

## Racial and Sectional Reconciliation in the Works of Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr.

Tim Ballard

African-American writer Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., (1861-1949) of Louisville, Kentucky, was most active on the black literary scene during the period 1895 to 1915. Cotter's output slowed after that period, but he continued his literary work into his eighties, with his last volume appearing in 1947. In all, Cotter published nine volumes in his lifetime: five volumes of poetry; a volume of short stories; a full-length play; a volume that includes verse, short stories, one-act plays, and miscellaneous writings; and a short history of a black settlement he helped found in Louisville in 1891.

Cotter came from an intriguing family, a heritage evident in his literary career. According to his unpublished "My Mother and Her Family,"<sup>1</sup> his great-grandfather was Daniel Stap,<sup>2</sup> a slave who bought his own freedom, plus twenty-eight acres of farmland, from his former master near Deatsville in Nelson County, Kentucky, about thirty-five miles south of Louisville. Stap then sent money to East Tennessee to purchase the freedom of his daughter, Lucinda.<sup>3</sup> Lucinda was the wife of Fleming Vaughn, a half-English, half-Cherokee slave. One of their fifteen children, Martha, born 9 May 1840, would become Cotter's mother.

At nineteen, Martha took service as a nurse to the children of W. Duff and Martha Queen Cotter of Louisville. While she worked for the Cotters, Martha was impregnated by W. Duff Cotter's father, Michael, who was in his early fifties when Joseph Cotter was born.<sup>4</sup>

Martha returned to Nelson County to give birth on 2 February 1861 at Stap's home. Six weeks later she returned to Louisville, where she lived until her death in 1906.<sup>5</sup> In a self-titled autobiographical sketch, Cotter said he attended a private school in Louisville and could read before he was four years old. His schooling ended when he was eight and had to go to work to help support the family. For the next fourteen years, Cotter worked an assortment of jobs to earn money, picking up rags in the street, working in tobacco factories and brickyards, becoming a distiller and a teamster, and prizefighting. At twenty-two, he returned to school as a third-grader. His intelligence and diligence are attested by the fact that after two school sessions, each lasting five months, he was promoted to the high school level and then became a teacher.<sup>6</sup> Cotter was a teacher and principal for more than half a century in Louisville's segregated schools, retiring in 1942 at the age of eighty-one.<sup>7</sup>

For the first four years of Cotter's life, Kentucky was a slave state. Instead of

seceding, however, the state legislature adopted resolutions declaring Kentucky's neutrality.<sup>8</sup> One result of the decision not to secede was that Kentucky was not subject to the Reconstruction measures instituted in the former Confederate states. That meant that federal authorities did not occupy Kentucky as conquerors, although the state was briefly under military occupation after the war.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the white power structure in the state was not subject to as many restrictions as in the former Confederacy.

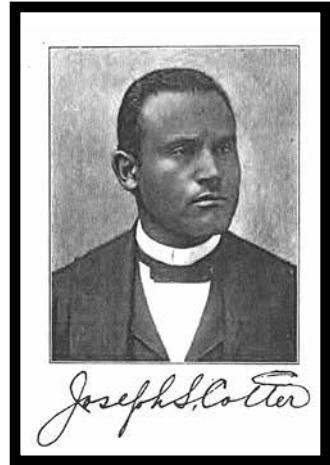
As Kentucky differed from other slave states, Louisville differed from the rest of Kentucky. Race relations were stable because the city had few large slaveholders and poor whites, and the free black population was too small to constitute a threat to the city's white political structure. In addition, local African-American ministers advocated a policy of moderation after the Civil War.<sup>10</sup> This attitude of moderation permeates much of Cotter's writing.

Louisville's black citizens were subject to racism, but discrimination in Louisville in the 1870s was inconsistent: "blacks were totally excluded from some areas of society while, for some unexplained reason, they faced little or no white resistance in others."<sup>11</sup> One area in which segregation occurred, although it varied from company to company, was in streetcars. Louisville's African-American population decided to test that segregation in a nonviolent way in 1870, when Cotter was nine years old. The demonstrations and ride-ins worked, helped by a ruling from a federal jury,<sup>12</sup> and even during the height of Jim Crow legislation in the 1890s, Louisville's streetcars remained integrated.<sup>13</sup> A young Cotter could have seen how nonviolent protest could effect social change in his hometown.

