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SUSANNA ASHTON

Volumes: Charles Chesnutt and the Racial History of the Stenographic Imagination

In Boston in 1846, four free Black men and women participated in thirty days of instruction in a new system of writing or “phonography,” as it was often known then. This would not have been that extraordinary in most circumstances: thirty days to learn the fundamentals of shorthand is not unreasonable. And the fact that they were Black might have been mildly surprising for that time but not in and of itself remarkable. Plenty of free Black people in the Northern states were literate and interested in advancing their skills. What was extraordinary here was that they were all entirely illiterate—shorthand was being taught as a starting point, not as a secondary skill for literacy.

After thirty days, their instructor, the abolitionist visionary and shorthand impresario Stephen Pearl Andrews, held an exhibition of their achievements. Even though the four participants reported disruptions to their studies because of illness and their “avocations,” and while they had faced some opposition from their friends, they had kept at it and completed most of their instructional hours. They were ready.

Andrews invited many of the most prominent abolitionists and progressives of Boston to attend the exhibition, including abolitionist Charles Sumner, economist Amasa Walker, and educator George Emerson. As the formerly illiterate students stood and watched, Andrews pointed at phonographic characters on the blackboard, guiding them as they translated the shapes into sounds, syllables, words, and stories. As reported in the *New York Tribune*, the audience went wild, crying out:

Let it be known the Union over, let it startle those who hold in galling bonds their fellow beings—let it rejoice the oppressed, and urge philanthropists to

new exertions in the cause of humanity, that those who are ignorant of a letter to-day, may know, in One Month, how to read!¹

Although he was not in the audience that day, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison heard about the event and described this system of phonography as “perhaps next in importance to the discovery of printing.”² He was interested in notions and mechanisms of a universal language that would render global equality more imaginable. And this particular kind of shorthand was not simply abbreviating words but a reproduction of sound—a system that essentially bypassed spelling rules and could be done very quickly. By the late 1840s, anti-slavery newspapers, such as the *Liberator* and the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, obtained official phonographers to record speeches of anti-slavery orators accurately. Because the testimony of Black witnesses was severely limited in most legal forums during this era, as Janine DeLombard has argued, abolitionists became especially intent upon having their speeches and witness presented in public lecture forums and then swiftly issued in print.³ Any form of stenography or shorthand could speed up this process, and phonetic-based stenography would be especially good at capturing the live moment as opposed to the polished and presented kinds of prepared speeches that might be later turned over to a newspaper. Indeed, by presenting lectures verbatim via shorthand or phonography, abolitionists could have a rhetoric of immediate accuracy and have the upper hand in claiming the truthfulness of their positions. This point has been made powerfully by Nicole Gray, who argues that by using these transcriptive methods, abolitionists sought to essentially democratize the record of injustice.⁴

The formidable abolitionist Wendell Phillips was especially appreciative of the fact that his speeches could find a larger audience beyond the auditorium and could also be reproduced accurately to forestall caricature or misrepresentation.⁵ Philanthropist and abolitionist Lewis Tappan was thrilled by the potential to swiftly educate people who had been denied education, particularly the enslaved or the formerly enslaved.⁶ Gerrit Smith, the philanthropist and abolitionist who was to help fund John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry, helped support Andrews’ endeavors as part of an investment in social liberation. At an anti-slavery fair at Faneuil Hall in Boston, phonographic mottoes were hung on the walls because the two reforms were understood as intrinsically linked.⁷

While phonography schools were subsequently set up around the country and books and correspondence courses also grew apace, sound-based shorthand never succeeded in becoming a widespread system for writing instruction despite its ease of acquisition. A kind of literacy was certainly

attainable within only a few short weeks (after all, one did not need to master the illogics of spelling rules) but it was a literacy with only limited scope for use, considering that most manifestations of the printed word in the United States were written in standard English and would not be comprehensible to someone who only knew phonography. Phonography was a closed discourse, a closed-loop as it were, and never succeeded in breaking through to become a replacement for literacy in English. Instead, phonography and other shorthand techniques evolved into a commercial tool to be called “stenography.” This tool became understood primarily as a technology that could promote accuracy in legal, journalistic, and business dealings.

