

Vernacular Soliloquy, Theatrical Gesture, and Embodied Consciousness in *The Marrow of Tradition*

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Introduction

At the outset of Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Major Carteret's wife has just given birth to the couple's first and only child, a baby boy named Dodie. The next day, Carteret is greeted with congratulations by his employees at the *The Morning Chronicle*, where he is editor. Among them is Jerry Letlow, the black porter and grandson of Mammy Jane, the Carterets' maid and Dodie's caretaker: "The major shook hands with them all except Jerry, though he acknowledged the porter's congratulations with a kind nod and put a good cigar into his outstretched palm, for which Jerry thanked him without manifesting any consciousness of the omission." Proper decorum disallowing his speech, Jerry communicates only by means of "his outstretched palm," a small but meaningful gesture signifying the vast social expanse between him and Carteret. As circumstance renders Jerry dumb, the narrator intervenes on his behalf:

He was quite aware that under ordinary circumstances the major would not have shaken hands with white workingmen, to say nothing of negroes; and he had merely hoped that in the pleasurable distraction of the moment the major might also overlook the distinction of color. Jerry's hope had been shattered, though not rudely; for the major had spoken pleasantly and the cigar was a good one. (487)

This awkward encounter between the leading man and the porter—who, "without manifesting any consciousness" in Carteret's presence, must be spoken for by the narrator—is not an insignificant detail. It speaks, rather, to one of the central problems of the novel: the narrative expression of black consciousness.

Based loosely on the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898—Chesnutt himself visited the North Carolina town to collect oral histories as material for the novel—*The Marrow of Tradition* has been understood nearly exclusively as a historical novel.¹ Since Chesnutt's revival from critical obscurity some three decades ago, critics

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have been preoccupied with the historiographical value of the work, using it to glean Chesnut's political persuasions. The overwhelming tendency is to read *The Marrow of Tradition* as the narrative struggle between racial reconciliation and assimilation on the one hand—as embodied by the upwardly mobile Dr. William Miller, representative of the new black middle class—and violent, vengeful protest on the other—as embodied by Miller's antithesis, the brutish Josh Green. This myopic focus on the opposition of Miller and Green has led astray many readers of the novel; Miller has been seen as representative of both Du Boisian elitism and Washingtonian accommodationism and almost always an autobiographical projection of Chesnut himself. Meanwhile, the political struggle supposedly enacted in the novel has left equally as many critics needlessly baffled by the novel's ambiguous conclusion, wondering whether Chesnut ultimately sides with Miller or Green and finding no satisfactory answer.²

Moreover, this generalized preoccupation with the explicitly political or historical contours of the novel frequently precludes closer scrutiny of Chesnut's formal literary strategies. By overemphasizing plot development and the ambiguous position of Chesnut's authorial persona, scholars have overlooked some of the novel's central formal tropes.³ Refocusing attention on these elements, I suggest, might in fact better illuminate the political stakes and historical weight of Chesnut's narrative construction. Jerry's "outstretched palm" (487) and reserved silence in the face of Major Carteret lend critical insight into *The Marrow of Tradition* not just as a historical novel but also as a novel of consciousness. Viewing the novel from the perspective of its representation of consciousness both reframes its historiographical bearing and opens up new ways to understand Chesnut's fiction and nineteenth-century African American literature more broadly.

Jerry's first encounter in the novel is but one of many such instances in which the expression of black consciousness is halted or impeded by a looming white presence. When Carteret assembles the white supremacist triumvirate responsible for the violent coup d'état and expulsion of black citizens from Wellington (Chesnut's fictionalized Wilmington) that forms the historical backdrop of the novel, Jerry finally gets his say. After meeting Carteret's coconspirators, General Belmont and Captain McBane, Jerry makes "his escape from the room as rapidly as possible" (492). There, in the safety and silence of the hallway outside Carteret's office, Jerry replays the scene that has just taken place:

"I don' like dat Cap'n McBane," he muttered, upon reaching the hall. "Dey says he got dat eye knock' out tryin' ter whip a cullud 'oman, when he wuz a boy, an' dat he ain' never had no use fer niggers sence,—'cep'n' fer what he could make outen 'em wid his convic' labor contrac's. His daddy wuz a ' overseer befo' 'im, an' it come nachul fer him ter be a nigger-driver. I don' want dat one eye er his'n restin' on me no longer 'n I kin he'p, an' I don' know how I'm gwine ter like dis job ef he's gwine ter be comin' roun' here. He ain' nothin' but po' w'ite trash nohow; but Lawd! Lawd! Look at de money he's got,—livin' at de hotel, wearin' di'mon's,

an' colloquin' wid de bes' quality er dis town! 'Pears ter me de bottom rail is gittin' mighty close ter de top. Well, I s'pose it all comes f'm bein' w'ite. I wush ter Gawd I wuz w'ite!" (492)

Here, Jerry initiates the repeated narrative pattern through which Chesnutt articulates black consciousness. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, the expression of black consciousness takes the form of the soliloquy: an isolated self-talking; a muttering aloud; a self-questioning; or a groaning, moaning, or laughing to oneself. Nearly each black character in the novel is granted at least one soliloquy.⁴

I argue that Chesnutt's soliloquies in the novel should be understood as a form of "embodied consciousness," a narrative mode endowed with the expressivity of theatrical gesture. Moreover, I examine such performative gestures in relation to additional patterns in the novel: first, the destructive circulation of written, material texts; and second, recurring images of corporeality and physical breakdown in which one's capacity for speech is endangered. As they are invulnerable to such formal compromise and breakdown, Chesnutt's soliloquies together produce a counter-archive of vernacular memory and reveal how dramatic form functions in the novel more broadly.

Soliloquy in the Novel

Jerry's first soliloquy serves three overlapping functions. First, it opens up social worlds of rumor and speculation that pervade Wellington's black community, thereby introducing several historical details that would otherwise remain obscure and providing a folk biography of Captain McBane. Only through Jerry's self-talking can we access this subterranean network of promiscuous speech and collective knowledge, revealing what "Dey says" and capturing subaltern voices in the narrative of Wellington's imminent demise. The same can be said for Mammy Jane's only soliloquy—delivered while gazing out the window of Dodie's nursery—relating the turbulent family drama enmeshing Olivia Carteret and her half-sister Janet Miller (547), and for Sandy Delamere's first soliloquy, spoken as he helps Mrs. Polly Ochiltree into a carriage and laughingly considers "de way dat ole lady do keep up her temper" (567). Second, it shows Jerry to be a figure of fun, a kind of *buffo* whose political pragmatism obviously outweighs any sense of racial loyalty. Third, it wedges characterological data about McBane himself into the texture of Chesnutt's prose. We should also note, however, the narrative circumstances that produce this first of many soliloquies: Jerry must leave Carteret's editorial office, creating physical distance between himself and the others. It is only in this newly inhabited, isolated space that Jerry can articulate his grievances.

When Jerry "mutter[s]" (492) to himself, he is literally speaking aloud. In dramatic literature, the soliloquy is defined simply as "a locution dominating the stage and the attention of the theater audience, delivered by a speaker who is alone on the stage" (Skiffington ix). More generally, taking as its root the Latin

soliloquium, “it is a talking to oneself” (MacKay 1). The distinction between spoken and unspoken soliloquy becomes relevant when the form migrates from the stage to the novel. “Whereas soliloquy in drama is limited to speaking aloud, soliloquy in fiction can also include silent self-address,” Carol MacKay writes, “thanks to the narrator’s power to represent a character’s thought process” (2). In this way, the soliloquy is closely related to, but distinct from, free indirect discourse, indirect speech, and interior monologue—all of which Chesnutt uses to depict the mental action and psychological quandaries of white characters in the novel (and in several instances, of Dr. Miller, too). The representation of consciousness in the novel is thus implicitly racialized: Chesnutt employs a separate set of narrative techniques for white and black characters, respectively, with the notable exception of Dr. Miller, for whom Chesnutt uses both spoken soliloquy and free indirect speech.