Unfortunately for African-Americans in Kentucky, the state's postwar political landscape was dominated by Confederate Democrats. Of the eight governors between 1867 and 1895, all Democrats, Simon B. Buckner had been a Confederate lieutenant general,<sup>14</sup> James B. McCreary a Confederate lieutenant colonel,<sup>15</sup> John L. Helm the father of a Confederate general,<sup>16</sup> J. Proctor Knott a former Missouri attorney general who had refused to swear allegiance to the Union,<sup>17</sup> John Young Brown a former representative whom Congress had refused to seat for alleged disloyalty,<sup>18</sup> and Luke P. Blackburn a doctor who had tried to start yellow fever outbreaks in Northern cities during the war.<sup>19</sup>

Given those Confederate pedigrees in the Governor's Mansion, it is little wonder that Kentucky's whites tried "to make racial exclusion more uniform and as complete as possible" in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>20</sup> Even so, segregation in Louisville was not absolute. As noted above, streetcars were integrated, and blacks could use the city's public swimming pools, tennis courts, and parks into the 1920s.<sup>21</sup> Matters were much different outside Louisville, so Cotter was living, working, and writing in an island of relative racial tolerance.

Nor were blacks in Louisville subject to the most heinous expression of racial discrimination, lynching. In an exhaustive study of lynchings in Kentucky from 1865 to 1940, George Wright lists only one in Louisville, which occurred in 1866,<sup>22</sup> and notes that the federal court in Louisville in 1868 convicted and sentenced to death a white man for the murder of a black man, based on the testimony of two African-Americans, an event without precedent in the state.<sup>23</sup>



*Courtesy: Kentucky Historical Society*

The situation in Louisville after the turn of the century can perhaps best be understood through the words of Blyden Jackson, an African-American who moved to Louisville as a three-year-old in 1914. Jackson became a professor of literature, and in an introduction to a collection of essays about African-American literature, he wrote:

In my Louisville, while it was understood that Negroes had a place and should be kept therein, it was also understood that Louisville was a better than average town where ugly, brutal, open, racial friction was not the accepted thing . . . Louisville's vaunted public image could not abide such gaucherie.<sup>24</sup>

Cotter expressed similar views. A friend wrote in a newspaper article that Cotter told him, "I think Louisville has less of the spirit to keep our people down than any other city. This has always been true."<sup>25</sup>

Such were the conditions of black-white relations in Louisville when Cotter was growing up and during the years of his greatest literary activity. Segregation was enshrined in law and tradition but was mitigated somewhat by the city leaders' self-image and the city's geographic position between North and South, for Louisville exhibited "an unusual blending of Southern racial practices and Northern racial policies."<sup>26</sup> Within those constraints blacks could try to help their race. Cotter used his writing to address racial and sectional reconciliation. He also forged friendships with some influential whites, which helped his cause. Since many of his poems were published in the *Courier-Journal*, Louisville's leading newspaper, Cotter would have been able to reach not only black but also white readers.

How Cotter began to address those themes can be seen with "Prelude," the poem that introduces his first volume of verse, *A Rhyming*: ". . . here's a rhymers of the lowly kind, / Applaud his little sallies if you can; / And, if you can't, just treat him like a man."<sup>27</sup> For Cotter, racial reconciliation begins with the acknowledgment of racial equality, and "Prelude" contains the implicit message that a black man should be treated the same as a white man.

Cotter expresses that message explicitly in "To the Memory of the Rev. Andrew Heath," in which he writes "Not by hue or form of faces . . . / Can we judge the worth of men."<sup>28</sup> Heath (1832-1887) was a former slave and pastor of Fifth Street Baptist Church in Louisville.<sup>29</sup>

Straightforwardness is characteristic of many of Cotter's poetic statements about equality, as is found in the bluntly critical "To Kentucky" in his second volume, *Links of Friendship*:

Make not a law to rule another  
That you yourselves would not obey;  
In this, as in the ancient day,  
Man is the keeper of his brother.

Let not the States about you see  
That you are great in all that goes  
To banish friends and harbor foes  
Around the base of freedom's tree.<sup>30</sup>

This poem may have been a response to a bill filed in the Kentucky General Assembly that called for segregating railroad coaches. Despite its pithy bluntness, this poem still displays the appeal to moderation that marks much of Cotter's racially oriented verse. He appeals to white Kentuckians' pride by suggesting that their neighbors will

think less of them if they do not do right by their friends, Kentucky's blacks.

