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Coming to Accounts: Fraud and Muckraking in Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*

Mark David Kaufman

- 1 “Bodysnatching” has become such a trope of science fiction that we tend to forget that it was also the reality of the slave trade: the violent appropriation of the body, the traumatic displacement from the familiar to the foreign, or alien. Economically driven, the slave trade inevitably reconstituted the body as both an exchangeable commodity and a figural assemblage of parts. The rhetoric of accounting came to mask—and in some sense make possible—the violence of the trade. Only in the ledger, manifest, or cargo list—in the itemized and quantitative table of the account—could the human body be rendered exchangeable, and so the business of “bookkeeping” became both the reality and one of the master metaphors of slavery itself. However, in relying on the economic logic and language of business, slavery and the racist ideology that followed in its wake were likewise vulnerable to a discourse that could challenge the institution on its own terms. Rather than doing away with the rhetoric of business and accounting, some abolitionists chose to critique and undermine slavery *as a business*. In the writings of Frederick Douglass, for instance, the terminology of accounting—especially the terminology of criminal bookkeeping—serves as a rhetorical weapon. As a result of its adoption by the ex-slave and abolitionist, the “account” took on a connotation of testimony, reportage, and confession—in short, a narrative that audits the tropological underpinnings of racial discourse.
- 2 This article will trace the rhetoric of accounting from its initial use by slave traders, to its reinscription (or re-metaphorization) as “fraud” by abolitionists, and finally to its turn-of-the-century valence in exposing the linguistic double-dealing and metonymic substitution that informed—and continues to inform—racial ideology and discourse. With its emphasis on bodysnatching, doubling, and displacement of “figures,” Charles W. Chesnutt’s 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition* exposes the fallacious logic, the traces of the trade, which persisted in the figuration of racial

relations in post-Reconstruction America. In doing so, Chesnutt's novel participates in, or prefigures, a method of journalistic "muckraking" that was soon to characterize the first decade of the twentieth century. Writing his own fictionalized account of the Wilmington Insurrection of 1898, Chesnutt compensates for the lack of fair media coverage—the absence of a black point-of-view following the riot—by dramatizing the incident in such a way as to emphasize the conditions of that very absence: the manipulation of media organs by a coalition of families and interests. Building upon Douglass's strategy, Chesnutt's muckraking method constructively conflates racism with fraudulent business and political activities, unethical monopolies, and inequitable privileges. Chesnutt forces us to see racial ideology as predicated upon a *violence of figuration*, a metonymical series of literal and figural substitutions and replacements that obscures the true nature of race relations. In tangent with the economic boom of the last decades of the nineteenth century, which benefited a powerful elite under the guise of collective prosperity, the wheeling and dealing of the long "post-bellum"¹ effectively foreclosed advancement to the colored population while promising an illusory political and economic emancipation. Ironically, the failure of historical Reconstruction occasioned the need for a rhetorical *deconstruction* of both racial and economic ideologies, an act of investigative reporting and invasive auditing that implicated newspapers, magazines, and realist literature in progressive politics while simultaneously critiquing Progressivism itself.

- 3 Before we consider Chesnutt's revelation of the linguistic and economic structures of racism in *The Marrow of Tradition*, we must first understand the relationship between literal and figural "accounting" in the history of the slave trade. In *Saltwater Slavery*, Stephanie E. Smallwood discusses the revolt on the slave ship *Cape Coast* in 1721 and the commodifying fiction that underlies the official record. Rather than crediting the slaves with organized rebellion, the investigating officials placed the blame on the captain's "foolhardy departure" from standard practice—his decision to keep the slaves out of irons. The reaction of the officials, Smallwood contends, "reminded any European who heard news of the [slave revolt on the *Cape Coast*] of what all preferred not to contemplate too closely: that their 'accountable' history was only as real as the violence and racial fiction at its foundation" (34). Crucially, this process of narrativization, of maintaining and repeating an official account that denies the slave any sort of agency, has the transverse effect of making the slave's very body "accountable" or inscribable as a commodity: "Only by ceaseless replication of the system's violence did African sellers and European buyers render captives in the distorted guise of human commodities to market" (34). Here, Smallwood draws our attention to the relationship between violence, fiction, and repetition. The denial of any willful agency attributable to the slaves within the official account of the revolt correlates with the event of commodification itself. Just as the ledger has the effect of reducing the human being to a number, the account reinscribes the slave within a fiction that "renders" men and women as items of cargo, exchangeable figures. "Turning captives into commodities," Smallwood writes, "was a thoroughly scientific enterprise":

It turned on perfecting the practices required to commodify people and determining where those practices reached their outer limits (that is, the point at which they extinguished the lives they were meant to sustain in commodified form). Traders reduced people to the sum of their biological parts, thereby scaling life down to an arithmetical equation and finding the lowest common denominator. (43)

