* on the Wilmington, North Carolina race riots of 1898.

The wreckage of the office of an African-American-owned newspaper, the first target of the rioters, is seen in the photograph behind Chesnut. Why do you think the rioters might have chosen the newspaper office as their first target?

DARING DREAMWEAVERS

Mini-talk: When American leaders drafted the Declaration of Independence, they wrote: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." (Ask students what this statement means to them). Charles Chesnut also believed that all people, regardless of their color, should be treated equally. Because this dream-theme wove throughout his entire life, he's called a dreamweaver. Mr. Chesnut was one of many leaders who have shared the same dream throughout American history. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln tried to make the dream a reality by abolishing slavery in the United States through the Emancipation Proclamation. This sparked the Civil War! A century later, on August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King championed Lincoln's vision during his "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In the 1990s, Barack Obama traveled to his ancestral homeland in Alego, Africa, to rediscover and celebrate his mixed heritage in his book, *Dreams from My Father*. The dream lives on.

1 Watch Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech on video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1732754907698549493, www.holidays.net/mlk/speech.htm, or www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEMXaTktUfA. The text from the speech can be accessed at <http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html>. Discuss

King's reference to Abraham Lincoln's efforts and his dream of a time when his "four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Has this dream become a reality in today's world?

2 Students conduct research on Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King, Barack Obama, Hiram R. Revels, Carl B. Stokes, Barbara Jordan, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, and Thurgood Marshall (or other dreamweavers of their choice). Search for ways these dreamweavers sought to make their dreams come true.

3 Add facts about the dreamweavers' efforts to a dream "bubble" above the head of the Chesnut body portrait, symbolizing the dreamweavers' common vision of a peaceful world where all people are treated equally.

4 Mr. Chesnut wrote several speeches, essays, and letters describing his dream. Have students identify a dream they have for making the world a better place in which to live. Students write short speeches, essays, or letters describing their dreams and how they intend to make their dreams come true. They will share these at the end of the next activity.

Design Dreamweavings

1 Choose one piece of 12" x 12" construction paper.

2 Draw a line one inch from the top edge. Fold along the line.

3 Draw lines perpendicular to the original line, spaced one inch apart.

4 Cut along the perpendicular lines, stopping at the horizontal (fold) line.

5 Weave multi-colored 1" x 12" paper strips through the original construction paper. Glue down the loose ends on both sides. Trim as needed.

6 Students create two simple, colorful depictions of their dreams of how to make the world a better place. Glue one picture to each side of the weaving.

7 Students use the dreamweavings as props while sharing their essays, letters, or speeches with the entire class.

8 Suspend the "dreamweavings" from the ceiling.



PHOTOS: Chesnut Photos Courtesy Cleveland Public Library Special Collections. Wilmington Riot Photo Corbis. BOOKLET: Biography and lesson plans created by Dr. Jacqueline Hansen, Murray State University. Project Manager: Jean Schlademan, Stamp Services, United States Postal Service. Design: Frank Schultz-DePalo, Public Affairs and Communications, United States Postal Service. Photo Editor: Michael Owens, PhotoAssist, Inc. Copy Editor: Greg Varner, PhotoAssist, Inc. ©2007 United States Postal Service. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT STAMPS AND STAMP PRODUCTS, VISIT THE POSTAL STORE AT WWW.USPS.COM/SHOP OR CALL 1-800-STAMP-24.

THE MARCH OF PROGRESS

MATERIALS NEEDED

lyrics of *True Colors* by Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly (http://www.lyricsfreak.com/c/cyndi+lauper/true+colors_20035189.html), computer with speakers, Internet access, various children's books, fruit, bowls, spoons, napkins, writing paper, art paper, crayons, paint shirts, old toothbrushes, scissors, newspapers, water-based paint, craft sticks, 8" long paper towel tubes, clear plastic sheets (report covers or transparencies), markers, utility knife, plastic wrap, waxed paper, rubber bands, clear tape, miscellaneous art supplies

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Watch Cyndi Lauper perform *True Colors* on www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbZDjnWk1A. Share the song's lyrics. What do you think is meant by true colors?

LITERATURE CONNECTION

1 Read aloud *The Crayon Box That Talked*, by Shane DeRolf and Michael Letzig. If a copy isn't available in your library, access it at: http://alaboon.com/a_box_of_crayons.htm. This story explores how although crayons are different, they all have something special to share with the world. Discuss how all people, regardless of their color, have something beautiful to share with the world. What "true colors" can students share with others?

2 Using 8" squares of plain white construction paper and crayons, children create abstract representations of their "true colors." After sharing

their abstract artworks, create a class quilt. This represents how dreamweavers need to collaborate to make their beautiful visions come true.

