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**‘Race’ and Realism:
Vision, Textuality, and Charles Chesnutt’s
*The Marrow of Tradition***

Abstract: In this article, I read Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) against the background of realism to unravel the novel’s distinct critique of racial discourse. I argue that realism’s characteristic technique of appealing to the visible to establish the reality and realness of its fictions enables the novel to trace a similar operation in the discourse of race. My focus rests on the novel’s treatment of two pairs of characters that challenge the visual confidence of both realism and race, pairs that exemplify what Samira Kawash has called ‘interracial twins:’ sets of characters whose parties ‘actually,’ ostensibly belong to different ‘races,’ yet whom the text presents as strikingly similar in their appearance. In its characterization of and narratives surrounding these ‘twins,’ the novel exposes the techniques by which racial discourse naturalizes itself and un-masks race as a textual construct, generated by stories and documents that dangerously sustain a reality of their own.

In a recent review essay, Henry Wonham diagnoses a veritable boom in Chesnutt studies – “[a]nyone who has made a habit of roaming the book exhibits at MLA conferences during the last ten years has watched the quiet cottage industry that was Charles Chesnutt studies grow into a publishing juggernaut” (Wonham 2006, 829). One of the reasons for Chesnutt’s previous marginality as well as his current scholarly attractiveness may rest in his work’s defiance of easy categorization, in literary as well as political terms.¹ His writing spans a great variety of literary forms, from his dialect fiction seemingly in the tradition of plantation romances, over his novels about the ‘color line,’ to his essays engaging the politics of ‘race.’² His advocacy of racial mixing and his skepticism about “race consciousness in any form” (Wonham 2006, 830) further complicates Chesnutt’s positioning within African-American literary traditions. It seems that it is precisely this challenge his work poses to conceived categories of literary studies that is drawing increasing critical attention.

One avenue that has proven particularly productive in recent years are efforts to read Chesnutt’s writing against the background of the realist aesthetics of his time. In studies like those by Joseph McElrath, Ryan Simmons, and Willie Harrell, this approach has inspired much debate, whose stakes go far beyond the question

¹ Another reason, which Wonham addresses as well, is the recent publication of several novels Chesnutt had been unable to publish during his lifetime (cf. Wonham 2006, 829-30).

² ‘Race’ is among the terms I would want to use in inverted commas throughout this paper to signal their constructedness. To ease readability, however, I endeavor to use inverted commas only sparingly.

where in literary history to place one author's work. Critical interrogations of Chesnutt and realism have shown the potential both to facilitate a profound engagement of Chesnutt's writing and to advance our understanding of American realism. As Ryan Simmons notes, American realism is still predominantly defined as an endeavor of white (male, middle-class) authors, and prevailing concepts of the properties of literary realism continue to insulate its canon from revisionary change, e.g., by foregrounding the formal strategies employed in white bourgeois realism, "defining realists as those whose writing looks like those already accepted in the 'pantheon' of realism" (Simmons 2006, 14). Revisionary scholarship of the past few years has worked to open up such narrow concepts of realism, constructing alternative genealogies to the one that underwrites a white male canon, and approaching the 'reality' on which notions of realism hinge as a contingent, always situated and politically implicated entity.³ Scholars like Simmons, Augusta Rohrbach, Kenneth Warren, and others, are particularly interested in unthinking the separation of realism and race on which traditional approaches to literary realism insist, an analytic step which, as their studies outline, can enrich theorizations of realist writing as well as theorizations of race.

With this paper, I will participate in this unfolding debate by exploring how Charles Chesnutt's most controversial novel, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), adopts conventions of realism to critique the discourse of race. My focus will rest on one aspect of realism that has a particular resonance with the discourse of race – its emphasis on vision as a way of grasping and representing reality. Both realist literature and racial discourse, as different as their respective projects may be, venture to establish the realness of certain fictions by making them appeal to visuality. Their discursive operations can be construed as similar in their triadic foundations on textuality, reality, and the visible – they use texts, in the broadest sense of the word, to construct (fictional) realities, and their texts centrally draw on the visible as evidence for their own realness. Chesnutt makes this resonance between realist literature and racial discourse productive to unmask the essentially fictional character of race, exposing race as a fiction that does not truthfully represent an uncontestable reality (as it claims to), but that fabricates a reality of its own, an artificial reality fully organized around the creed of white supremacy. I want to trace this unmasking of race in and around the novel's treatment of two pairs of characters that challenge the visual confidence of both realism and race, pairs that exemplify what Samira Kawash has called 'interracial twins:' two sets of characters whose parties 'actually,' ostensibly belong to different 'races,' yet whom the text presents as so similar in their appearance that they are almost impossible to distinguish.