Cotter again alludes to discriminatory laws such as the 1892 law that segregated railroad coaches in "'Marse' Henry Watterson": "Who makes a law may force a means to curse, / Who puts it forth may blight the universe."<sup>31</sup> The weapon against such laws, Cotter writes in the last stanza, is Watterson. This poem involves a more direct plea than "To Kentucky," for Watterson, a Confederate veteran, was the highly influential editor of the *Courier-Journal*, whose pen could shape public opinion and public action not only in Louisville but also in Frankfort, the state capital. Nor was Watterson the only former Confederate to whom Cotter could appeal.

"Col. Bennett H. Young, Confederate Veteran, to the North" exemplifies Cotter's belief in the need for sectional reconciliation some four decades after the end of the Civil War. Although "The Northerners have often censured us, / And we of Southern blood have held in scorn / Their manhood's value and their motive's aim," Cotter calls for North and South to transcend the border line to "hail the deed that makes us one forever."<sup>32</sup> Young (1843-1919) led the Confederate attack on St. Albans, Vermont, in October 1864. After the war, he practiced law in Louisville and was the commanding general of the United Confederate Veterans Association from 1913 to 1916. According to an 11 February 1908 letter, Young considered himself Cotter's friend. Cotter, Young wrote, "has written a good deal of poetry, much of which he has submitted to me for criticism, and some of which I have sent to Eastern Magazines."<sup>33</sup> Having a white of Young's stature vouch for him could only have helped Cotter in his efforts to spread his messages.

Reconciliation is also the theme of "Grant and Lee" and "Lincoln and Davis." In "Grant and Lee," Cotter writes, "The South's the sin? The North's the glory? / Laugh out of court the hackneyed story."<sup>34</sup> Reconciliation can only come when North and South admit that both were at fault in the years that led to the Civil War.

"Lincoln and Davis," only four lines long, brings an element of pacifism to Cotter's theme of reconciliation:

Lincoln and Davis, sitting far above  
The plane where orgies and their tumults cease,  
Know that men cannot grasp the hand of Love  
'Till they ride war-shod to the gate of peace.<sup>35</sup>

Those four lines, however, constitute an eloquent plea for the need to overcome racial and sectional animosities caused by the war and lingering long after the nation had been reunited in law but not in spirit. For Cotter, it is the spirit of reunion, not legalities, that will lead to true reconciliation.

Cotter addresses black-white and North-South relations in other poems, but he also turns his attention to intraracial relations by focusing on attitudes toward mulattoes, an issue that would be of personal interest to Cotter as the son of a white father and a mother of mixed European, African, and Native American ancestry.

Mulattoes came in gradations of skin color, some so light that they could, and did, pass for whites. Both Northerners and Southerners favored mulattoes over dark-skinned African-Americans, according to Robert Brent Toplin,<sup>36</sup> who quotes several Southern writers to the effect that mulattoes, because of the admixture of white blood, were superior to blacks.<sup>37</sup> Although his study examines attitudes toward mulattoes in the antebellum South, Toplin notes that "the favoritism toward light-skinned Negroes continued into modern times."<sup>38</sup> Light-skinned African-Americans reflected the prevailing white attitudes, considering themselves superior to darker-skinned blacks and



**STORY-TELLING ON A LOUISVILLE PLAYGROUND**

*1922 postcard showing Mr. Cotter telling stories to children. Courtesy: Kentucky Historical Society*

forming social clubs that excluded people with dark skin. This ostracism generated a backlash on the part of darker-skinned African-Americans, some of whom founded clubs that refused membership to those with light skin.<sup>39</sup> African-American writers concerned with racial equality often felt compelled to delve into the issue of mulattoes and their position in society vis-à-vis both whites and blacks. Cotter did so, but only in two stories, “Rodney” and “Tesney, the Deceived,” and one poem, “Melchisedec and Pushkin,” which celebrates the famous Russian mulatto writer, Aleksandr Pushkin.

In the poem, Melchisedec, the Earth-God, describes Pushkin as rare, while Pushkin describes himself as being of “white blood, black and brown,” adding that he had “missed all Heaven offers — / And found all Hell denies.”<sup>40</sup> Through such words Cotter conveys the fate of most mulattoes at the time: they were considered superior to dark-skinned blacks but inferior to whites, existing in a neither-nor world between the two.

In “Rodney,” the title character has a black mother and a white father, whom he meets only once, in what may be an autobiographical incident, and who tells him the head of hair of which Rodney is so proud is a sign of disgrace. But whites are not Rodney’s problems:

The Negro has as much prejudice as the white man. Under like conditions the negro<sup>41</sup> would make the same laws against the white. This crept out in the treatment of Rodney. His worst enemies were always negroes. The Anglo-Saxon blood in his veins made scoffers of some and demons of others.<sup>42</sup>

Later in the story, “two fine ladies of ebony hue” visiting Rodney’s mother call him a “half-white brat” and hint that he is a thief. The treatment Rodney receives shows the plight of the mulatto—neither black nor white, subject to rejection by both.