This insertion of spoken soliloquy starkly contrasts the narrative prose within which it is set and thus “pops” out of the surrounding text.⁵ The frequency of Jerry’s soliloquizing also makes him “pop” out of the social network of the novel in surprising ways. *The Marrow of Tradition* is tightly structured, like a Victorian multi-plot novel, around three interwoven narratives: a love triangle, a murder mystery, and the racial conflict that brings the preceding drama to a head (Delmar, “Character” 284-85). Jerry does not play a significant role in any of these plots. Due to his seemingly secondary importance, the porter has been altogether ignored by critics of the novel, who have instead focused on major characters such as Dr. Miller and Josh Green, Major Carteret and his wife Olivia, her estranged half-sister Mrs. Janet Miller, the unctuous and conniving Tom Delamere, his loyal servant Sandy Delamere, and the wretched old Mrs. Polly Ochiltree, whose murder sets off a chain of events that leads ultimately to the bloody siege of Wellington.⁶ Viewing the novel from the standpoint of its representation of black consciousness, however, forces us to overturn this convention. Indeed, Jerry is the most often soliloquized character in all of *Marrow*, thereby approaching something like the status of a protagonist—a kind of trickster anti-hero granted an extended cycle of dramatic speeches in dialect, projecting a privileged voice within the narrative terrain of the psychological soliloquy.

Traditionally, the soliloquy has three primary functions: plot-exposition, character-description, and homily (Skiffington 3-4). Jerry’s first speech satisfies the first two categories as it recalls McBane’s biography before the events of the novel take place. Jerry’s later soliloquies, however, begin to resemble the projection of psychological inner struggle associated with Shakespeare’s innovations in the form (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 492, 494, 495, 534, 536, and 661). “Shakespeare developed, virtually alone, a distinct type [of soliloquy] only hinted at in the Middle Ages, the psychological soliloquy,” Lloyd A. Skiffington writes, “[a]nd he put it to use constantly for revealing motivation or intention of his characters or for laying bare the war within a personality” (71).⁷ Jerry’s mutterings successively come

to take on this Shakespearean aspect, following “a question-and-answer pattern that could be called a meditative self-debate.” This pattern “shows the soliloquist repeatedly trying to move out of uncertainty or indecision through a form of self-negation—the self-division of self-debate—followed by self-creation in the form of rhetorical self-projection” (MacKay 10). The three gentlemen’s meeting in Carteret’s office presents Jerry time and space for this very self-confrontation and “self-projection.” The social distance between them and him provides the narrative space for “self-creation” through the dramatic narration of his own consciousness. Being sent out of the room to fetch drinks—or simply eavesdropping in the hall outside the office door—enables “a moment of self-confrontation and self-creation that only soliloquy can embody and portray” (13). Furthermore, these soliloquies crucially index three major issues in the novel: its use of black dialect, tragicomic tone, and fundamental theatricality.⁸

For John Edgar Wideman, Chesnutt presents a case of the so-called “schizophrenia enforced upon the black writer.” Writing, as it were, in two languages—the Southern black vernacular and Standard English—Chesnutt “drew from both worlds,” Wideman writes, “the literate and the oral.” In this schematic, the “literate” and the “oral” constitute separate and opposed spheres, distinct in both style and cultural derivation. The “literate” is associated with “books” and the “classic English writers” that Chesnutt read and studied (“Charles Chesnutt” 60). The “oral” is associated with forms of cultural expression that exceed the bound book—what Lawrence W. Levine called the “spoken arts” of songs, tales, proverbs, and verbal games (6)—and the “black folk” with whom Chesnutt lived and worked. With respect to Chesnutt’s literary career, this distinction also tends to mark a split in his fictional output.

Critics conventionally associate orality with the humorous, epic monologues spoken by the formerly enslaved, Aesopian fabulist Uncle Julius, from Chesnutt’s plantation tales collected in *The Conjure Woman* (1899). Critics likewise associate literacy with Chesnutt’s later novels, especially *The Marrow of Tradition*. This split is also generic and stylistic. As Chesnutt entered the second phase of his career, he abandoned the short story for the novel; at the same time, he disavowed the local-color-dialect writing of his plantation fiction in favor of what he considered more serious writing in Standard English.⁹ Jerry’s soliloquies suggest, however, that this binaristic division of Chesnutt’s literary career is far too simple. They also reveal how Chesnutt retains the crucial function of dialect in his mature output by means of formal techniques imported from theatrical performance. With one exception (that of Dr. Miller), all soliloquies in the novel are delivered in black dialect. Recalling his earlier “local color” plantation fiction, Chesnutt thus coopts his own former narrative style and places it into the center of his realist mode, thereby collapsing the purported distinction between the two phases of his career.¹⁰ The form of the soliloquy enables his reuptake of an otherwise forsaken vernacularity.

In addition, the reappearance of dialect in *The Marrow of Tradition* evokes Uncle Julius's trickster humor in a novel frequently criticized for its Victorian melodrama. The resurgence of "conjure" in the figure of Jerry—the most frequently soliloquized character in the novel, who jests while presaging racial conflagration—reveals a tragicomic undercurrent to Chesnut's novel that has been altogether overlooked. As Glenda Carpio writes of *The Conjure Woman*, "Chesnut produces what Pirandello calls 'the feeling of the opposite' at the heart of tragicomedy," thereby producing "laughter that is 'troubled and obstructed' by the lingering eventuality of doom" (36). This is exactly the tone of *The Marrow of Tradition* when Jerry appears. Far from the humorless and severe political drama it is often understood to be, Chesnut's novel frequently signifies on the tragicomic satire of *The Conjure Woman* and his other Uncle Julius tales.¹¹ As those frame narratives usually comprise extended spoken monologues in dialect, we might begin to see that Chesnut's preoccupation with dramatic form is not peculiar to *The Marrow of Tradition* but rather recurs throughout his earlier and later output.

Chesnut's mature fiction as exemplified by *The Marrow of Tradition* unites Standard English and Southern black dialect, the literate and the oral, the novel and the theater—or, taken together, the textual and the performative. Rather than suppose, as Wideman does, that Chesnut oscillates between two diametrically opposed modes, I would rather consider how his prose style actually provides the occasion for their convergence. From this view, the author does not simply "transmit" (Wideman, "Charles W. Chesnut" 78) the one into the other but in fact foregrounds their mutual constitution. Chesnut's novel is bolstered and propelled by the dialectical relation between textuality and performativity, a tension shared not only with black fiction of the period but just as crucially—and perhaps surprisingly—with the early modern stage.¹² As such, we might begin to rethink *The Marrow of Tradition* and arguably the realist novel more broadly in terms of its theatricality, or its arrangement and deployment of "theatrical space."

Theatrical Space in the Novel

Perhaps the novel's most curious soliloquy is spoken by Sandy Delamere, the old and loyal servant (and former slave) to Mr. Delamere. Tom Delamere, Mr. Delamere's drunk and profligate grandson, disguised in blackface and Sandy's clothing, murders and robs old Mrs. Ochiltree to pay back his gambling debts and restore his reputation in town. After commiserating over drinks with his friend Josh Green, Sandy walks home in a semi-drunken state and encounters a ghostly sight:

"Ef dat 's me gwine 'long in front," mused Sandy, in vinous perplexity, "den who is dis behin' here? Dere ain' but one er me, an' my ha'nt would n' leave my body 'tel I

wuz dead. Ef dat 's me in front, den I mus' be my own ha'nt; an' whichever one of us is de ha'nt, de yuther must be dead an' don' know it. I don' know what ter make er no sech gwines-on, I don't. Maybe it ain' me after all, but it certainly do look lack me." (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 594)

In this eerie double vision, Sandy trails behind Tom Delamere—dressed as Sandy in blackface—as they both return home. In yet another self-reflexive allusion to *The Conjure Woman*, Sandy cannot determine whether he is alive or dead, whether the shadowy figure he sees before him is his “haunt,” or whether he himself has become “my own ha'nt.” These supernatural “gwines-on” reflect the tragicomic tone of Jerry’s soliloquies and can be read as an exceedingly subtle allusion to William Wells Brown’s play *The Escape; or, A Leap to Freedom* (1858).