³ See especially Kaplan (1988) and, in the following, studies like Barrish (2001), Thomas (1997), or Morgan (2004).

1. Realist Vision, Constructions of 'Race,' and 'Interracial Twins'

Vision and visuality figure prominently among the aesthetic and discursive features that criticism has identified as defining literary realism. As Peter Brooks puts it: "Certainly realism more than almost any other mode of literature makes sight paramount – makes it the dominant sense in our understanding of and relation to the world" (Brooks 2005, 3). His recent study *Realist Vision* explores the distinct manner in which realist literature emphasizes "the visual, looking at things, registering their presence in the world through sight" (Brooks 2005, 3). Brooks traces realism's characteristic reliance on the visual to a number of social and cultural developments in the 19th century, from the rise of the social sciences and their faith in empirical research, to the formation of a realist aesthetic in the visual arts, all of which ultimately owe to empiricist philosophy in their underlying assumption that "the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it" (Watt 1957, 12). More narrowly, and more programmatically, Nancy Armstrong argues that the formation of a realist literary aesthetic in the 19th century was singularly shaped by the contemporaneous development of photography.⁴ To their relationship of mutual influence and authorization, Armstrong traces what she identifies as realist literature's pictorial quality: realist fiction, she notes, characteristically "equated seeing with knowing and made visual information the basis for the intelligibility of verbal narrative" (Armstrong 1999, 7).

Both Brooks and Armstrong touch upon a number of literary techniques that they see associated with realism's distinct visuality. Armstrong lists the "use of painterly technique, perspective, detail, spectacle, or simply an abundance of visual description [that] served to create, enlarge, revise, or update the reality shared by Victorian readers" (Armstrong 1999, 6). Brooks, more broadly, talks about the central role realist fictions accord to acts of seeing. Their characters and narrators typically seek to grasp the fictional world around them by looking at it, by visual interrogation. Realist literature likes to establish its characters by detailing their appearance and by inventorying the physical spaces in which they move. In addition, realist literature foregrounds acts of seeing in its characteristic plots of individual emancipation and disillusionment, which often have their characters learn how to look, to actually see reality as it is – by learning to distrust first impressions, for example, or by casting off prejudice that blinds them to the truth (cf. Brooks 2005, 8). The resulting density of visual descriptions in realist fictions may serve narrative purposes – e.g., to aid characterization by referencing the reality their targeted readers know – or it may conspicuously lack such narrative purpose. Roland Barthes famously theorized such incorporation of narratively useless detail as contributing to a 'reality effect:' by markedly not participating in the elaboration of a narrative's meaning, these descriptive details "say nothing but this: *we are real*; it is the category of 'the real' (and not its contingent contents) which is then

⁴ Armstrong specifically talks about British literature, whose turn to realism unfolded at a time and in a manner different from the U.S.-American context. Her observations about the mutual influence of writing and photography, however, can be applied to the American setting as well.

signified” (Barthes 2006, 234). Visuality, then, plays a role in the construction of, both, the ‘reality’ and the ‘realness’ of realist fictions. Overall, realism is marked by its confidence in the visual intelligibility of the world, in the meaningfulness of the visible, and in the rhetorical power of textual appeals to visible reality.

This confidence in the visible is exactly where Cathy Boeckmann discerns a resonance between the logic of literary realism and of racial discourse, particularly of its late 19th-century version as scientific racism. She argues that both discourses share a characteristic “faith in the truth that visual images provide” (Boeckmann 2000, 2). Racial discourse centrally appeals to visible bodily markers to fashion ‘race’ as a biological fact, in the process associating these visible markers with certain ‘deep,’ essential character traits.⁵ In another context, Robyn Wiegman draws attention to “the way race has been constituted as a visual phenomenon, with all the political and ideological force that the seemingly naturalness of the body as the locus of difference can claim” (Wiegman 1995, 22), arguing that the visibility of certain bodily features construed as ‘racial’ plays a key role in naturalizing racial ideologies, serving as *the* argument for the realness of race.⁶ Boeckmann therefore suggests that such reliance on visual evidence and concomitant visual conventions of verbal representation linked realism at the turn of the century “to [racial discourse’s] attempts to represent whiteness, blackness, and the presumed differences between them” (Boeckmann 2000, 10). Her readings – spanning from Thomas Dixon’s white-supremacist novels to James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* – outline that this resonance has variable political potential: on the one hand, there are literary texts that employ the visual conventions of realism to affirm and authorize racist discourse; but on the other, there are texts that make use of this resonance to poignantly expose and criticize racial thought.