Tesney, a beautiful mulatta, is verbally assaulted by Agnes, the ex-slave who runs the household. When Tesney tells Agnes she cannot marry George, Agnes lashes out, calling the young woman “a ha’f-white nigger. You thinks bekase yo’ face ain’t whut you calls raal black, an’ bekase yo’ hair ain’t smack-dab ter yo’ haid”<sup>43</sup> that she is too good for George. Tesney discovers, as does Rodney, that her worst enemies are not whites but African-Americans.

The spirit of reconciliation that Cotter so fervently believed in is perhaps best

expressed in “The Mouth of a Babe Has Spoken,”<sup>44</sup> written to honor a white boy who drowned in an unsuccessful attempt to save a black companion.<sup>45</sup> Cotter writes:

The mouth of a babe has spoken, and phrased the word with his life.  
 The mouth of a babe has spoken, and Death writes the creed of Heaven in the wrath of  
 the water.  
 The mouth of a babe has spoken, and the warmth of the heart springs a flame in the murk  
 of the conscience.  
 The mouth of a babe has spoken, and the deed runs riot in music—a music that sobers  
 the world.  
 The mouth of a babe has spoken, and companionship holds eternal tryst in the tardy  
 Court of the Brotherhood of Man.

These poems and short stories demonstrate one vital theme that runs through much of Cotter’s writings: the need for racial and sectional equality and reconciliation. African-Americans, no matter how light or dark their skin, must be treated as equals not only by whites but also by each other. North and South, still alienated by animosities left over from the Civil War and Reconstruction, must vanquish that alienation to achieve true reconciliation and national unity.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ENDNOTES

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1. “My Mother and Her Family” is divided into chapters, with only a few pages numbered, so citations are made to chapters. Copies of the legal-sized typescript were found at the Western Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library and at the Center of Excellence for the Study of Kentucky African Americans at Kentucky State University in Frankfort.

2. Some records in Nelson County give Stap’s last name as Step.

3. “My Mother,” Chapter 3.

4. In “My Mother,” Cotter gives his father’s first name as Michiel or Micheil and states that he was sixty at the younger Cotter’s birth (Chapter 6). However, 1850 census records for Louisville show the name as Michael Cotter and give an age, forty-two, that would put him in his early fifties rather than sixty when Joseph Cotter was born. (Barbara Sistler, Byron Sistler, and Samuel Sistler, comps. *1850 Census, Jefferson County, Kentucky*, Byron Sistler & Associates, Nashville, 1990, 284.)

5. “My Mother,” Chapter 1.

6. “Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr.” Ts. Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., Papers, Louisville Free Public Library, Western Branch, Louisville. The sketch is less than two pages long.

7. *Kentucky Negro Educational Association Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1, November-December 1942, 27.

8. Lowell Harrison, *The Civil War in Kentucky*, U P of Kentucky, Lexington, 1975, 9.

9. Ross A. Webb. “Readjustment.” *The Kentucky Encyclopedia*. Ed. John E. Kleber. U P of Kentucky, Lexington, 1992, 756.

10. Marjorie M. Norris, “An Early Instance of Nonviolence: The Louisville Demonstrations of 1870-1871,” *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 32, No. 4, November 1966, 488.