Midway through Act V of *The Escape*, Cato—“an expedient house servant who wages a one-man, slow-burning insurrection of blackface minstrelsy in his solo bid for freedom” (Brooks 1)—dons his sleeping master’s clothes: “I wonder if dis is me? By Golly, I is free as a frog. But maybe I is mistaken; maybe dis ain’t me. Cato, is dis you? Yes, seer. Well, now it is me, an’ I em a free man” (Brown 457). As Daphne Brooks writes of Cato, “In his soliloquy, he transmogrifies his own self-fragmentation into signifying parody” (2). It is hard to return to Chesnutt’s Sandy without seeing the incredible parallels with Brown’s Cato—except that instead of the slave donning the master’s clothes, the young master disguises himself as the old servant. Chesnutt has flipped and switched Brown’s scenario in *The Escape* but maintained its central formal aspect, the soliloquy. Furthermore, Brown takes as his epigraph to *The Escape* a single line from *Hamlet*: “Look on this picture, and on this” (413), initiating a series of direct and oblique references to Shakespeare’s work—specifically *Hamlet* and *Othello*—throughout the play.¹³ Through Sandy’s haunting soliloquy in dialect, Chesnutt inscribes his work within both the history of English soliloquy and nineteenth-century black performance. Chesnutt, Brown, and Shakespeare are all linked by the soliloquy and its psychological insight.¹⁴

This intertextual gesture takes on further implications when we return to Jerry lingering outside the office door at the *Morning Chronicle*, overhearing the conversations among Carteret, Belmont, and McBane within:

“Dat wuz a close shave,” he muttered, as he swallowed the remaining contents of Major Carteret’s glass. “I ’lowed dem twenty centz wuz gone dat time,—an’ whar I wuz gwine ter git de money ter take my gal ter de chu’ch festibal ter-night, de Lawd only knows!—’less’n I borried it off’n Mr. Ellis, an’ I owes him sixty cents a’ready. But I wonduh w’at dem w’ite folks in dere is up ter? Dere ’s one thing sho’,—dey ’re gwine ter git after de niggers some way er ’nuther, an’ w’en dey does, whar is Jerry gwine ter be? Dat ’s de mos’ impo’tantes’ question. I’m gwine ter look at dat newspaper dey be’n talkin’ ’bout, an’ ’less’n my min’ changes might’ly, I’m gwine ter keep my mouf shet an’ stan’ in wid de Angry-Saxon race,—ez dey calls deyse’ves

nowadays,—an' keep on de right side er my bread an' meat. W'at nigger ever give me twenty cents in all my bawn days?" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 535-36)

In his process of self-questioning, Jerry utters a single phrase—"whar is Jerry gwine ter be? Dat's de mos' impo'tantes' question"—that should be seen as an allusion to the most famous soliloquy in the history of the form, that of *Hamlet*. As the prospect of racial violence looms over Wellington, Jerry must indeed ask himself, "To be, or not to be," as the soliloquist's life is very much at stake. With this gesture to Shakespeare, Chesnutt again inscribes his novel within the history of English soliloquy.

In several other instances, Jerry humorously mishears the white supremacists' rallying cry as he delivers their drinks, receives the change as a tip, and makes his exit from the office:

"Dat's a gent'eman, a rale ole-time gent'eman," he said to himself when he had closed the door. "But dere 's somethin' gwine on in dere,—dere sho' is! 'No nigger damnation!' Dat soun's all right,—I'm sho' dere ain' no nigger I knows w'at wants damnation, do' dere 's lots of 'em w'at deserves it; but ef dat one-eyed Cap'n McBane got anything ter do wid it, w'atever it is, it don' mean no good fer de niggers,—damnation 'd be better fer 'em dan dat Cap'n McBane! He looks at a nigger lack he could jes' eat 'im alive." (494)

Jerry mistakes the three gentlemen's chant of "No nigger domination!" for its opposite, "No nigger damnation!" Jerry is thus befuddled by the impassioned, threatening tone of the men's boozy cheers and the relatively congenial message he mishears. Here, the repeated invocation of "damnation," considered in tandem with Jerry's previous allusion to *Hamlet* and his spatial positioning by the door of Carteret's office—the narrative site of his repeated soliloquizing—brings instantly to mind the famed "Porter's Scene" from *Macbeth*. In Act II, Scene 3 of that play, the Porter hears knocking at the door; rather than open it to admit Lennox and Macduff, he plays a game imagining himself as the porter of hell and the sorts of sinners he might welcome (2595).

There are several parallels, between Shakespeare's Porter and Chesnutt's Jerry: they are (obviously) both porters; they occupy the same narrative site, the threshold between two interior spaces; the Porter imagines three sinners knocking at the gates of hell, while Jerry eavesdrops on three white supremacist conspirators in the office; both comically thematize damnation; Jerry's tragicomic trickster antics resemble the Porter's self-joking; and, just as the Porter speaks in prose, Jerry speaks in dialect. This cycle of Macbethian scenes in *The Marrow of Tradition* not only confirms the Shakespearean psychological soliloquy as a central formal and intertextual referent for the novel but, more crucially, provides new ways to conceptualize the essential theatricality of Chesnutt's realist mode.

For Robert Weimann, the “Porter’s Scene” in *Macbeth* perhaps best exemplifies the “cooperation and confrontation, interaction and ‘interface’” of “dramatic writing” and “theatrical performing” in the English Renaissance (6). In the performance of dramatic speech, Weimann notes, “neither pen nor voice remained an isolated, univocal source of authority in the projection of theatrical space” (180). Examining the profound tension between these two sources of authority, Weimann identifies two distinct but often converging “projection[s] of theatrical space”: the *locus* and the *platea*. The *locus* signifies the stage-as-fictional-world, and the *platea* signifies the stage-as-stage, where performer and audience meet. The former is representational and the latter presentational; the *locus* is associated with (spatial, verbal, temporal, epistemological) unity and the *platea* with disunity; the former is often the site “on which matters of ‘worthiness’” and “historical and novelistic narrative could be presented” (184), and the latter is the provenance of clownish figures, “the shadowy realm of death and perdition, drink and desire, sexuality and the body in its regenerative and decaying dimensions” (195). The language of the *locus* is verse; the language of the *platea* is prose. Indeed, the “detached,” “aloof,” and “unfixed” space of the *platea*, Weimann writes, was marked by “a language close to the ordinary word and the native language of the jesting, riddling, punning ‘mother-wits,’ serving the immediate give and take of unstilted, possibly ‘unrefined’ perceptions of status, conduct, and ideas” (194-95). The “Porter’s Scene,” accordingly, represents not the time and space “of those who are represented” but rather “of those who are doing the representing and watching the play as a performed event” (201). The repeated knocking by Lennox and Macduff indexes the collision of *locus* and *platea*, such that “localized and unlocalized space” coalesce in a “double-image” (203).

Thinking through this deployment of theatrical space in *Macbeth* enables us to reexamine Chesnut’s novel, its theatrical contours, and its narrative construction in important ways.¹⁵ First, it reveals to us that Chesnut’s black soliloquists unfailingly occupy *platea*-like spaces in the novel. This is as true for Jerry at the office door as it is for Sandy drunkenly stumbling home. It is also the case for Mammy Jane, who peers out a window while delivering her speech; for Dr. Miller, who likewise delivers his soliloquy while peering out a train window (Chesnut, *Marrow* 510-12); and for Josh Green, who performs his short speech while exiting that same train (512-13). Second, it reconfigures the relationship among the social architecture of Wellington, the projection of theatrical space on Chesnut’s narrative stage, and the visual display of the text on the page.