This is exactly what I see Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* do in the characterization of, and in the narratives surrounding, its two pairs of ‘interracial twins.’ Tapping into yet extending the critical potential of the more established literary characters of ambivalent racial identification,⁷ the figure of interracial twins challenges the visual logic of racial distinctions. It plays on the tension between, on the one hand, a racial difference that narratives in various ways establish as ‘there,’ and, on the other, a conspicuous absence or indeterminacy of the visible markers

⁵ As Cheryl Harris notes, increasing legal investments in racial distinctions (such as personal freedom vs. bondage during slavery, entitlement to civil rights under Jim Crow) informed the development of ‘subcutaneous’ definitions of race, typically captured in the metaphor of ‘black blood.’ The point of such definitions was not to supersede notions of race as a visible category, but to amend them so as to exclude from the privileges of whiteness even those descendants of Africans whose ‘blackness’ had become invisible (Harris 1993, 1737–41).

⁶ African-American literature has anteceded such analysis of the discursive operations of race in its conspicuous use of visual tropes – the manifold figurations of vision in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, for example, or W.E.B. duBois’s definition of double consciousness in visual terms, as, in Shawn Smith’s words, “the negotiation of disparate gazes and competing visions that imposes the ‘two-ness’ of double consciousness” (Smith 2004, 25).

⁷ For scholarship on the figure of the ‘tragic mulatto/a,’ on the themes of ‘miscegenation’ and passing, and on cultures of racial masquerade, see, e.g., Sollors (1997), Rosenthal (2004), Pfeiffer (2003), Gubar (1997), Raimon (2004).

in which this difference is supposed to manifest itself. Samira Kawash⁸ thus notes that the figure of interracial twins, in Chesnutt's novel and also in Mark Twain's contemporaneous *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, functions as a powerful metaphor of racial difference, figuring it as eerily there and not there at the same time (Kawash 1997, 90).⁹ The figure of the interracial twin pointedly asks what constitutes racial difference, as it does not show where racial discourse promises it would – in visible distinctions between 'whiteness' and 'blackness.' As I will outline, *The Marrow of Tradition* imagines two very different pairs of interracial twins, whose interchangeable appearances owe to different racially charged practices – 'miscegenation' and blackface. Both pairs, however, frustrate expectations of clearly legible, reliable markers of racial distinctions, expectations captured in variously framed scenes of visual interrogation. Diagnosing the absence or indeterminacy of visual markers of racial difference, the novel locates the constitution of race elsewhere: in texts and stories of various kinds – legal documents, journalism, gossip – texts that are presented as dangerously at odds with the novel's diegetic reality, as constructing a rival reality of racial essences which they write and talk into realness.¹⁰ 'Race' is thus exposed as everything but the immutable biological fact as which it fashions itself. It is rather unmasked as a fiction, a rhetorical construction whose textual fabrication and lack of loyalty to the 'truth' are closely examined by the novel.

2. *The Marrow of Tradition*

Chesnutt's novel fictionalizes a historical event – the white supremacist massacre and *coup d'état* in the town of Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898. It embeds this in the story of two families, the 'white' Carterets and the 'black' Millers. These two families are precariously interconnected because the wives, Olivia Carteret and Janet Miller, are half-sisters, and they represent the first pair of interracial twins I want to discuss below. The novel opens with a moment of crisis in the Carteret family, whose new-born son is threatened by a serious illness. Dr. Miller,

⁸ Kawash's chief interest in the figure of the interracial twin rests elsewhere. She explores how this figure undermines the hierarchy implicit in distinctions of race: "Unlike the mutually exhaustive terms of a binary opposition, the twoness of the twin does not mark a completion or an exclusion [...] Twoness here suggests a pure supplementarity without reference to any particular originary term" (Kawash 1997, 90).

⁹ The figure of the interracial twin can be related to the more common literary figure of the double or *doppelgänger*, which has been chiefly interrogated for its figuration of split identity (cf. Herdman 1991). In the context of the interracial twin, the more general questions of individual identity that the literary figure of the double raises collapse into questions of racial identity, in telling reflection of the way in which racial discourse, in the kind of racist culture that the novel dramatizes, colonizes notions of identity.