- 4 Smallwood's emphasis on *turning* is appropriate, given that the movement she describes is essentially a process of figuration or troping. Inscribed within a racialized fiction, the slave is simultaneously rendered and rent—that is to say, figuratively reduced to a collection of parts. This abstraction operates with the logic of metonymy or (more properly) synecdoche: the individual becomes a “head” to be counted or a “hand” for labor.²
- 5 In its exchangeability, the commodified body is more prone to physical appropriation and figural reproduction, forms of violence with implications for both the literal body and the represented figure, the image of the slave in the text. The power to put the body to work is conditional upon the power to represent the body on paper. Moreover, as the archives of literary history and literary criticism indicate, the body persisted in its commodified form even beyond the era of slavery. The reduction of the body to an arithmetical state is one aspect of what Marcus Rediker, drawing on the novelist Barry Unsworth, sees as a problem with the current study of slavery. In essence, the rhetoric of the account continues to haunt the text. In emphasizing numbers and statistics, Rediker suggests, we unwittingly reproduce the very tropes of commodification that made slavery possible:
- [In *Sacred Hunger*] Unsworth describes a ‘violence of abstraction’ that has plagued the study of the slave trade from its beginning. It is as if the use of ledgers, almanacs, balance sheets, graphs, and tables—the merchants’ comforting methods—has rendered abstract, and thereby dehumanized, a reality that must, for moral and political reasons, be understood concretely. (12)
- 6 Even when benevolent or ostensibly progressive, critical inquiry and narrativization of the past become acts of *taking stock* that threaten to dehumanize the subject.
- 7 However, while Smallwood and Rediker understandably negate the methodology and discourse of “accounting,” we should also attend to the manner in which exploiting this discourse has historically provided an effective means of resistance and subversion. Indeed, the figuring and disfiguring rhetoric of the account was so pervasive in the discourse of slavery that it was necessary for the abolitionist movement itself to *incorporate* the language of business and bookkeeping. Abolitionist rhetoric presupposed that slavery sold itself on a fundamental level as a business and thus strategically emphasized slavery's economic perversion, characterizing the institution as a “bad business,” a corrupt enterprise. The mercantile discourse that had initially commodified the body of the slave thus became an instrument in the service of its emancipation. Frederick Douglass is one of the most significant writers to employ this strategy. In the first place, the former slave's decision to write and publish his own story served to establish the “authenticity” of his account (Sundquist 87). To put it another way, Douglass's own “revolt” escaped the kind of racial revisionism that underwrote the official narrative of the *Cape Coast*. Through this process of accounting, the writer is thus free to expose the violence of slavery through the rhetoric of commerce itself. In his *Narrative* (1845), Douglass famously refers to his Aunt Hester's beating as a “bloody transaction” (14). Likewise, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass describes a similar “dark transaction” (95), the shooting of an old man poaching oysters. As indicated in Webster's 1844 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, the word “transaction” had, by the mid-nineteenth century, evolved from the connotation of an “event” in general to the “doing or performing of any business” (“Transaction”; my emphasis). In characterizing these acts as “transactions,”

Douglass implies a violence of (dis)figuration that posits the body as the locus or product of illegal or immoral work—in effect, a black market commodity that may be abused or disposed of as the owner sees fit.

- 8 While critics have problematized Douglass's emphasis on these extreme "transactions," he makes it clear that the quotidian reality of slavery is just as susceptible to an economic critique. Douglass repeatedly uses the word "fraud" to describe the daily business of slavery. In *My Bondage*, while discussing a song typically sung at a holiday party—a song that begins with the lines: "We raise de wheat, / Dey gib us de corn; / We bake the bread, / Dey gib us de cruss"—Douglass wryly comments: "This is not a bad summary of the palpable injustice and fraud of slavery, giving—as it does—to the lazy and idle, the comforts which God designed should be given solely to the honest laborer" (185). In drawing attention to the fraudulent character of slavery, Douglass exposes the criminality of the institution from within the linguistic system (or semantic field) of slavery itself: the rhetoric of labor and production.³ The implications of Douglass's exposure of slavery's "fraud" are far-reaching. In making visible the economic as well as the moral injustice of slavery, Douglass effectively critiques capitalism as a whole; the "fraud" he describes becomes the constitutive condition of the capitalist economy, the chronic disproportion between labor and compensation. Arguably, it is this inability to separate abolitionist rhetoric from an overall criticism of unchecked capitalism that results in the conflation of racial with economic discourse in progressive journalism and realist literature at the turn of the century.
- 9 In the decades following the Civil War, the failure of Reconstruction to impose social and economic reform in the "New South" created conditions in which the colored population was subjected to forms of fraud beyond the realm of business and commerce. "Armed conflict temporarily abolished Dixie's rule along with slavery," writes Michael T. Gilmore, "but if the North won the war, the historically closed and illiberal South won the peace" (2). As the newly restored republic embraced laissez-faire economics, northern investment in southern industry and the need for stability ensured that New York and Washington would turn a blind eye to resurgent racism and inequality. Despite the initial enfranchisement of freedmen and other steps forward made during Reconstruction, southern white lawmakers soon had *carte blanche* (so to speak) to reverse these reforms through any legislative means at their disposal. Poll taxes, literacy tests, and property requirements became the instruments of disfranchisement, a movement that one southern newspaper characterized as "the struggle of the white people... to rid themselves of the dangers of the rule of negroes and the lower class of whites" (qtd. in Zinn 291). Black voters who met these conditions had still to contend with elections that were marred by fraud and coercion. At the same time, the adoption of Jim Crow laws established an ideology of "separate but equal." By the turn of the century, every southern state had codified the disfranchisement and segregation of the African American population, and northerners accepted these injustices as—according to a contemporary *New York Times* editorial—necessary "under the supreme law of self-preservation" (qtd. in Zinn 207).
- 10 When Charles W. Chesnutt began publishing his first stories and essays in the 1880s, such retrogressions were already well underway. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1858 to free parents, Chesnutt began his career as an educator before turning to law and literature. Although light-skinned, he chose to identify as a colored man, and this decision would have a twofold effect on his professional life. On the one hand, in spite