As Bryan Wagner writes, the rising “African American middle class” in the novel “provokes an epistemological crisis that is simultaneously a crisis of white identity” (312). This “epistemological crisis” is sparked by the increasing visibility of the black middle class in urban spaces: newly constructed homes, hospitals, newspaper offices, and other professional sites interrupt the white supremacist visual field that excludes black citizens from its purview. Mammy Jane’s

disapproving shock at seeing Janet Miller's carriage buggy represents exactly this knee-jerk resistance to the "changing racial geography of Wilmington" (316). In other words, this "crisis of white identity" is catalyzed by the seeming movement of black life out of *platea*-like spaces and into *locus*-like spaces. Chesnut's interplay of narrative and dramatic form restages this conflict rhetorically: just as "the African American middle class . . . reconfigured the visual field of Wilmington by initiating changes in local architecture, neighborhood demographics, and sidewalk etiquette" (312), the novel's soliloquies reconfigure the visual field of the page, forcing the collision of its performative and textual components and creating a narrative "double-image." The discursive architecture of the novel thus reflects Wellington's sociopolitical transformation, signifying the "tension inherent" to its "becoming (politically, economically, socially, culturally, and racially) a modern American city" (Reid-Pharr 479).

Furthermore, by "translating alienation into self-actualizing performance," the soliloquies throughout *The Marrow of Tradition* function as what Brooks calls "Afro-alienation acts," wherein "the condition of alterity converts into cultural expressiveness," recurring as a "trope that reflects and characterizes marginal cultural positions" and as a "tactic that the marginalized seized on and reordered in the self-making process" (4). Just as Sandy's and Jerry's semi-drunken soliloquies—and those of Mammy Jane and Josh Green—recall the tragicomic satire of *The Conjure Woman* as outlined by Glenda Carpio, these marginalized-yet-self-actualizing performances "invoke largely anti-realist forms of cultural expression" (5). Cut from the same cloth as his supernatural plantation tales, Chesnut's "Afro-alienated" soliloquies "[open] up a field where black cultural producers might perform narratives of black culture that resist the narrow constraints of realist representation" (6). Chesnut, even in distancing himself from the nonrealist, explicitly performative mode of his earlier work, used it to great effect in his novel.

Ultimately, considering the deployment of theatrical space and its narrative effects in *The Marrow of Tradition* allows us to glimpse the political stakes of Chesnut's fictional construction in new and startling ways. By disrupting the temporal and spatial orders associated with the *locus*, the *platea*—the space occupied by Chesnut's black soliloquists and the performative site of their collective consciousness—has the effect of redistributing textual authority from the "world-of-the-play" to the "playing-in-the-world" (Weimann 207). The soliloquy thereby destabilizes the fixity of the *locus*, the narrative terrain of white supremacy and white supremacist historiography in Chesnut's novel. As Michel de Certeau similarly writes, the "strategies" of institutions of power "postulate a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with . . . targets or threats . . . can be managed" (36). This move "to distinguish its 'own' place, that is, the place of its own power and will," de Certeau continues, "is an effort to delimit one's own place in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other"

(36). If the “strategy” is a weapon of power, the “tactic,” by contrast, is “an art of the weak,” a “calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. . . . The space of a tactic is the space of the other” (37).

In Chesnutt’s novel, the performative utterance of black dialect is the primary narrative “tactic” that functions in the “absence of a proper locus,” or space to call its own, and aims to disrupt and destabilize the privileged, authoritative space of the *locus*. In so doing, Chesnutt’s soliloquies contest the white supremacist “strategies,” politics, and histories embedded in the lived event that *The Marrow of Tradition* fictionalizes. Through this mode of “embodied consciousness,” Jerry, Sandy, Mammy Jane, Josh Green, and even Dr. Miller open up, in Weimann’s terms, a “space . . . for the marginal, the visceral, the liminal, the otherwise nonrepresentable” (195). By centering the performer performing in a narrative realm outside the representational or symbolic time and space of the novel, Chesnutt carves out space for the articulation and, indeed, survival of black consciousness in the face of white supremacist violence. At this threshold, this conceptual non-space, the performative—if only for a moment—wrests narrative authority from the textual, the supernatural confronts the realist, the tragicomic undercuts the melodramatic, dialect meets Standard English, and vernacular memory contests racist historiography.

The fundamental theatricality of Chesnutt’s realist mode bears additional implications for the study of the novel. It seems to “conscript” certain modes of reading through implied forms of direct address at the same time that it imagines new forms of black collectivity. These soliloquies in dialect do not simply break off from the prose passages surrounding them—a phenomenon Paul de Man might call the ironic “interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register” (179)—they also gesture toward an alternative arena of reception, “an imaginary theatrical audience . . . just beyond the ‘footlights’ of the diegetic universe” (Kurnick 13). Indeed, such passages alter the event of reading itself. In order to comprehend and register the force of the black vernacular in Chesnutt’s novel, one must slow down and sound out the speeches themselves. That is, the reader must internalize and inhabit black speech with and through its speaker. Rather than simply witness the delivery of the soliloquy as in a conventional theatrical scenario, the reader must actively reproduce the soliloquy itself (either mentally or verbally) and is thereby conscripted into the role of the performer. Chesnutt thus produces a microcosmic theater on the page. Without proper audience in the text, these moments of self-talking marooned from their immediate diegetic contexts approach an apostrophic form of direct address to the reader.¹⁶ Nearly simultaneously, the reader must also do the performative work of the speaking character, sounding out extended passages in dialect and effectively entering the contested theatrical space of the novel.¹⁷

If this rhetorical effect of the dialect soliloquy creates a kind of performative intimacy between (implied) reader and character, it also gestures toward forms of

“collective space,” as David Kurnick writes, thereby “turn[ing] psychological questions into social ones” (12). That is, although the psychological soliloquy appears to produce predominantly interiorizing effects associated with the novel, its theatricality “implicitly convenes a collective body of witness” (16), both between performer and audience and among the performers themselves. Taken together, then, the dialect speeches of Jerry Letlow, Sandy Delamere, Mammy Jane, and Josh Green—united by the formal trope of the spoken soliloquy—create a kind of collective voice not unlike the *Choragos* of Ancient Greek theater, the formal structure from which soliloquy is in fact derived. Through this implied collectivity and the soliloquy’s formal relationship to direct address, the several instantiations of dialect speech in the novel come to resemble an ongoing moment of *parabasis*, defined as the point during an intermission where the chorus “came forward without their masks to face the audience and delivered . . . views on topics such as politics or religion about which the dramatist felt strongly” (Hornsby), often “subjects that [had] little to do with plot but [were] of topical interest” (Howatson).¹⁸ The power of the soliloquy in *The Marrow of Tradition* thus resides not within its capacity to advance plot or narrative conflict but rather in its “dethematizing element” (Kurnick 21). A fugitive performativity warping the textual fabric of the novel, situating itself between the reader and diegetic action, cleaving a space for its own enunciation, the black soliloquy yet imagines a mode of theatrical collectivity and constructs a counter-archive of vernacular memory under threat of violent intimidation and imminent disaster.¹⁹

Writing in the Novel

Our understanding of the soliloquies scattered throughout *The Marrow of Tradition* is enriched by two of the novel’s other significant features: first, the destructive circulation of written or material texts; and second, the preoccupation with images of corporeality, embodiment, and physical breakdown. I noted above that the soliloquy in *The Marrow of Tradition* should be understood as a form of “embodied consciousness” that is indestructible. This is illustrated most clearly by the paradoxically dismal fate of the written word in the novel. In the historical Wilmington and Chesnut’s Wellington, the advent of white supremacy in the public sphere is sparked by the publication of an editorial in the town’s black newspaper alleging that sexual relations between white women and black men were in fact consensual and not coerced—a common accusation that often led to the lynching of black men en masse. Indeed, it is the ghostly editorial, as an expression of consciousness in the print sphere, that haunts the novel and its historicity. Chesnut’s fictionalized editorial only appears in the novel when Major Carteret retrieves it from his office trashcan: “‘It’s an elegant specimen of journalism, isn’t it?’ laughed the general, airily.” Here, the actual editorial content

of the paper is swamped by “a number of advertisements of proprietary medicines, quack doctors, and fortune-tellers.” “Poorly printed on cheap paper” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 531), its substance is worthy only of derision.