¹⁰ The novel juxtaposes these texts and their construction of racial identities with its own 'truthful' engagement of its fictional world, and it diagnoses a discrepancy between the two. In its context of turn-of-the-century realism, the novel can be confident about its own ability to truthfully represent reality: the failure of these texts within the novel to provide truthful accounts is not so much credited to the inherent limitations and contingencies of textuality (which would also concern the novel itself) as to the white-supremacist project that drives them.

though ostensibly the best-qualified surgeon to help the child, is refused entrance to the Carteret home because of his blackness and of his relationship to Olivia's hated half-sister. The novel ends with another, even more serious crisis in baby Carteret's health, but this time, thanks to the turmoils of the race riot rampaging the town, Dr. Miller is the only doctor available to save the child's life. The Millers are meanwhile mourning the death of their own son, killed by a stray bullet in the course of the riot, and the novel's end leaves it unclear whether Dr. Miller will answer the Carterets' call. The Carterets are cast as major agents behind the riot's violence – Olivia thanks to her private hysteria about her black half-sister and her husband by directly fueling the public hysteria of the race riot¹¹ (he co-founds a white-supremacist secret organization and uses his newspaper to spread its ideas).

There are many other sub-plots and characters in this novel, and two more of them will be relevant as my second pair of interracial twins: Sandy, who is the black servant of old Mr. Delamere, an old-fashioned white Southern gentleman; and Tom, who is the gentleman's good-for-nothing son. Tom, as the novel only gradually reveals, masquerades as Sandy to rob and kill his aunt. Sandy is arrested for this crime and about to be lynched without a trial. The lynching is prevented in the last minute, but in its threat of white-against-black violence, and in its careful engineering by the town's white supremacists, it prefigures the eventual violence of the massacre.¹²

2.1 Janet and Olivia

As interracial half-siblings, Janet and Olivia represent characters quite familiar from American literary traditions, reflecting on such well-established themes like miscegenation and passing. In their physical likeness, they poignantly highlight the visual, empirical slipperiness of racial distinctions. The novel, as I will outline, counterposes this slipperiness with the massive social reality of race in the characters' lives. It thereby unmasks race as a fiction that has no grounds in empirical reality; a fiction in the narrow sense of the word as it is texts and stories that the novel foregrounds as fabricating the two characters' racial distinction, as narrating and textualizing the phantasm of race into realness. These fictions of race, emphatically disloyal to truthful representations of reality, are exposed as oriented toward the various interests of the novel's white characters.

As noted above, Olivia and Janet are half-sisters, daughters of white Southern patriarch Samuel Merrell and two different mothers, one white and one black. This difference in their mothers' racial identification, by Southern law and custom, determines the daughters' racial identification, defining one as white and the other

¹¹ Eric Sundquist, in his pioneering discussion of the novel, correlates Olivia's and her husband's racism in terms of their hysterical dynamics (Sundquist 1993, 407).

¹² Several readings of the novel focus on this massacre, on how the novel dramatizes the historical events in Wilmington, although the riot occupies only a fraction of its plot (Wagner 2001; Roe 1999; Pettis 1990). Most readings have more broadly engaged the constructions of race in various moments of and constellations in the novel (e.g. McWilliams 2002; Finseth 1999; Najmi 1999; Duncan 1998; Wilson 2004; Friedman 2007).

as black. And in the novel's account of Southern society, this racial difference makes all the difference: Olivia and Janet live thoroughly separated lives, have never even met before the novel's climactic final chapter. The white Olivia refuses to acknowledge her black sister Janet not only because it would mean to acknowledge her father's interracial relationship, but also because she is envious of everything Janet has – the fine house, the healthy son – things Olivia hates to see in her black sister's possession.¹³ The text makes a point in highlighting Olivia's investments in her own racial distinction from Janet: one, to disavow familial relations with blacks who, just a generation ago, had been slaves; and, two, to articulate her own sense of entitlement and her sister's lack of it, an issue of particular relevance because Janet and her husband are laying claim to middle-class affluence and respectability (strictly within the black community, of course). These motivations emerge as the driving force behind Olivia's and her community's insistence on racial distinctions.¹⁴