of running a lucrative and well-respected stenography firm, his legal practice struggled in the face of racial discrimination. On the other hand, his status as a “voluntary Negro” worked to establish “the authenticity of his literary voice” (Sundquist 360). As an attorney and court reporter, Chesnutt was well aware of both the linguistic dimension of law and the figuring potential of the account, the testimony of the witness. Moreover, as a biographer of Frederick Douglass, Chesnutt had an opportunity to study Douglass’s rhetorical method quite closely. Over half a century after Douglass first named the “bloody transaction” of slavery, Chesnutt could employ a similar tactic: the exposure of racism as fraud, trickery, and (perhaps most importantly) a violence of figuration that relies on the rhetorical machinations attendant upon the “business” of white supremacy. In doing so, the writer reveals the larger constellation of racism, industrialism, and dirty politics that informs the Gilded Age. He implicates not only southern white supremacists, but the entire capitalist system of post-bellum America. Just as Douglass’s description of slavery as “fraud” implies a critique of the entire market economy and its mechanisms, so too do Chesnutt’s essays, stories, and novels contextualize racism within a larger industrial complex of newspapers, law enforcement agencies, and powerful businesses. Significantly, Chesnutt goes one step further than Douglass in emphasizing the metonymical structure of racial ideology, the acts of misnaming that sustain the white monopoly of economics, communications, and politics.

- 11 From this perspective, Chesnutt takes part in a kind of *literary* muckraking concomitant with—or preceding—the journalistic muckraking that was just beginning to appear in magazines like *McClure’s* and *Collier’s Weekly*. The turn of the century saw the ascension of the first truly global corporations, such as the Standard Oil Company and the United States Steel Corporation. Despite growing suspicions and allegations of unfair business practices, these companies became so powerful that, by 1910, William Archer could write in the *Fortnightly Review* that America “[was] like an enormously rich country overrun by robber barons, and very inadequately policed by the central government and by certain local vigilance societies” (qtd. in Regier 3). Large companies established “trusts,” arrangements among multiple corporate bodies to consolidate shares, for the purposes of dominating the market and masking the true nature of their business practices and holdings. Likewise, in order to better police their public image, these corporations took virtual control of the media. Positioning itself against these industrial and media monopolies, the muckraking movement made use of existing media organs with large circulations to expose the various crimes that were then masquerading as progress (Regier 194). Given the close proximity of literature and journalism in the popular magazines of the day, it is hardly surprising that many muckrakers chose to highlight the “fiction” at the core of corporate America. One such writer, Charles Edward Russell, was “blacklisted” for making it clear that the success of these corporations rested upon a “whole vast mass of watered stocks, fictitious bonds, fraudulent scrip, [and] gambling insecurities” (qtd. in Regier 143). As Russell indicates, the trust is sustained by a legal and economic fantasy, an accumulation of fragmentary documentation without substance—in short, a kind of simulacrum.
- 12 Ironically (or tellingly) a similar quality emerges in the criticism leveled at the muckraking movement itself, which is, in its own way, a complex negotiation between fact and fiction, journalism and sensationalism, objectivity and “investment.” As Robert Miraldi has suggested, the fact-fiction distortion in the “genre” of muckraking effectively reconstitutes such journalism as a form of “faction” (25).⁴ Interestingly,

Miraldi's characterization of muckraking as "the blurring of the line between fiction and nonfiction" (45) echoes the originary documentation of the term itself. In a 1906 speech that was also published as an editorial in the *New York Tribune*, Theodore Roosevelt associates the journalist whose scandal-mongering goes too far with John Bunyan's "Man with the Muckrake," the misdirected soul "who could look no way but downward" (58). While sympathetic to the cause and censorious of corruption, Roosevelt enjoins writers to "remember that even in the case of crime, if it is attacked in sensational, lurid and untruthful fashion, the attack may do more damage to the public mind than the crime itself" (60). "If the whole picture is painted black," Roosevelt continues, "there remains no hue whereby to single out the rascals for distinction from their fellows. Such painting finally induces a kind of moral color blindness; and people affected by it come to the conclusion that no man is really black and no man really white, but they are all gray" (60).