11. George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930*, Louisiana State UP, Baton Rouge, 1985, 50.

12. Norris, 499.
13. *Ibid.*, 503.
14. Lowell Harrison, "Buckner, Simon Bolivar," *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 136.
15. Lowell Harrison, "McCreary, James Bennett," *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 594.
16. "Helm, Benjamin Hardin," *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 421.
17. Lowell Harrison, "Knott, James Proctor," *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 522.
18. Lowell Harrison, "Brown, John Young," *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 129.
19. Lowell Harrison, "Blackburn, Luke Pryor," *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 84.
20. Wright, *Behind a Veil*, 50.
21. *Ibid.*, 62.
22. George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings,"* Louisiana State U P, Baton Rouge, 1990, 307.
23. *Ibid.*, 23.
24. *The Waiting Years: Essays on American Negro Literature*, Louisiana State U P, Baton Rouge, 1976, 3.
25. Lucien V. Rule, "Joseph Seamon Cotter 1861-1940." *Oldham Era*, La Grange, Kentucky. 19 July 1940, 2.
26. Scott Cummings and Michael Price. *Race Relations in Louisville: Southern Racial Traditions and Northern Class Dynamics*. College of Urban and Public Affairs, University of Louisville, 1990, 3.
27. *A Rhyming*, New South, Louisville, 1895, 5.
28. *Ibid.*, 17.
29. "Heath, Andrew." *Afro-American Encyclopedia*. Ed. Martin Rywell. Vol. 4. Educational Book, North Miami, 1974, 1170.
30. *Links of Friendship*, Bradley & Gilbert, Louisville, 1898, 63-64.
31. *A White Song and a Black One*, Bradley & Gilbert, Louisville, 1909, 12.
32. *A White Song*, 13-14.
33. Bennett H. Young to John Wilson Townsend. 11 Feb. 1908. John Wilson Townsend Papers, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, Kentucky.
34. *A White Song*, 13.
35. *Collected Poems*, Henry Harrison, New York, 1938, 20.
36. Robert Brent Toplin, "Between Black and White: Attitudes Toward Southern Mulattoes," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 45, No. 2, May 1979, 189.
37. *Ibid.*, 192.
38. *Ibid.*, 200.
39. *Ibid.*, 193-194.
40. *Sequel to the "Pied Piper of Hamelin" and Other Poems*, Henry Harrison, New York, 1939, 74.
41. Cotter was inconsistent in his capitalization of the word "Negro." I have followed his usage in direct quotations.
42. *Negro Tales*, Cosmopolitan, New York, 1912, 23.
43. *Negro Tales*, 41.
44. *Negroes and Others at Work and Play*, Paebur, New York, 1947, 14.
45. "Boy, 13, Drowned with His Pal He Tried to Save." *Courier-Journal*, Louisville, Ky., 5 Sept. 1919, 1. The story in the *Courier-Journal* gives the age of both the white youth, Roy Davis, and the black youth, James Alexander, as about thirteen. Their death certificates, however, give Davis's age as fourteen and Alexander's as twelve. According to the story, Davis, although an inexperienced swimmer, jumped into the Ohio River in an attempt to save Alexander.

### A List of Joseph Seamon Cotter's Published Works

Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., published eight books and one booklet during his lifetime:

*Caleb, the Degenerate: A Study of the Customs, Types, and Needs of the American Negro.* New York: Henry Harrison, 1940. Cotter's only full-length play, written in the 1890s. A closet drama that has, so far as is known, never been performed on stage.

*Collected Poems.* New York: Henry Harrison, 1938. Includes poems previously published in book form, plus additional poems. Many of the poems use dialect. Also includes lines from Act III of *Caleb, the Degenerate*.

*Links of Friendship.* Louisville, 1898. Cotter's second collection of verse, some of which previously appeared in *A Rhyming*. It contains some poems approaching the use of dialect, including "Answer to Dunbar's 'After a Visit,'" written in response to a poem Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote about a visit to Louisville.

*Negroes and Others at Work and Play.* New York: Paebar, 1947. Cotter's last book, published when he was eighty-six years old. Contains verse, short stories, one-act plays, and a miscellany of epigrams, apothegms, and the like.

*Negro Tales.* New York: Cosmopolitan, 1912. Cotter's only collection of short stories, including some that are only one to two pages long. One is apparently intended as a prose version of *Caleb, the Degenerate*. Several make use of dialect, and some stories seem to be at least partly autobiographical.

*A Rhyming.* Louisville, 1895. Cotter's first published collection of verse, none of it in dialect. According to one source, he included the ones he thought worthy in *Links of Friendship* and destroyed all the copies of *A Rhyming* he could find.

*Sequel to the "Pied Piper of Hamelin" and Other Poems.* New York: Henry Harrison, 1939. As with *Collected Poems* above, some previously published work and some new. One interesting dialect poem is addressed to the Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen, who eschewed dialect in his own verse.

*Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of Colored Parkland or "Little Africa," Louisville, Kentucky, 1891-1916.* Louisville: I. Willis Cole, 1934. A slender volume that celebrates the anniversary of an African-American community that Cotter helped found in the Louisville area.

*A White Song and a Black One.* Louisville: Bradley & Gilbert, 1909. Cotter's third collection of poetry, with the first section including poems addressed to or about whites, the final section addressed to or about blacks. Two of the twenty-six "white songs" are in dialect, while fourteen of the twenty-two "black songs" are.



photograph by Nicci Mechler