Olivia's insistence on her own whiteness and Janet's blackness now contrasts with the two characters' description as strikingly similar, almost twin-like in their appearance. Significantly, the text establishes this likeness by narrating acts of seeing. At the novel's beginning, Olivia's 'mammy' articulates this visual scrutiny when she tells a visitor: "Dis yer Janet, w'at's Mis' 'Livy's half-sister, is ez much like her ez ef dey wuz twins. Folks sometimes takes 'em fer one ernudder" (Chesnutt 1901, 8). Toward the novel's end, Janet's husband opens the door to Olivia and the narrative relates what he sees: "A lady stood there, so near the image of his own wife, whom he had just left, that for a moment he was well-nigh startled" (*ibid.*, 323). This paves the way for the sisters' climactic encounter, finally placing them next to each other, so the authorial narrator can immediately look at and compare them:

The two women stood confronting each other across the body of the dead child, mute witness of this first meeting between two children of the same father. Standing thus face to face, each under the stress of the deepest emotions, the resemblance between them was even more striking than it had seemed to Miller when he had admitted Mrs. Carteret to the house. (Chesnutt 1901, 325-6)

These acts of seeing in the novel are doubly determined. On the one hand, they are standard operations in realist literature, a most conventional technique for fleshing out fictional characters. On the other hand, they are also motivated by racial discourse, which promises that there be a visible difference between a white and a black woman. This double determination of visual scrutiny, I would suggest, highlights the resonance between the logic of literary realism, implemented

¹³ Olivia's envy of Janet is further augmented by the fact that the Millers live in the house previously owned by Mr. Carteret's family, and that they have a son to whom they can bequeath this property. In Eric Sundquist's words, "[l]iving in the house formerly owned by the Carteret family, Miller and his wife are the symbol of black usurpation and, in the novel's terms, of the ascendancy of black genealogy over white" (Sundquist 1993, 428).

¹⁴ The novel's depiction of the white community's interest in racial distinctions as oriented toward securing their property rights resonates with critical race theorist Cheryl Harris's analysis of whiteness as a legal construct analogous to property. See also Kawash's reading of the novel as casting the color line as a property line (Kawash 1997, 103-8).

by the novel itself, and the logic of racial discourse, which permeates the novel's fictional world. In these scenes, the novel exposes the rhetorical operations commonly used in racial discourse to establish the reality and realness of race, operations that the novel exposes by their resonance with its own techniques of characterization.

Racial discourse particularly resonates in the scenes' framing of Janet and Olivia's twin-like appearance as 'striking': this likeness becomes 'striking' only because it frustrates expectations of the kind of visible signs that racial discourse evokes to naturalize itself. The racial difference that so massively influences the two characters' social positions does not show where racial discourse claims it does. But if it has no grounds in observable reality, what establishes and sustains the one character's whiteness and the other's blackness? The novel specifically points to texts and stories as creating race as a social reality. Most prominently, there are the stories about Janet's illegitimate 'black' birth that Olivia's family keeps in circulation. The novel opens with an extended account, delivered by Olivia's mammy, of the conditions of Janet's birth – of how her mother had been a servant in the Merrell household and how the newly widowed Mr. Merrell started an affair with her, a story that the narrator compares to the 'concubinage' common under slavery (Chesnutt 1901, 6). This story's prominent positioning in the novel, and its recurrent evocation throughout the text reflect on the white family's effort to define Janet on the basis of her birth, racializing her by pointing to her mother's slave-like domestic servitude and to the illegitimacy of Janet's birth (both notably indirect markers of race themselves).¹⁵

Next to this story, two legal documents that Olivia finds later in the novel further characterize race as something textualized into realness: her father's last will, in which he leaves part of his estate to Janet's mother, and the certificate of their marriage, legal because it had been issued before the ban on interracial marriage was signed into law. Olivia is deeply disturbed by the find, and the novel extensively details her struggle what to do with these documents. While, eventually, she can live with the idea of giving part of her property to Janet, which would be one consequence if the documents became public, she fathoms another consequence that leaves her horrified enough to destroy the documents:

She shuddered before the possibility that at some time in the future some person, none too well informed, might learn that her father had married a colored woman, and might assume that she, Olivia Carteret, or her child, had sprung from this shocking *mésalliance*, – a fate to which she would willingly have preferred death. (Chesnutt 1901, 270)

¹⁵ This narrative of Janet's mother and of Janet's own birth works as a racial marker only by referencing other texts, such as the notorious Southern laws that prohibit interracial marriages and thereby encourage a semantic connection between 'illegitimate birth' and 'blackness.' On another note, the story and its conspicuous circulation echo the legal strategy, in the context of slavery as well as in Jim-Crow legislation, to define blackness on the basis of ancestry (cf. Harris 1993, 1737-41).