- 13 Intentionally or not, Roosevelt's rhetoric seems to evoke the indeterminate "color line" that infuses Chesnutt's own investigative method. But while Roosevelt negates the inability to distinguish "white" from "black," Chesnutt foregrounds the problematic yet ultimately productive blurring of lines both racial (as in mixed-race relationships) and rhetorical (as in the hybridity of realist or "purpose" fiction). This emphasis, in general, on multiplicity, pluralism, and coexistence lies at the heart of his muckraking mode. Although it would be misleading to describe Chesnutt as entirely hostile to capitalism—in addition to his success as a businessman, he gave a speech in praise of "Competition"⁵—his short stories are critical of unchecked commerce, monopoly, and exploitation, while simultaneously attuned to the ambiguities and hypocrisies of the color line.⁶ In "The Sheriff's Children" (1899), for example, the citizens of a small town in North Carolina pin the murder of a certain Captain Walker, a former Confederate officer, on a "strange mulatto" who has been seen near the captain's house (*Conjure* 134). One of the most remarkable aspects of this story is the manner in which Chesnutt records the townspeople's deliberations over whether or not to lynch the suspect with what could only be described as business-like indifference. Indeed, one sometimes feels that one is reading the minutes of a board meeting. After the townspeople brainstorm possible motives, leading to "a discussion of the speculative value of Confederate money," they vote to murder the young man, and Chesnutt summarizes the conclusion of the gathering in bureaucratic prose: "When the preliminaries of the lynching had been arranged, and a committee appointed to manage the affair, the crowd dispersed, some to go to their dinners, and some to secure recruits for the lynching party" (136). Meanwhile, Sheriff Campbell, aware that his prisoner is about to be lynched, frees the man from his cell and offers him a gun to protect himself. But the suspect turns the gun on the sheriff and reveals that he is the sheriff's son, Tom, by a former slave named Cicely. While Sheriff Campbell deals with this realization, his daughter, Polly, shoots Tom from behind, and the sheriff returns him to his cell. After wrestling with his conscience, the sheriff decides to free Tom and let him escape, but in the morning he finds the young man dead, having bled to death in the night. A tale of multigenerational revenge and atonement, "The Sheriff's Children" explores the way violence is institutionalized and how the family—another institution—comes to serve as a microcosm for the complexities of justice, restitution, and integration. While the ending of the story is less than optimistic, Chesnutt clearly sees a certain value in making visible the blurring of lines, reminding readers that such issues are far from "black and white."

- 14 In its preoccupation with amalgamation on communal, familial, and individual levels, and in its attentiveness to the manner in which the past continues to haunt the present, *The Marrow of Tradition* more explicitly extends the writer's literary muckraking to contemporary events. A response to the 1898 Wilmington "Race Riot,"⁷ which Chesnutt believed had been misrepresented in the national media, the novel interrogates the legacy of slavery and the failure of Reconstruction in the fictional town of Wellington. Fearing a "Fusionist" (Republican and Populist) political victory, which threatens to place African Americans in a position of authority over the white population, a small group of individuals—Major Carteret, General Belmont, and Captain McBane—hatch a conspiracy to forestall the election by playing on public anxieties in the wake of a recent murder of a white woman, Polly Ochiltree, for which a black manservant, Sandy, has been framed (she has actually been killed by Tom Delamere, the disreputable scion of an old family). Manipulating the public through a local newspaper (owned by Carteret), the conspirators use an anti-lynching article to provoke fears of aggressive black sexuality. In this way, the riot erupts, ostensibly, as a macabre defense of white womanhood, but its true purpose is the "revolution," as the plotters put it, against "nigger domination" (67). Concurrently, a family drama unfolds between the once-dominant Carterets and the Millers, an affluent black family who now live in the former Carteret mansion. Olivia Carteret is, we learn, the half-sister of Janet Miller; both are daughters of Samuel Merkel, who had secretly married his black servant after the war and whose will becomes a cipher for the enfranchisement of the negroes in the New South.
- 15 Chesnutt's novel is in many ways a meditation upon the role of the media in both sustaining and disrupting power structures, but newspapers are not the only media at play. If the events and characters in *The Marrow of Tradition* seem oddly familiar, it is because the novel draws not only, as many commentators have pointed out, on Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), but also on Chesnutt's own stories. In "The Sheriff's Children," a white Polly shoots a "mulatto" Tom, while in the novel a white Tom (pretending to be black) murders a white Polly. Along with the centrality of lynching, this uncanny repetition of names—repetitions that also shift or distort the color line—serves as a rhetorical analogue for both the perpetuation of racial violence and the fraudulent "progress" that is more properly a revisionary *reenactment*, the persistence of a "dark story" (*Marrow* 114).
- 16 While critical assessments like Eric J. Sundquist's lengthy treatment in *To Wake the Nations* and Michael T. Gilmore's more recent reading in *The War on Words* tend to stress Chesnutt's indictment of the New South,⁸ *Marrow* may also be read more generally as a response to economic imperialism and social hegemony on a national level. From this perspective, Chesnutt's focus on the machinations of a cabal of families correlates with the muckrakers' probing of powerful and influential "houses." To be sure, the situation at the beginning of the novel could hardly be described as a white "monopoly"; while families like the Millers have become, in a sense, the new ascendancy, the old families are reduced to toasting their former glory at the Clarendon Club, from which even the arriviste McBane is excluded, much to his chagrin.⁹ Rather, theirs is a monopoly *in potentia*, a dominion to be restored through violence, propaganda, and fraud. At the same time, this cartel may have had a wider valence for Chesnutt's readers. In labeling Carteret, Belmont, and McBane the "Big Three" (94), Chesnutt is doing much more than evoking the "Secret Nine" behind the Wilmington massacre; the designation alludes to