If a newspaper editorial is the written expression of consciousness, will, or intent, then the very danger of its publication is the potential for its eventual reuse and appropriation: “Gentlemen . . . I believe we can find a more effective use for this article,” remarks General Belmont (532). Indeed, this print culture expression of political dissent is ultimately repurposed toward opposing goals: “That editorial in the negro newspaper is good campaign matter, but we should reserve it until it will be most effective,” explains General Belmont. He continues:

“In the meantime we will continue to work up public opinion,—we can use that letter privately for that purpose,—and when the state campaign opens we’ll print the editorial, with suitable comment, scatter it broadcast throughout the state, fire the Southern heart. . . . and teach our colored fellow citizens that we are tired of negro domination and have put an end to it forever.” (534)

Thus, the entire project of the editorial undoes itself. The written expression of consciousness is not only fruitless but also harmful and destructive to its own cause.

A later attempt on the part of the white supremacists to suppress black suffrage sees the editorial resurface:

“What became of that editorial in the nigger paper?” inquired the general in his blandest tones, cleverly directing a smoke ring toward the ceiling. . . . “[W]hy wouldn’t it be a good thing to bring into play at the present juncture?” . . . It was unanimously decided to republish the obnoxious article, with comment adapted to fire the inflammable Southern heart. (652-53)

The editorial’s circulation in the public sphere—due simply to its appearance in print—leaves it hopelessly vulnerable to political tampering: “The reproduction, in the *Chronicle*, of the article from the *Afro-American Banner*, with Carteret’s inflammatory comment, took immediate effect,” Chesnutt writes. “It touched the Southern white man in his most sensitive spot” (657). Print media, as a vehicle for black expression, necessarily falls prey to the parties of white supremacy.

The dangers of the printed word are further indicated later in the novel, after Sandy is acquitted for the murder of Mrs. Ochiltree. The widely circulated report of “another dastardly outrage” renders Sandy a “burly black brute” whose innocence is relegated to “fine-print” on an “inside page” yet trumped by the “large black type” on the “front pages” announcing the trial and “impending lynching with its prospective horrors” (645-46). The written word, by whatever medium or means, is destructive.²⁰ That is, all written documents in the novel are either destroyed or compromised—or they are destructive and compromising.

Such is the fate most crucially of legal documents in the novel. Three sets of legalistic texts—specifically, wills and contracts—are either purposely or inadvertently sabotaged or damaged.²¹ The first belongs to Mr. Delamere, who falls ill after Sandy’s trial and acquittal and the revelation that his grandson Tom was not only an illegal gambler and heavy drinker but also responsible for Mrs. Ochiltree’s death. Delamere dictates his will to General Belmont, leaving three thousand dollars to Sandy and the remainder of his estate to Dr. Miller’s hospital and nursing school. Immediately thereafter, he “suffered a third paralytic stroke, from which he died two days afterwards,” and, as a result, “[t]he will was never produced” (647). Despite Mr. Delamere’s best intentions to reward Sandy’s loyalty and Dr. Miller’s lofty ambitions, neither comes to fruition. The dictation of Mr. Delamere’s last will and testament and its translation into legal writing are thwarted by General Belmont, again revealing the danger of the written word—that it is dangerously vulnerable to human tampering.

The most significant sets of legal documents in the novel—belonging to Mrs. Ochiltree and discovered by Olivia Carteret after the old woman’s unexpected death—spell out a turbulent family history. After her mother’s death, Olivia’s father takes in their black housemaid Julia Brown to live with him. Outraged by this gesture, Mrs. Ochiltree removes Olivia from her father’s care and raises the girl in her own house. Olivia’s father eventually has a child with Julia: Janet Miller, Dr. Miller’s wife and estranged half-sister to Olivia. It is assumed that Olivia’s father had never married Julia, thus making Janet an illegitimate child without legal rights to her father’s inheritance.

In the papers recovered from Mrs. Ochiltree’s home, Olivia identifies her father’s will—bequeathing “to his daughter Janet, the child of the woman known as Julia Brown, the sum of ten thousand dollars, and a certain plantation or tract of land a short distance from Wellington”—and thereafter promptly “threw the offending paper into the fire, and watched it slowly burn” (664). The next morning, Olivia once again takes out the folder formerly containing the will and discovers her father’s and Julia Brown’s certificate of marriage. “Mechanically she moved toward the fireplace, so dazed by this discovery as to be scarcely conscious of her own actions. She surely had not formed any definite intention of destroying this piece of paper when her fingers relaxed unconsciously and let go of their hold upon it,” Chesnutt writes. “The draught swept it toward the fireplace. Ere scarcely touching the flames it caught, blazed fiercely, and shot upward with the current of air. A moment later the record of poor Julia’s marriage was scattered to the four winds of heaven, as her poor body had long since mingled with the dust of the earth” (665-66). The only remaining testament to Julia Brown’s legitimate marriage and her legitimate child is thereby destroyed. Whereas in the previous scene Olivia purposely sets afire her father’s last will and testament, here the marriage certificate is carried by a gust of wind into the fireplace. Given the pattern elsewhere established by Chesnutt, it could not be otherwise: the novel insists that all written records must be erased.

Such repeated destruction, compromise, and misuse of written, material texts is thus not simply a question of corrupt ethics, human tampering, and malicious intent but a question of necessity. The consciousnesses, inner lives, and the social and family histories of black characters in the novel cannot ever safely reside within printed texts.²² The only way to safeguard them from destruction is to speak them aloud. To guarantee the integrity of the expression of consciousness is also to guarantee its transience. Importantly, spoken expression, presented as a necessary alternative to the printed word—whether circulated publicly or stowed away in private—cannot be broken down, removed, compromised, or appropriated. Thus, *The Marrow of Tradition* is deeply ironic, its performative counter-text demonstrating the weakness of the written word as a vehicle for expressing consciousness.

Embodiment in the Novel

Aside from Jerry's tragicomic ruminations and Sandy's supernatural visions, several striking moments of dramatic utterance in the novel serve no symbolic function and provide no psychological insight whatsoever beyond the mere embodiment of speech itself. In one instance, Chesnutt writes that Dr. Miller "had often seen Josh's mother, old Aunt Milly, — 'Silly Milly,' the children called her, — wandering aimlessly about the street, muttering to herself incoherently" (552). In another, when Mammy Jane is fatally wounded during the town riot at the end of the novel, Dr. Miller rushes to tend to her: "She was not yet quite dead, and as Miller, with a tender touch, placed her head in a more comfortable position, her lips moved with a last lingering flicker of consciousness: — 'Comin', missis, comin'!" (694).²³ These two final moments should still be understood in terms of the soliloquy, although they seem to depict merely incoherent "muttering" or "a last lingering flicker of consciousness." They demonstrate profoundly how Chesnutt's representation of black consciousness is not always, or not simply, about the substantive content of its expression. It is also necessarily concerned with the embodiment of speech as theatrical gesture.