Olivia, then, is primarily concerned that the documents might inspire new stories about the sisters' racial identities. And her controlling fear is not so much that these new stories could establish the legitimacy of Janet's birth and thus render her less 'black,' but that these stories might contaminate her own racial identity, that they might make herself 'black.' It is precisely the irrationality of this fear that makes it such an acute moment in the novel's characterization of 'race:' Olivia's fear springs from an appreciation (however unconscious) of the fictionality of race in her community, of how racial identities are made real by texts and stories, fantastic stories, detached from any kind of empirical reality.

2.2 Sandy and Tom

This pair of characters, though populating only a subplot of the novel, complements the narrative of Janet and Olivia by its very different dynamic of interracial twinning. Here, a white character, Tom, masquerades as black, as his father's servant Sandy;¹⁶ and the pair's interchangeable appearance is strategically affected by Tom to mask a crime he plans to commit. As the twinning of Janet and Olivia evokes particular cultural traditions of thinking 'race' in the 19th century (miscegenation and tragic mulatto/a), the twinning of Sandy and Tom specifically evokes another one, that of blackface minstrelsy.¹⁷ Most importantly for my purpose, the story of Sandy and Tom contributes to the novel's critique of racial discourse by pointing to the faultiness of racial perceptions, highlighting what the novel elsewhere calls the 'veil' of racism that prevents white characters from actually seeing blacks.¹⁸ The definition of race as a visual phenomenon, which racial discourse employs as *the* argument for its realness, is thus unmasked as particularly susceptible to misperception and manipulation. And it is, again, texts and stories to which the novel points as key media of such manipulation.

The first and most indicative time Tom is mistaken for Sandy is at a 'cakewalk,' a stereotypical black dance performance organized for a group of Northern philanthropists touring the South in search of black culture (cf. Chesnutt 1901, 117). The cakewalk, at the time of the novel's publication, figured as one of the most

¹⁶ Albeit much less directly than with Janet and Olivia, there is a suggestion of familial relationship in the constellation of Sandy and Tom: Sandy takes care of old Mr. Delamere as a son should, and Mr. Delamere eventually disinherits Tom to bequeath (some of) his property to Sandy. See also Sundquist: "given old Delamere's fondness for Sandy and Sandy's apparent devotion to him, there is more than a hint that there may be a blood relation between them" (Sundquist 1993, 432).

¹⁷ As Julie Iromuanya compellingly argues, the narratives of Janet's (potential) passing and of Tom's blackface "go hand-in-hand. Both represent the schematics of racial performance and racial anxiety" (Iromuanya 2009, 190).

¹⁸ Talking about Major Carteret in his desperate attempt to convince Dr. Miller to save his dying son, the narrator notes: "In the agony of his own predicament, – in the horror of the situation at Miller's house, – for a moment the veil of racism was rent in twain, and he saw things as they were, in their correct proportions and relations" (Chesnutt 1901, 321). Ryan Simmons suggests that Chesnutt may have appropriated the phrase "in their correct proportions and relations" from Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*; Simmons thus discusses it as a key moment for unraveling Chesnutt's version of realism (Simmons 2006, 5; 165).

popular forms of 'black entertainment,' epitomizing what many whites considered typical of black culture and commodified throughout contemporary (white) popular culture.¹⁹ In the novel, the scene of Tom's masquerade in the cakewalk is doubly framed by acts of seeing, both of which are deeply interrelated. On the one hand, the dance is cast as a performance in front of an audience, the philanthropists, who are engaging it as a spontaneous expression of authentic black culture. On the other hand, the text relates the scene through the eyes of another white character, Ellis, who inquisitively gazes at the blackfaced Tom, 'recognizing' him as Sandy yet sensing that something is wrong, without being able to put a name on it:

the grotesque contortions of one participant had struck him as somewhat overdone, even for the comical type of negro. He recognized the fellow, after a few minutes' scrutiny, as the body servant of old Mr. Delamere. The man's present occupation, or choice of diversion, seemed out of keeping with his employment as attendant upon an invalid old gentleman, and strangely inconsistent with the gravity and decorum which had been so noticeable when this agile cakewalker had served as butler at Major Carteret's table, upon the occasion of the christening dinner. There was a vague suggestion of unreality about this performance, too, which Ellis did not attempt to analyze, but which recurred vividly to his memory upon a subsequent occasion. (Chesnutt 1901, 119)

The passage conveys the effort Ellis puts into his visual scrutiny of the dancer and his diffuse uncertainty about the 'realness' of the scene he witnesses. But Ellis, one of the novel's most positive white characters, is either unable or unwilling to interrogate this uncertainty. The racially overdetermined scenery of the cakewalk, and Tom's performance in the stereotypical role as cakewalker, seduces Ellis to see the dancer as black, to recognize him as Sandy.