the journalistic rhetoric of the Gilded Age, in which the “Big Three” signified the banking trio of J. P. Morgan, George F. Baker, and James Stillman (Markham 48) as well as the combined houses of Morgan, Rockefeller, and Carnegie. Thus, we might think of *Marrow*’s “Big Three” as institutions in their own right, organizations that bring their will to bear not only on the media and police, but on the social and racial relations of the entire community.

- 17 Just as *Marrow* itself is an attempt to intervene in the official account—that is to say, to offer a corrective to the biased and limited coverage of Wilmington—so too does the novel represent racial friction as a contest of papers: Carteret’s *Morning Chronicle* and the more progressive *Afro-American Banner*. In the novel, General Belmont is well aware of the necessity of controlling the media: “[Y]ou,” he tells Carteret, “represent the Associated Press”:

Through your hands passes all the news of the state. What more powerful medium for the propagation of an idea? The man who would govern a nation by writing its songs was a blethering idiot beside the fellow who can edit its news dispatches. The negroes are playing into our hands,—every crime that one of them commits is reported by us. (96)

- 18 In addition to highlighting crimes committed by the colored population, Carteret uses his paper to create the suggestion of crime where none exists. At the beginning of the novel, the *Banner* has recently published an editorial constituting “a frank and bold discussion of lynching and its causes. It denied that most lynchings were for the offense most generally charged as their justification [i.e. rape], and declared that, even of those seemingly traced to this cause, many were not for crimes at all, but for voluntary acts” (97). As it foregrounds the way in which appeals to “rape” are used as a means of concealing the consensuality of interracial relations, the editorial scandalously affirms the racial “fusion” that underlies and colors the community as a whole.¹⁰ In order to contain the article and simultaneously redirect it to their own purposes, the Big Three conspire to reprint it out of context at a moment when the public is already on edge in the wake of Polly’s murder—which the *Morning Chronicle* implies had a sexual dimension. Rhetorically, then, the real “crime” (libel or fraud) is displaced from the white complex of power to the black population in an act of framing that reinscribes political advancement as sexual violation, an affront to racial purity.
- 19 Although dominated by the physical violence of its climax, *Marrow* abounds with similar instances of what we might describe as “white collar” crime: counterfeiting, cheating, forgery, and perjury. These crimes of language and image are essentially acts of misrepresentation that alter, replace, efface, or destroy “accounts,” feats of prestidigitation that have the effect of positing black sexuality as the condition of all criminal action. Polly’s murder, for instance, is viewed not only as an “assault upon a woman of [the white] race” but as an all-out attack on “[the white] race in the person of its womanhood” (156). This “rhetorical collapse”¹¹ performs a logical fallacy that exposes the linguistic—or more specifically metonymic—structure of racist ideology. Far from being an exception to the “white collar” pattern, the murder operates within a similar logic of substitution; it is, in effect, a material instantiation of a fraudulent metonymy. Like other crimes in the novel, the murder is committed by a white man and blamed on a colored man. In this particular case, however, the frame-up is made possible through a literal exchange of bodies, a performance that must be witnessed to be successful. Returning home from the office of the *Morning Chronicle* on the night of

the crime, Lee Ellis sees two men walking down the street. The second of the two appears to be tailing the first:

This aroused Ellis's curiosity, which was satisfied in some degree when the man in advance stopped beneath a lamp-post and stood for a moment looking across the street, with his face plainly visible in the yellow circle of light. It was a dark face, and Ellis recognized it instantly as that of old Mr. Delamere's body servant [...]
(150-151)