Indeed, there is good reason to refer to the soliloquy in the novel as a form of "embodied consciousness." Chesnutt's text is preoccupied with images of corporeality, embodiment, and physical breakdown. The novel begins with physical suffering and the threat of death, as Olivia Carteret struggles to give birth to her first child, having "fought back the grim spectre that stood by the bedside" (473). Occupied by tactile sensation, the opening of the novel describes the Carterets' painful, spasmodic clutch, "The major shiver[ing] with apprehension as the slender hand which he held in his own contracted nervously and in a spasm of pain clutched his fingers with a viselike grip" (467). This particular image recalls Jerry's "outstretched palm" (487). Elsewhere, Chesnutt employs

anatomical metaphors to dramatize social and political conflict, as when Dr. Price's feelings of racial superiority are likened to "the very breath of his nostrils" (523) or the Carterets' "ancestral home" is "swallowed up in the common ruin" (467) following the Civil War. Indeed, Chesnutt repeatedly returns to the sensations of the mouth. The narrator opines, for example, that "Blood is thicker than water, but, if it flow too far from conventional channels, may turn to gall and wormwood" (516), taking a rhetorical cliché unnecessarily far, rendering it disgusting by soaking it in bodily fluids and bitter taste. Recalling this image of wormwood and evoking the physical sensation of disgust, the narrator continues: "Truth, it has been said, is might, and must prevail; but it sometimes leaves a bad taste in the mouth" (524).

The threat of physical breakdown—especially concerning the capacity for speech—surfaces throughout the novel. Dodie, for example, swallows a small piece of ivory that has detached from one of his toys, leaving him "gasping for breath" and, later, "breath[ing] heavily, with a strange, whistling noise" (499). Like Dr. Price's nostrils and other images of the body's internals (and repeated references to oral sensation), this brief passage takes us down—with the toy piece—into Dodie's throat. In fact, an entire chapter is dedicated to "The Operation." A group of doctors awaits the arrival of Dr. Miller, with Carteret becoming increasingly anxious to begin the procedure before the Negro doctor arrives:

Miller's presence could not but be distasteful to Mrs. Carteret for other reasons. Miller's wife was the living evidence of a painful episode in Mrs. Carteret's family, which the doctor's presence would inevitably recall. Once before, Mrs. Carteret's life had been endangered by encountering, at a time of great nervous strain, this ill-born sister and her child. She was even now on the verge of collapse at the prospect of her child's suffering, and should be protected from the intrusion of any idea which might add to her distress. (521)

Again, Chesnutt recalls the previous image of bitter taste—Miller's presence is "distasteful"—this time to describe a "painful" family history that had "endangered" Mrs. Carteret's life. Janet, her sister, is "ill-born," like a disease, and the damage done to Dodie's body is reflected in Mrs. Carteret's near breakdown due to "distress."

When Dr. Miller learns that he has been dismissed from the operation due to Major Carteret's discomfort with his presence near Mrs. Carteret, the narrator states: "The rebuff came with a corresponding shock. He had the heart of a man, the sensibilities of a cultivated gentleman; the one was sore, the other deeply wounded" (524). Not only is his dismissal described in terms of pain and physical harm, but Dr. Miller also finds that the "truth" is "unpalatable," another image of bitter taste and disgust. Chesnutt also vividly describes the procedure to save Dodie's life, including "all the ghastly paraphernalia for vivisection," the doctor

“[a]pplying his ear again to the child’s throat . . . then picking the baby up from the table” and “[giving] it a couple of sharp claps between the shoulders,” after which “a small object shot out from the child’s mouth” (525-26). This scene devotes microscopic attention to Dodie’s mouth, throat, and chest—the final emphasis again on the “child’s mouth.”

As Susan Danielson correctly observes, “Each of Dodie’s illnesses is connected to his voice” and “threatens his capacity for expression” (84). In a somewhat analogous scene, Mr. Delamere suffers a third “paralytic stroke, from which he dies two days afterwards, without having in the meantime recovered the power of speech” (646). Although Dodie is ultimately treated, both he and Mr. Delamere might lose their physical capacity to speak and to breathe. In the final sequence of the novel, Dodie is again struck by illness, of which “[n]othing short of tracheotomy—an operation to open the windpipe—will relieve him.” Chesnutt thus not only frequently describes broader plot developments and social circumstances in terms of the body and its organs and networks but also frequently thematizes physical and bodily vitality and breakdown. The title of the novel itself brings us immediately to the body’s interior—“marrow,” the interior of the interior. More specifically, Chesnutt’s corporeal imagery is obsessed with the mouth—its ability to sense taste and render speech.

Chesnutt thereby frames his soliloquies with lucid images of bodily breakdown in which one’s physical capacity for speech is endangered. If we juxtapose these descriptions with the repeated spoliation of the printed word outlined above, we approach a conception of the expression of consciousness in the novel as necessarily an embodied gesture.²⁴ Since “[g]estures, unlike language, tend to mobilize the turbulent expressivity of the human body and thus complicate the processes through which expressivity enters the circulation of meaning,” they “occupy a hybrid domain of incoherent expressivity, repetitive movement, and uproot affect” (Puchner 25). This reliance on an “aesthetics of gesture” profoundly complicates our understanding of consciousness in novels, which we typically associate with abstracted mental states represented through techniques such as interior monologue or free indirect speech.²⁵ Chesnutt’s emphasis on performative gesture, then, undergirds a narrative mode that projects consciousness into the material and social world of the novel.

In simplest terms, the expression of consciousness through soliloquy requires a mouth that can speak. Elaine Scarry describes speech as bodily enunciation. “The ‘self’ or ‘me,’ which is experienced on the one hand as more private, more essentially at the center, and on the other hand as participating across the bridge of the body in the world, is ‘embodied’ in the voice, in language,” Scarry writes. “Through his ability to project words and sounds out into his environment, a human being inhabits, humanizes, and makes his own a space much larger than that occupied by his body alone” (49). Each black character in the novel must “project sounds and words out into his environment” in order to

properly inhabit it, humanize it, and exist in it beyond his bodily mass and thus counteract “the silencing that spreads like an illness throughout Chesnutt’s work” (Gilmore 257). This “visceral” and “nonrepresentable” aspect, as Weimann notes, renders the soliloquy invulnerable to the threat of compromise and breakdown. In the “downstage space” of the *platea*, beyond and apart from the centralized textual authority of the *locus*, Chesnutt’s soliloquies in dialect “provide an opening for, and a threshold to, what in the existence of the human animal itself was and is liminal and, to a certain degree, irreducible” (195). In this way, Jerry, Mammy Jane, Josh Green, Sandy, and Dr. Miller join the woodland chorus that opens the novel: “Only the shrill chirp of the cicada and the muffled croaking of the frogs in some distant marsh broke the night silence” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 467).

Conclusion

The drama of consciousness in *The Marrow of Tradition* reaches a fever pitch in the final sequence of the novel. In the aftermath of catastrophic violence, Dr. Miller’s young son has been killed by a stray bullet. Meanwhile, Dodie continues to suffer from an increasingly severe illness. Amid the ongoing chaos of the massacre, Chesnutt resets the narrative stage as the detached isolation of the spoken soliloquy gives way to the overt contestation of dramatic monologue. In the first instance, Major Carteret reluctantly asks Miller to perform a life-saving operation on his son, prompting an irate response from the doctor:

“There, Major Carteret!” exclaimed Miller, with the tragic eloquence of despair, “there lies a specimen of your handiwork! There lies *my* only child, laid low by a stray bullet in this riot which you and your paper have fomented; struck down as much by your hand as though you had held the weapon with which his life was taken!” . . .