This seductive power of racial stereotypes, powerful enough to control perceptions, links the scene of the cakewalk with that in which Tom frames Sandy as the murderer of his aunt. There, the white public is only too willing to assume that a black man must have committed the crime, to envision its perpetrator as black. As the narrator observes:

Suspicion was at once directed toward the negroes, as it always is when an unexplained crime is committed in a Southern community. [...] It must not be imagined that any logic was needed, or any reasoning consciously worked out. The mere suggestion that the crime had been committed by a negro was equivalent to proof against any negro that might be suspected and could not prove his innocence. (Chesnutt 1901, 178-9)

The popular stereotype of the savage black criminal determines the community's willingness to see the crime's perpetrator as black. And the evidence, carefully planted by the blackfaced Tom, does the rest to indict Sandy.

¹⁹ Cf. Baldwin (1981), who offers a historical account of how the cakewalk developed into both one of the major images whites had of blacks, and a major theme of racial caricature, especially in the context of blackface minstrelsy. This double determination of the cakewalk, by white notions of 'authentic' blackness and by conventions of racial masquerade, is keenly exploited by Chesnutt's novel.

Significantly, the novel depicts the work of this stereotype in concert with, again, texts: the town's white supremacist secret organization, the 'Big Three,' is cast to activate the stereotype by strategic use of Mr. Carteret's newspaper. Immediately after the crime, Carteret publishes an extra edition of his newspaper which narrates the crime as a black assault upon white womanhood, framing it as representative of a general unruliness of the black population, and calling upon the white community to lynch the suspect:

[The crime] was characterized as an atrocious assault upon a defenseless old lady, whose age and sex would have prevented her from harm at the hands of any one but a brute in the lowest human form. [...] It was only another significant example of the results which might have been foreseen from the application of a false and pernicious political theory, by which ignorance, clothed in a little brief authority, was sought to be exalted over knowledge, vice over virtue, an inferior and degraded race above the heaven-crowned Anglo-Saxon. If an outraged people, justly infuriated, and impatient of the slow processes of the courts, [...] should choose, in obedience to the higher law, to set aside, temporarily, the ordinary judicial procedures, it would serve as a warning and an example [...]. (Chesnutt 1901, 185-6)

The article notably evokes the popular stereotype of the 'black brute,' especially by emphasizing the victim's womanhood, and molds it into a narrative that appears to make sense of the crime. Its capacity to make sense precisely rests in its activation of a commonly held stereotype (among the newspaper's white readership, that is), 'confirming' what they already 'knew' – that a black man committed the crime. And it is really only the perpetrator's blackness that matters in the article; the question *which* black man allegedly killed the woman plays no role at all.

I will return to Carteret's journalism in a moment, but before, let me note that not only stereotypes of blackness but also of whiteness shape how the white community is able, or rather willing, to envision the crime. When eventually evidence surfaces that Sandy is innocent and Tom had killed his aunt, the town's white supremacist leadership prevents this from becoming public because they do not want any white man associated with such a crime:

The white people of the city had raised the issue of their own superior morality, and had themselves made this crime a race question. [...] The reputation of the race was threatened. They must not lynch the negro, and yet, for the credit of the town, its aristocracy, and the race, the truth of this ghastly story must not see the light. (Chesnutt 1901, 227-8)

And this is exactly what happens: the 'Big Three' persuade all the other involved white characters, even those who do not share their racist politics, to keep Tom's guilt secret. The novel's white community, as diverse as it is cast, agrees that the perpetrator of this crime must not be thought of as white. Sandy is acquitted on the basis of a fake alibi, and the murder is blamed on "some unknown man, who has fled from the city" (Chesnutt 1901, 230).