- 20 When the second individual also passes into the light, Ellis "[wonders] that there should be two men so much alike" (151). What Ellis does not, of course, realize is that the first man is Tom Delamere in blackface, pretending to be his grandfather's "body servant," Sandy. Oddly, the real Sandy appears as a fraudulent copy of himself, and therein lies the monstrous power of representation that Chesnutt dramatizes, in various ways, throughout the novel. In *Marrow*, the appropriation of black identity is the white criminal's most effective cover. When old Delamere later confesses his grandson's guilt to Carteret, he contends that "nothing is easier than for a white man to black his face. God alone knows how many crimes have been done in this guise" (182). Identity theft through mimicry and imitation—figural forms of body-snatching—is not only a fraudulent act but a (melo)dramatic transaction, an exchange that renders material the rhetorical collapse of white crime into black criminality.
- 21 By representing racism as fraud, Chesnutt makes visible the metonymical structure of all racial ideology as an exchange of *figures*. Olivia and Janet, half-sisters whose resemblance to each other makes them all the more exchangeable, represent two sides of what Chesnutt himself describes as a "transaction" (111). Early in the novel, a strange, wordless confrontation occurs on the street, during which Olivia's infant son, Dodie, is nearly dropped. Dodie's Mammy Jane suspects that Janet "may have cast the evil eye upon the baby" (111). Regardless, this unsettling "transaction" situates Janet as a threat to the Carteret legacy, a position that is further amplified after the murder, when Polly's death reveals Merkel's secret will. As Olivia contemplates whether or not to acknowledge her father's marriage to his former slave—which had been legalized in the early years of Reconstruction and therefore entitled Janet to an inheritance—her justification for keeping silent follows a corrupt line of reasoning that manages to reabsorb, dialectically, the whole history of slavery (as well as its critique) as an economically untenable system:
- Under the law, which intervened now that there was no will, the property should have been equally divided. If the woman had been white,—but the woman had *not* been white, and the same rule of moral conduct did not, *could* not, in the very nature of things, apply, as between white people! For, if this were not so, slavery had been, not merely an economic mistake, but a great crime against humanity. If it had been such a crime, as for a moment she dimly perceived it might have been, then through the long centuries there had been piled up a catalogue of wrong and outrage which, if the law of compensation be a law of nature, must some time, somewhere, in some way, be atoned for. She herself had not escaped the penalty, of which, she realized, this burden placed upon her conscience was but another installment. (208)
- 22 The body-switching and doubling we have seen throughout the novel is now enacted upon the level of the word itself. Olivia's subjunctive attempt to substitute white for black ("If the woman had been white") is cut short, because she understands that for the black citizen the law is in force but does not signify. For a brief moment, she sees that the "economic mistake," the fraud that violently dis-incorporates, is the crime of

racism itself. Ultimately, though, her act of effacement, of destroying the marriage certificate, becomes the latest entry in the “catalogue” or record of wrongs that, as she herself hypothesizes, must eventually be set to rights. In its continuous deferral of syntactical logic and grammatical sense, the tortured and tortuous language of this passage performs the rhetorical sleight-of-hand that sustains (or reestablishes) white hegemony and simultaneously exposes the inability of the law to enfranchise or incorporate the black population.

- 23 In the end, the question of inheritance is tantamount to that of bequeathing a localized monopoly. To put it another way, maintaining the bloodline becomes necessary for economic stability. Consequently, the fear of rape, which signifies in this case a fear of amalgamation or miscegenation, converges with the anxiety of inheritance in Chesnutt's novel. The race riot is predicated on the notion that the female body must be protected, and its protection ensures the bloodline. Ironically, however, the riot results in the potential eradication of the inheritor. The final drama of the novel is, of course, the race to save baby Dodie, the only child of the Carterets and the heir to the *Morning Chronicle*. The child is necessary for the legal transmission of power, and only the town's black doctor has the skill to save the child. Significantly, it is Olivia's resemblance to her half-white half-sister—her virtual exchangeability—that persuades Dr. Miller, whose own child has just been killed in the riot, to let Olivia have a hearing. Yet despite Olivia's overtures to Janet and her attempt to establish a legitimate trust between them that would incorporate Janet within the family, Janet refuses and Olivia is able to maintain her monopoly—assuming that Dodie lives to inherit. Among Chesnutt's critics, there appears to be some disagreement over the novel's conclusion. Appealing to the writer's stated intention to end the book on a positive note, ¹²Sundquist contends that Dodie, “an innocent victim of the racial violence unleashed by his own father and other white supremacists,” finally “owes his life to William Miller and to the forgiving generosity of his wife, Janet” (406). Gilmore, on the other hand, observes that Dodie's preservation will, “one fears, enable him to carry on his father's racist crusade when he grows into an adult” (263).¹³ However, given that Chesnutt withholds the actual scene of Dodie's survival, it is perhaps this very state of suspension that most clearly renders “progress” ironic—a final intrusion of the “dark story” that haunts not only the “doubtful present” but also an “uncertain future” (*Marrow* 114). The ambiguity with which Chesnutt ends his novel is the most telling indication of the racially inflected anxiety facing the nation in the early years of the twentieth century. As Olivia herself observes, if there is to be any reconciliation, any “recognition,” it will necessarily be “tainted with fraud and crime and blood” (246).
- 24 Perhaps the most significant crime of account to which this line of inquiry alerts us is the lack of attention paid to race in the history of muckraking journalism and the antitrust debates. C. C. Regier's *The Era of the Muckrakers*, which continues to be a standard work in the field, devotes a whole two paragraphs to “the industrial status of the Negro” (152).¹⁴ As Russell Ames pointed out over sixty years ago, even the most canonical of social realist novels from the early years of the twentieth century—novels such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*—“did not... comprehend the relation of monopoly to imperialism or the use of racism to both” (203). What *The Marrow of Tradition* brings to our attention is that very relation: the intersection of race, economics, and hegemony. Following the failure of Reconstruction, unchecked capitalism and the monopolization of the industrial complex made it possible for the black population to be kept