By the 1870s, when an ambitious young man of mixed race in Fayetteville, North Carolina, began to teach himself stenography, it was no longer coupled in the popular mind with the abolitionist reforms that had helped launch it. It was seen primarily as a tool for advancement in the world of business. Nonetheless, when Charles Waddell Chesnutt decided to learn shorthand, he engaged with a practice historically inflected with notions of freedom, racial equality, and justice in a way that might be hard for us to apprehend today. That his stenographic career supported his artistry for many years is certainly true, but his career as a stenographer also shaped the way he could imagine and represent the racially-constructed world around him.

The fact that stenography had since become a practice understood primarily in commercial discourse rather than liberation rhetoric foreshadowed the reception his race-themed fiction was to receive. After all, publishers assessed Chesnutt’s works more for their commercial potential than for their ability to change readers’ racial attitudes. The contradictory role of stenography in American culture was thus reflected in the narrative structure of Chesnutt’s lifework—both his fiction and his business. He invoked a stenographic literary idiom in both his dialect and his non-dialect writings.⁸

In this study I demonstrate how stenographic practice allowed Chesnutt to construct a language of representation that was uniquely opposed to the known and familiar in language and texts but also one which was intrinsically tied to notions of race. So, while other scholars have brilliantly parsed many of the ways stenographic work manifested in Chesnutt’s dialect-heavy fiction, I seek to contextualize that analysis more deeply by siting stenography as a practice deeply involved with notions about racial power and mimetic representation that were particular to the historical moments in which they developed. Chesnutt may or may not have been aware of some of the specific history surrounding stenographic practice in early-nineteenth century

America but he was part of its legacy nonetheless. He would have been well aware that it was part of a cultural discourse around power, access, and visibility: notions in the nineteenth century that were inextricably tied to race.

The mimetic play on sound that dialect writing represents offers an insurrectionary opposition to the privilege standard English enjoys and has been thoughtfully analyzed and interrogated by scholars such as Mark Sussman, Jeffrey W. Miller, and Mary E. Brown Ziegler.⁹ Hence this essay attends more to the context of the stenographic history within racial practice and also to demonstrate similarly compelling concerns about speech, representation, text, and justice worked out in works such as Chesnutt's novel *A Business Career*—concerns most apparent when read through a historically informed and racially constructed stenographic lens.

Scrivening and Black Witness

This invisibility of stenography and its particularly apt metaphorical embodiment of the racial trope of invisibility recall both earlier and more recent notions of the scrivener as paradigmatic American outsider, uniquely posed to reflect racially inflected notions of the real. This notion was best articulated by Amiri Baraka, then best known as LeRoi Jones, in 1962. He observed that “the Negro remains an integral part of U.S. society, but continually outside it, a figure like Melville's *Bartleby*. He is an American, capable of identifying emotionally with the fantastic cultural ingredients of this society, but he is also, forever, outside that culture, an invisible strength within it, an observer.”¹⁰

This notion does more than just link the nineteenth-century fascination with stenography as a tool for liberation movements. It suggests that the idea of visibility and representation of invisibility are key to artistic interpretations of racial power in American life. This tracks well with how Chesnutt's fiction was often shaped around the inadequacy of transcription to record ultimately the experiences of all his characters. He was necessarily confident of the accuracy of his stenographic business in the real world, but with his writerly sense he was convinced that transcription and material rendering of the world could never be wholly accurate—this results in the stenographic dialectic through which his works must be read. Chesnutt used his stenographic knowledge to perform an absence, as much as a presence, of meaning.