“There he lies,” continued [Miller], “an innocent child,—there he lies dead, his little life snuffed out like a candle, because you and a handful of your friends thought you must override the laws and run this town at any cost!—and there kneels his mother, overcome by grief. We are alone in the house. It is not safe to leave her unattended. My duty calls me here, by the side of my dead child and my suffering wife! I cannot go with you. There is a just God in heaven!—as you have sown, so may you reap!” (710)

After Miller’s initial refusal, Olivia Carteret desperately rushes to the Millers’ home, acknowledges her half-sister Janet for the first time, and pleads with the doctor to help her child. At this moment, with the rioters dissipated and the violence ended, Janet Miller addresses her half-sister, again in the form of an extended monologue:

“Listen!” she cried, dashing her tears aside. “I have but one word for you,—one last word,—and then I hope never to see your face again! My mother died of want, and I was brought up by the hand of charity. Now, when I have married a man who can supply my needs, you offer me back the money which you and your friends robbed me of! You imagined that the shame of being a negro swallowed up every other ignominy,—and in your eyes I am a negro, though I am your sister, and you are white, and people have taken me for you on the streets,—and you, therefore, left me nameless all my life! Now, when an honest man has given me a name of which I can be proud, you offer me the one of which you robbed me, and of which I can make no use. For twenty-five years I, poor, despicable fool, would have kissed your feet for a word, a nod, a smile. Now, when this tardy recognition comes, for which I have waited so long, it is tainted with fraud and crime and blood, and I must pay for it with my child’s life!” (717-18)

After her emotional speech, Janet instructs her husband to follow Olivia back to the Carterets’ home, where he is rushed upstairs to operate on Dodie: “There’s time enough, but none to spare” (718). These two moments may be the only expressions of black consciousness in the novel that successfully cross the racial threshold, addressed to and heard by a white character.²⁶ That is, Miller’s harangue and Janet’s impassioned plea together gesture toward a resolution of one of the novel’s central problems—where black consciousness is not just embodied through the performativity of speech but, crucially, also traverses the “color line.”²⁷

This development perhaps further complicates a narrative resolution that many critics consider an unfortunate yet unavoidable flaw.²⁸ P. Jay Delmar, for example, writes that “the resolution of the dilemma has the appearance of a temporary truce; the novel seems to stop, not end, and the reader is left with the uneasy feeling that something is not quite right, that Chesnut has left something out of the work which might have made its theme more coherent” (“Moral” 271). While the shifting dramatic aspect of this *dénouement* remains riddled with ambiguity, Chesnut seems to suggest that—at least in the imagined, nonnarrated futurity of the novel—the survival of black speech and consciousness will be predicated on its transcendence of the dramatic fracture found elsewhere in the novel: between *locus* and *platea*, “strategy” and “tactic,” Standard English and Southern black dialect, interior monologue and spoken soliloquy, narrative and theater. With that, perhaps nothing remains to be said.

Notes

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1. For discussion of *The Marrow of Tradition* as a historical novel, see William Gleason (25) and Jae H. Roe (233).
2. For representative examples of this tendency, see Marjorie George and Richard S. Pressman (289-91), Roe (237), John M. Reilly (36), Trinyan Mariano (56), Gleason (32-34), John Edgar Wideman ("Charles W. Chesnutt" 130), Eric Sundquist (440), and William L. Andrews (*Literary* 197-212). According to Samina Najmi, "Scholars have argued variously that Green or, more often, Miller embodies Chesnutt's political ideals," thus "result[ing] in a myopia precluding critical engagement with the novel as a whole" (1).
3. See, for example, Birgit Brander Rasmussen. On the tendency in earlier Chesnutt criticism to read *The Marrow of Tradition* as a social tract rather than a work of literary art, see Ernestine Williams Pickens (49-51).
4. The only exception is the lawyer Mr. Watson.
5. Carol MacKay writes that the soliloquy was a key feature of Victorian novels. Although the form eventually fell out of fashion in favor of free indirect speech, the soliloquy was an important narrative tool by which nineteenth-century British authors staged the conflict of the Victorian "constricted self" and restrictive social boundaries. MacKay's discussion is especially relevant as Chesnutt's novel is fashioned after the Victorian multi-plot novel. On Chesnutt's engagement with Victorian literature, see Daniel Hack (102-34). Lloyd A. Skiffington describes in broad outlines the history of the English soliloquy, beginning with its roots in ancient drama as the "offspring" (11) of the speaking role of the *Choragos* in the fifth century BC. The form was then taken up later by medieval dramatists, especially of the mystery play, with little influence from its antique precedents. William Shakespeare's innovations in the form, expanding on medieval developments, brought the soliloquy to its artistic zenith.
6. While Ian Finseth briefly draws attention to "the porter Jerry's 'soliloquies in dialect'" (9), the character's role in the novel has gone largely unnoticed. Roe also remarks that Jerry's political dilemma is key to understanding Chesnutt's authorial predicament (239-40). Sundquist, on the other hand, claims that, "By the time of *The Marrow of Tradition*, however, some of Chesnutt's most venomous sarcasm is directed at the black Jerry Letlow, who would bleach his skin and straighten his hair in order to appear more white" (400). For another effort to reframe the narrative significance of minor characters in the novel, see Rachel A. Wise.

7. Skiffington writes that Shakespeare “so highly refined his soliloquies of character as to render practically unrecognizable their relationship to any earlier variety of solo utterance” (71). On the history of Shakespearean soliloquy, see James E. Hirsh.
8. On the relationship between the theatrical spectacle of lynching and the cakewalk in the novel, see John Mac Kilgore.
9. On Chesnutt’s move away from dialect writing, see Andrews (*Literary* 22-23).
10. On the relationship between realism and romance in Chesnutt’s work, see Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. and Gleason. On Chesnutt’s realism as a mode of Reconstruction historiography, see Peter Zogas. On realism and its relationship to the novel’s historicity, see Joyce Pettis. On the question of realism’s capacity to depict race and racism and the convergence of Chesnutt’s realist technique with his activist purposes, see Ryan Simmons. On the shared mimetic capacities of Chesnutt’s literary realism and legal stenography, see Mark Sussman.
11. On further stylistic continuities between *The Conjure Woman* and *The Marrow of Tradition*, especially the gothic, see Gerald Ianovici.
12. If Chesnutt’s importation of the soliloquy into the novel is not new—similar instances of self-talking are common to both the Victorian novel and earlier African American fiction—his particular use of the form is. Frederick Douglass’s historical novella *The Heroic Slave* (1854) and Martin Delany’s novel *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1852-53), for example, both contain several such moments. However, in contrast to Chesnutt’s novel, the soliloquy itself is not a racialized form in these works. Chesnutt’s major intervention, then, is to designate the soliloquy as the unique discursive arena for the articulation of black consciousness. On voice and consciousness in nineteenth-century black fiction, see Andrews (“Novelization”).
13. This is actually a misquotation from Act III, Scene 4, in which Hamlet states, “Look here, upon this picture, and on this” (1749). William Wells Brown seems to have been quite taken not only with *Hamlet* but also with this specific line, which he quotes with varying degrees of accuracy in several of his works. He uses the correct statement as the epigraph to chapter 28 of *The American Fugitive in Europe* (1855) and to the chapter on Joseph Jenkins (not Joseph Jenkins Roberts, the African colonizationist and first president of Liberia described in another chapter, but rather a different figure who may indeed be fictitious) in *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863). Brown takes a separate passage from *Hamlet*—“’Tis too much prov’d—that with devotion’s visage, / And pious action, we do sugar o’er the devil himself” (1733)—as the epigraph to chapter 13 of his novel *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1853). Finally, Brown includes in *The Black Man* a chapter on the Victorian actor Ira Aldridge, whom Brown reports seeing portray Othello and then Hamlet on successive nights, writing that Aldridge’s “rendering