In the plot involving Tom and Sandy as interracial twins, then, the novel dramatizes stereotypes of blackness and whiteness as controlling people's perceptions of 'reality,' controlling, quite literally, what they see. These perceptions, colonized by racial discourse, in turn determine textualizations of reality, feeding a mechanism that validates the stereotypes and makes them more powerful than the novel's

diegetic reality and its truthful representation. Stereotypes of black criminality and white honor fully control the official account of the woman's murder; in their name, the reality of what happened is suppressed and replaced by a fiction that does not bear any relation to the truth, one only geared toward leaving the dominant racial stereotypes intact. Once again, white fictions of race are highlighted as detached from the novel's reality, as perpetuating and validating themselves, powerful enough to keep other, truthful accounts from circulating.

The true story of Tom's guilt and Sandy's innocence is joined by several other stories and documents in the novel's plot that are kept from circulating; stories and documents that had the potential of changing the social reality of race in the community: there are Mr. Merrell's last will and marriage certificate that Olivia destroys in the scene I discussed above, two documents which would have affirmed Janet's place within the Merrell family. Another will is held back after old Mr. Delamere's death, whom the revelation of his son's guilt had prompted to disinherit Tom and to bestow his property partly on Sandy and partly on Dr. Miller's black hospital. The member of the town's 'Big Three' to whom Delamere had entrusted his will suppresses the document based on the rationale that "Mr. Delamere's property belonged of right to the white race, and by the higher law should remain in the possession of white people" (Chesnutt 1901, 235). It is indicative that, in these scenes, the novel focalizes its larger concern with the power of texts in legal documents, which represent a particular quality of textual power, of a capacity to performatively create social realities and affect material changes. Marriage certificates and last wills immediately create 'race' and racial distinctions by defining familial relations and regulating the succession of property, thus establishing two central items of racial discourse – genealogy and ownership. As indicated above, journalistic writing is another text-type the novel highlights as powerful in establishing the social reality of race, and hence as a battleground for whose texts get to circulate. Major Carteret's newspaper is cast as a major instrument by which the 'Big Three' advance their white-supremacist agenda and fuel white hatred as well as fear of blacks, in the context of Sandy's near-lynching and of the eventual massacre. There, the newspaper's strategy also involves the use of a black-authored piece of writing – an editorial in an African-American newspaper that indicts the practice of lynching – of which Carteret assumes control in an editorial of his own, cannibalizing and misrepresenting it so as to further heat up racial hatred.²⁰ Overall, the control of textuality which the white community is shown to exert is identified as key to the enforcement of white supremacy, immediately associated with the dispossession of and violence against African Americans that mark the town's race relations.

²⁰ Early on in the plot, the 'Big Three' find an editorial in the *Afro-American Banner* which, in the narrator's sober words, "was a frank and somewhat bold discussion of lynching and its causes. It denied that most lynchings were for the offense most generally charged as their justification" (Chesnutt 1901, 85). The group immediately recognize that a reprint of this article, "with suitable comment" (89), would be able to "organize the white people on the color line" (89). The novel has this article's eventual re-publication in Carteret's paper, framed as an "insult on white womanhood" (248), ignite the violence of the massacre.

By thus revealing texts and stories – the town's public discourse, legal documents, journalism – as major sites where race is created, made 'real' and charged with meaning, the novel also establishes a touchstone for its own textuality. Framing texts as profoundly political agents endows the novel itself with a political horizon. It positions the novel as a counternarrative to the hegemonic discourse of white supremacy that it dramatizes, as speaking on behalf of the texts that are prevented from circulating and their truth that does not get told in its diegetic world, a form of resistance against white control over fictions of race. This is exactly what Ryan Simmons, in his comprehensive study of Chesnutt's novels, outlines as the author's distinct version of, and contribution to, literary realism: "As practiced by Chesnutt, realism demands a deep awareness that 'reality' is both negotiated and rooted in discourse, and it requires an experimental attempt to reorient readers' reception of language in order to do its work" (Simmons 2006, 4). Chesnutt's realism is based on a profound appreciation of the role of discourse and textuality in perceptions and representations of reality, especially in perceptions and representations of race as a 'reality.' His writing makes use of realist literature's unique potential to expose racism's grip on what people see, or want to see, as reality, and to facilitate a different, more truthful perspective. Against this background, Simmons insists, "Chesnutt ought to be considered a major contributor to the realist movement, both for his challenge to white audiences to consider realistically the nature of American race relations and for his career-long narrative experiment to determine how an entrenched majority might be compelled to see the social world more accurately and completely" (Simmons 2006, 2).

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