disfranchised and figurally dis-membered, cut off from access to wealth and power. As we know from an article Chesnutt wrote after the publication of *The Marrow of Tradition*, he considered “tradition” a precondition of “monopoly”: “Tradition made the white people masters, rulers, who absorbed all the power, the wealth, the honors of the community, and jealously guarded this monopoly, with which they claimed to be divinely endowed, by denying to those who were not of their caste the opportunity to acquire any of these desirable things” (*Essays* 169). “Tradition,” he continues, “made the Negro a slave, an underling, existing by favor and not by right” (169). To live outside the law and yet be subject to its strictures is the condition of perpetual slavery, a condition sustained by a lack of sufficient accounting. Compensating for this “absence of black perspective” (Belau and Cameron 8), Chesnutt employs the realist novel as a journalist might an investigative report. It is appropriate that so many of his past and present commentators should choose to characterize his work in terms of the “exposé”; Chesnutt makes up for the silence of the muckrakers and their failure to account for what Ames describes as “the worst-smelling muck” of all (202)—the perpetuation of racism in the guise of reform.¹⁵

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NOTES

1. In using the term "post-bellum," I mean to reproduce the connotation implied by Chesnutt himself in the title of his 1931 essay, "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem" (Essays 543-549). Here, "post-bellum" signifies a longer, more indeterminate period than the historical Reconstruction (1865-1877). By suggesting that the war and its aftermath continuously haunt the present, Chesnutt arguably renders all "progress" suspicious.
2. In this sense, slavery intersects with another form of "body-snatching" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—namely, the acquisition and selling of bodies for the purposes of medical experimentation or dissection. In both cases, moneyed interests—appealing in different ways to the principles of the Enlightenment—justified their appropriations by stressing (respectively) the body's literal and spiritual "inanimacy," its dearth of *anima*, or soul.
3. In *To Wake the Nations*, Sundquist highlights this slave song not for its economic critique, but as "an index of the tenacity of oral culture, of African survivals in labor patterns, folk art, and music that are scattered throughout Douglass's work" (128-129). However, Sundquist also suggests that such songs served as "safety valves forestalling dissent" in the same way that religion and holidays kept potentially revolutionary energies confined to a controlled and symbolic space (129).
4. While acknowledging this problematic quality, Miraldi draws the line at describing muckraking as "literary," and he makes it clear that "literature" is not the subject of his study (18). Nevertheless, his repeated emphasis on muckraking as a hybrid "genre"—as well as his characterization of the journalists themselves as aspiring belletrists—seems to trouble this assertion.
5. In "Competition," a speech delivered before the Ohio Stenographer's Association in 1892, Chesnutt argues that rivalry in business fosters innovation, but he also makes it clear that such competitiveness should not devolve into slander or the desire for monopoly: "[By] competition I

do not mean a cut-throat struggle for supremacy; I do not mean a resort to unworthy methods. I would not want a dollar which I had put myself in the way of earning by decrying a worthy competitor. I think the most desirable way, in fact the only absolutely safe way to succeed, is on one's own merits, and not on the weaknesses of others" (*Essays* 93).

6. His first published story, "The Goophered Grapevine," which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1887 and was later included in his 1899 collection, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*, presents an imaginative indictment of northerners whose speculation in the "New South" requires their implicit acceptance of the status quo. The narrator, an amiable northerner named John who has moved south in quest of cheap labor and "land [that] could be bought for a mere song" (*Conjure* 1), meets the stereotypical plantation denizen Uncle Julius, whose self-conscious performance (Chesnutt's way of signifying on Joel Chandler Harris's "Uncle Remus") reminds us that John's economic venture is likewise an "investment" in racial ideologies. After listening to Uncle Julius's macabre "conjure" tale, essentially a warning against buying a bewitched or haunted vineyard, John dismisses the old man's advice and ends his narration (ironically) in praise of "the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries" (13).

7. Belau and Cameron argue that in using the term "race riot" we continue to participate in a misnaming of the real crime, the "illegal and unruly practices of the whites who controlled all the mediums for disseminating information to the public" (9). To put it another way, the violence at the heart of the Wilmington massacre and (by extension) Chesnutt's fictional retelling is nothing less than the "illegal seizure of a duly elected government and the unprovoked slaying of a peaceful citizenry" perpetuated by white supremacists (8).