- of the ‘Soliloquy on Death’ . . . was one of his best efforts” (536). On Brown’s engagement with Shakespeare in *The Escape*, see Keith M. Botelho.
14. It is worth noting that this sequence is most likely also derived from Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), where Tom Driscoll robs and then murders his uncle—while disguised in blackface and women’s clothing—in order to pay off his gambling debts. See Werner Sollors (xxviii-xxix).
 15. My thinking about the intertextual relationship between Chesnutt and Shakespeare is informed by the work of Peter Erickson, who posits that allusion should be understood as an act of revision that resolves interauthorial conflict through reinterpretation and thus lends creative agency to the successor artist, in contrast to unidirectional and hierarchical notions of allusion that foreground either parricidal melodrama (Harold Bloom) or sentimental gratitude (Christopher Ricks). Erickson describes allusions as “tiny microcosms of canon formation in which localized explorations ultimately have larger, cumulative repercussions” (8). This may be precisely the case with Chesnutt’s novel, where seemingly brief gestures to *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* open up new interpretive vistas. Furthermore, I am also convinced by Daniel Hack’s recent work that the distinctiveness and coherence of the African American literary tradition need not be predicated solely on its detachment or isolation from other literatures but rather on its uses of and associations with other canons and traditions.
 16. The form of soliloquy found in the novel seems to fall somewhere between Garrett Stewart’s notions of “interpolated reading” and “extrapolated reading”: the former inscribing its reader through third-person reference, vocative tag, or apostrophe and the latter inviting the reader to substitute itself into narrative scenes of reading or interpretation. Of the three “formats” Stewart identifies whereby the narrative scene suggests the situation of its own reading, one is “the oral (and so at least at that extent communal rather than private) delivery and reception of a narrative” (59). Chesnutt’s novel clearly complicates this case, as the oral delivery of narrative is often explicitly private and self-spoken. See Stewart (3-86).
 17. Stephen P. Knadler, too, notes how Chesnutt’s “tactical positioning of the [liberal white] reader” (433) forces one to confront and even assume “the shifting eyes, voices, and hearts of the novel’s many ‘covert’ black authors” (432).
 18. The ancient roots of the soliloquy are also significant since Chesnutt—who read both Latin and Greek—was deeply influenced by classical literature, especially Ovid and Vergil. Indeed, the “devil-porter” in *Macbeth* might ultimately derive from similar figures in ancient comedy, notably Aeacus in Aristophanes’s *Frogs*. On Chesnutt’s classicism, see Sarah Wagner-McCoy and John Levi Barnard.
 19. As David Kurnick focuses specifically on residues of theatricality in the works of novelists whose dramatic ambitions did not come to fruition (William Makepeace Thackeray, T. S. Eliot, Henry James, and James Joyce), it might be

- worth noting here that Chesnutt was in fact drafting a play entitled *Mrs. Darcy's Daughter* while writing *The Marrow of Tradition*. He copyrighted the play in 1906 but ultimately failed to get it produced or published. On the play and its relationship to realism and melodrama, see Matthew Wilson and Anne Marie McDonald.
20. Roe similarly writes that Chesnutt ironically “calls his reader’s attention to the historical record of ‘the newspapers’” but “immediately subverts the authority of that official history by giving greater authority to the counter-memory of ‘the people of Wellington’” (236).
 21. Chesnutt’s treatment of legal topics has sparked a rich body of criticism. Many critics read *The Marrow of Tradition* as a direct response to *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)—indeed, Chesnutt proclaimed to have taken Albion Tourgée’s *Fool’s Errand* (1879) as his working model. For the relationship between *The Marrow of Tradition* and the *Plessy* case and decision, see Thomas Brook and Gwen Mathewson. For Chesnutt’s relationship with Tourgée, see Peter Caccavari, Bill Hardwig, and Gretchen Short. For other engagements with Chesnutt’s legal thinking, see Nancy Bentley, Andrew Hebard, and William E. Moddelmog. While much of the legal scholarship on Chesnutt has focused on questions of contract, Trinyan Mariano goes further in claiming that *The Marrow of Tradition* shows the severe limitations of contract theory by appealing to the law of torts. Tort, an emerging concept in American law at the time of the novel’s publication, is not a subset of contract law but rather the overarching theory from which contract draws its power. The repeated destruction of legal documents in the novel—especially contractual agreements—shows the racist functions of so-called “higher law” that claims to supersede the mere material formalities guaranteed by contract. As tort subsumes contract, Chesnutt’s legal critique demonstrates the dangers of corrective justice—namely lynching—based on appeals to higher law. If we accept Chesnutt’s gesture to the emergence of tort law, the necessity of spoken soliloquy in the novel assumes an added significance: by operating above and beyond written contract, the soliloquy seems to provide a defense against the racist implementation of “higher law” corrective justice based on tort law.
 22. The same can be said for an additional document unearthed by Olivia Carteret after Mrs. Ochiltree’s murder: a letter from her late father to Mr. Delamere, detailing his marriage to Julia and granting Delamere executorship of his will. The letter is not destroyed in the novel, but it never reaches its recipient. On other moments of verbal suppression in the novel, see Michael T. Gilmore.
 23. Mammy Jane’s final words also resemble those of Jerry, whose frantic shouts to Carteret (“Majah Carteret—*O majah!* It’s me, suh, Jerry, suh!”) go unheard amid the chaos of the insurrection, effectively rendering his dialogic gesture a moribund soliloquy: “Jerry’s cries were drowned in a roar of rage and a volley of shots from the mob. Carteret, who had turned away with Ellis, did not even hear his servant’s voice” (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 702).

24. The expression of black consciousness through embodied gesture is not unique to Chesnutt's novel. His earlier short stories, too, suggest similar preoccupations. In "The Passing of Grandison" from *The Wife of His Youth* (1899), for example, the titular character and his family escape slavery to Canada aboard a steamboat. When their owner catches up to them, he glimpses only the "look they cast backward," Grandison "point[ing] him out," and a crewmember who "waved his hand derisively" (205). Perhaps the first and only explicit articulation of consciousness in any of Chesnutt's plantation tales is accomplished through embodiment: the shaking of a fist, a backward glance, a mocking hand gesture. A thematic preoccupation with consciousness and its relation to speech runs throughout other stories: "The Dumb Witness" (c. 1897), for example, reinvents the cut-tongue trope derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by way of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*.
25. Gordon O. Taylor writes that the late nineteenth-century American novel moves away the representation of consciousness as "static, discrete mental states requiring representational emphasis on the conventional nature of particular states" toward a notion of consciousness as "linked mental states requiring representational emphasis on the nature of the sequential process itself" (5-6)—the latter of which clearly describes *The Marrow of Tradition*, in which the spoken soliloquy builds an "extend[ed] analysis of the mind in process" into the "narrative flow of the novel" (7).
26. Of course, these are not the only instances in the novel of dialogue between white and black characters, nor even of dramatic monologue. In the novel's opening chapter, for example, Mammy Jane has an extended speech in which she narrates the Carterets' family history to Dr. Price. That monologue serves the primary function of plot exposition, however, and does not grant privileged narrative access to psychological interiority or black collectivity in the same manner as the soliloquy. Hence, I refer to the Millers' closing "monologues" as unique specifically for their articulation of consciousness, rather than simply thematic, plot-based, or characterological data. One possible counterexample appears in chapter 4, when Mammy Jane reacts strongly to the perceived disrespect paid her by a young nurse caring for Dodie. Although she eventually "relate[s] her grievance" to Carteret, it is only after her self-spoken soliloquy is interrupted by the Major's entrance into the scene: "Now what are you croaking about, Jane?" (Chesnutt, *Marrow* 498). If the ensuing dialogue qualifies as an expression of consciousness, at the very least it begins with and proceeds from an initial moment of soliloquizing.
27. On Janet Miller's allegorical function in the novel, see James R. Giles and Thomas P. Lally.
28. See Roe (238) and Mariano (570).

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