MODERN DREAMWEAVERS

Mini-talk: Throughout his writing career, Charles Chesnut's major focus was on equal treatment of all people, regardless of their heritage. Because Mr. Chesnut was neither totally African American nor totally White, some people did not accept him or his writing. In America today, we have made tremendous progress in celebrating people's cultural heritage! Can you name any people who have parents from different races or cultures? Invite student input. Many famous Americans today also have a mixed heritage, including: Halle Berry, Mariah Carey, Jordin Sparks, Alicia Keys, Grant Hill, Soledad O'Brian, Mario Van Peebles, Naomi Campbell, Barack Obama, Tiger Woods, Derek Jeter, Rachel Renee Smith (reigning Miss USA), The "Rock", and Vanessa

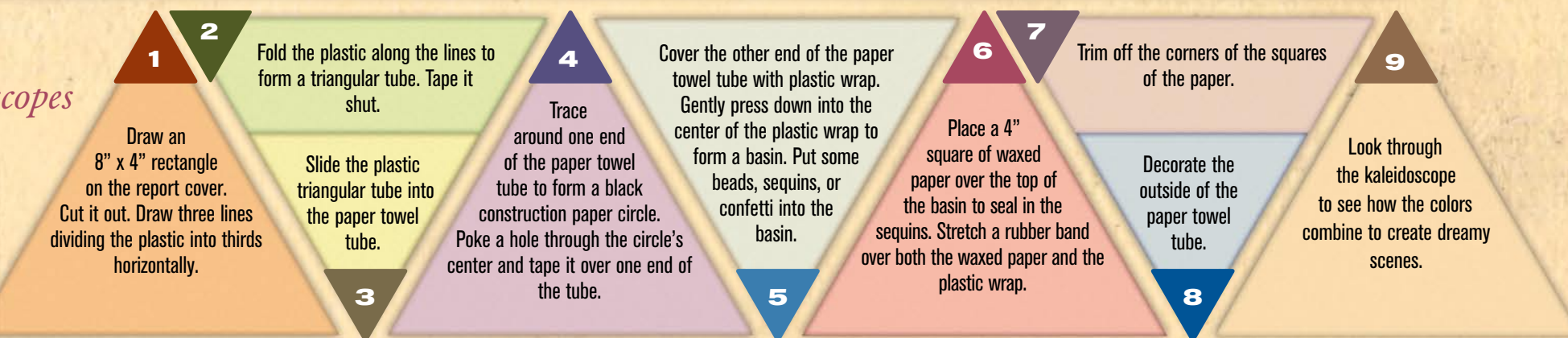
Art Extension Activities

It's the blending together, or celebration of these cultures and heritages that makes America such a wonderful, interesting place to live! Now let's celebrate what we've learned by creating some artworks showing how intermingling people's true colors and cultural heritage contribute to the American dream.

- Students need to wear paint shirts.
- Students cut out shapes representing the ways they dream to change the world one day.
- Lay the shapes on newspaper-covered surfaces.
- Dip old toothbrushes into water-based paint. Spatter the paint on the paper by rubbing the surface of the toothbrush bristles with a craft stick.
- Continue until the entire surface of the paper is covered.
- Let dry, then mount on color-coordinated construction paper to display.

Spatter Paintings

Cultural Kaleidoscopes



CHARLES W. CHESNUT COMMEMORATIVE STAMP
 January 31, 2008, First Day of Issue
 Artist: Kazuhiko Sano
 Designer: Howard E. Paine

To create more complicated kaleidoscopes with real mirrors, go to these sites:
 ❖ www.town4kids.com/town4kids/kids/science/explore/kalei.htm
 ❖ www.kaleidoscopesusa.com/makeAscope.htm
 ❖ www.optics.arizona.edu/AcademicsKaleidoscopeHowtoMakeAKaleidoscope.htm

Create electronic kaleidoscopes at this site:
 ❖ <http://www.kaarzydad.com/makeyourown/index.php>

Arna Wendell Bontemps. Charles Chesnut's poems, *The Ballad of Fair Oscar and To the Grand Army of the Republic* can be accessed at <http://faculty.berea.edu/browners/chesnut/manuscripts.htm>. Please select poetry that is developmentally appropriate for your students' maturity level. After a discussion, students will create poems reflecting their dreams for a better world.

1 What dream-themes were these poets promoting through their writing?

2 To create concrete poems, students draw a simple outline of a shape representing themselves or their dreams. Overlay this shape with plain white paper. Write the poem along the outline so that when the bottom paper is removed, the words form the picture. Students can use one continuous sentence, a couplet poem, or repetitive phrases to create their poems. Post these for a class walk and gawk.

3 Because Mr. Chesnut felt he had a foot in two different worlds, student pairs might want to create poems for two voices. Student pairs choose one theme. To facilitate composition, create a Venn diagram. Write student A's perspective in one circle, Student B's perspective in the other circle, and shared perspectives in the overlapping area. Write the poem in two columns: student A's phrases in the left column and student B's phrases in the right column. Phrases they share should be written in both columns. Read these aloud, alternating phrases when perspectives differ; speaking in unison when perspectives are the same.