8. Sundquist summarizes Chesnutt's novel as a "mediation on post-Reconstruction reunion politics, genealogy and the New South, Jim Crow cultural forms, intraracial 'racism,' and the rise of a black middle class" (13), but he neglects to acknowledge the writer's journalistic intervention, privileging instead the novel's literary and folkloric modes. Likewise, Gilmore's valuable analysis of (self-)censorship in American letters highlights *Marrow's* guarded critique of the New South, yet it overlooks the novel's wider muckraking context, its denunciation not only of the North's acquiescence to white supremacy, but also of imperialism in general.

9. Chesnutt describes McBane as one of those men, "foremost in negro-baiting and election fraud, [who] had done the dirty work of politics, as their fathers had done that of slavery, seeking their reward at first in minor offices,—for which men of gentler breeding did not care,—until their ambition began to reach out for higher honors" (65). Even his captain's rank, we are told, "was merely a polite fiction" (65). Naturally, McBane is at pains to make racial purity a more important condition for advancement than social class.

10. As Sundquist points out, "'fusion' had colloquial usage as a term for miscegenation in addition to designating the maverick political party that controlled much of North Carolina politics in the 1890s before being swept away in a statewide frenzy of racial intimidation and violence" (409).

11. In the introduction to the Bedford Cultural Edition of Chesnutt's novel, the editors note "the hallmark strategy of American white supremacy during and after Reconstruction, namely the rhetorical collapse of black power with black male sexuality" (Bentley and Gunning 15).

12. "[*The Marrow of Tradition*] is not a study in pessimism," Chesnutt declared in the *Cleveland World* in October 1901, "for it is the writer's belief that the forces of progress will in the end prevail, and that in time a remedy may be found for every social ill" (*Essays* 70).

13. Gilmore qualifies this reading by noting that "[the] cynical note is extratextual, as it were, for although Chesnutt said that his book eschewed pessimism, we know from history that Dixie's newspapers did not relent from their white-supremacist rhetoric for another seven decades. The text encourages the thought because of its own oscillations" (263).

14. To be fair, in his now classic study, *Muckraking and Progressivism in the American Tradition* (first published in 1976), Louis Filler devotes a chapter to the problematic figure of Tom Watson, a Populist who “abandoned his [initially] idealistic views of Negro-white cooperation” while maintaining “his castigations of trusts and recreant Democrats” (130). As Filler points out, “[the] unfortunate implication—reaffirmed elsewhere—was that progressivism was racism [...]” (131).

15. There is one noteworthy exception to the general lack of attention paid to race in turn-of-the-century muckraking journalism. To a remarkable degree, Chesnutt anticipates the investigative reporting of Ray Stannard Baker, whose dramatic exposés of mob violence and lynchings first began appearing in *The American Magazine* in April 1907 and were subsequently published as a book, *Following the Color Line* (1908). Like Chesnutt, Baker frames his study with a “race riot”—the Atlanta riot of 1903—and goes on to explore a variety of interrelated issues: the role of newspapers in perpetuating violence, the difficulty of defining the “color line,” the disfranchisement of African Americans, and the problem of northern acquiescence. At one point in his narration of the Atlanta aftermath, he records an exchange between a certain Dr. W. F. Penn, a “negro physician,” and one Colonel A. J. McBride, “a real estate owner and Confederate veteran” (20). The accidental similarity to Chesnutt’s Dr. Miller and Captain McBane reinforces the novelist’s theme of the distorted but uncanny repetitions that inform the history of race relations. However, in this case, the white soldier is sympathetic to the cause. When Dr. Penn tells the gathering of Atlantans that he now fears for his life, Colonel McBride stands and declares that the city should “protect such men.” “If necessary,” the former Confederate officer continues, “I will go out and sit on his porch with a rifle” (20). It seems, then, that not all echoes are discordant; far from duplicitous, such transactions suggest there is progress after all.

ABSTRACTS

This article traces the rhetoric of accounting in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century racial discourse, from its initial use by slave traders, to its reinscription (or re-metaphorization) as “fraud” by abolitionists, and finally to its turn-of-the-century valence in exposing the linguistic double-dealing and metonymic substitution that informed—and continues to inform—racist ideology. With its emphasis on bodysnatching, doubling, and displacement of “figures,” Charles W. Chesnutt’s 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition* exposes the fallacious logic, the traces of the trade, which persisted in the figuration of racial relations in post-Reconstruction America. In doing so, Chesnutt’s novel participates in, or prefigures, a method of journalistic “muckraking” that was soon to characterize the first decade of the twentieth century.

INDEX

Mots-clés: accounting, Charles W. Chesnutt, fraud, Frederick Douglass, Gilded Age, muckraking, New Economic Criticism, post-Reconstruction, racism, slavery

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