Many of the Americans who became best known for importing European styles and theories of fast transcription to the American scene were involved quite explicitly with pursuing racial justice in the nineteenth century. Although traditions of shorthand and transcription had been around for

centuries, it wasn't until the mid-nineteenth that it caught on as an important skill for journalists, court reporters, and business offices. Some of the most important early popularizers of stenography in America, however, had a more than coincidental interest in liberal and even radical politics. Benn Pitman, for example, a major claimant to the title of founder of American stenography, transcribed legal cases dealing with the Ku Klux Klan's suppression of Black suffrage in South Carolina in 1871. Moreover, his most famous transcription was undoubtedly the one produced by a stenographic team he led during the conspiracy trial that investigated Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865.¹¹ While we might imagine Pitman as an uninvolved witness to these cases, perhaps not engaged in their drama one way or another, it is surely relevant that his wife, a "prominent" practitioner of stenography, had worked for the underground railroad in her youth.¹² It seems reasonable to assume that these legal cases were met with more than dispassionate interest at Pitman's family table.

Another example of how the worlds of activism and stenography intersected can be found in the life of the young abolitionist lawyer mentioned at the opening of this study: Stephen Pearl Andrews, who through his public exhibitions of stenographic literacy became a celebrated popularizer of stenography in the United States. His initial encounter with stenography is instructive because it was not incidental to his politics: in 1843, Andrews traveled to the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London as part of a (failed) mission to persuade British abolitionists and governmental leaders to purchase the freedom of enslaved people in Texas. He was approached by a stranger there who gave him a packet of books and pamphlets extolling the virtues of shorthand. Andrews claimed that he did not open the package until he was on the ship returning to America. The materials proclaimed a phoneticizing system of representation that would also assist with reforming the illogic of English spelling. Andrews became a convert to the cause and saw in it a way to liberate the impoverished and uneducated classes, particularly the enslaved or the formerly enslaved, from illiteracy. He immediately set up courses in Boston upon his return there in 1843.¹³

Andrews embodied the fascination of many nineteenth-century activists who saw abolitionism and racial justice as part of a rationalized and scientific world that would innovate and solve social problems. He was a founder of utopian communities, a creator of a philosophy he dubbed "universology," a polyglot who supposedly mastered over thirty languages, and an inventor of an Esperanto-like "scientific universal language" he called "Alwato." He was an eccentric, to be sure, but his indefatigable curiosity and commitment to equity allowed him to connect fleeting moments of speech with a recognition of a kind of universal humanity.¹⁴ Stenography (or, as Andrews

called it, “phonography”) was part of his larger project of making the world a more equitable place.¹⁵ We can see, therefore, that the lexographic and stenographic reforms were seen as part of an ongoing interest to democratize, modernize, and provide access to the ideals of American justice—and the foremost questions of American justice during this time were inevitably mixed in with notions of race.

Certainly, the premise that we are all equal under the eyes of the law is especially crucial to stenographers who supposedly do not look at the speaker. They just listen. With this premise, the color of a person’s skin might be initially irrelevant to a stenographer, who is supposed to be functionally invisible or disembodied, simply creating a record for posterity but not in any way shaping that record. Stenographers were witnesses to history but could never be acknowledged as such. Their existence was useful only inasmuch as they could be ignored. But, of course, no such race-blind world could ever exist. Since this was an era that witnessed the “separate but equal” *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision (1896) that declared the visibility of race was trumped by the legal identification of it, it would seem that Chesnutt’s stenographic presence was especially apt.¹⁶ He was fair enough to pass as a white man and render his own mixed-race “invisible” if he chose. While it would not have been illegal for a Black man to work as a stenographer, it was almost unheard of before the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and thus Chesnutt’s courtroom presence was doubly invisible, both stenographic and racial.¹⁷

Of course, stenographers were a physical and embodied presence. They were generally sitting up in front of the courtroom at strategically placed tables and in congressional reporting they were known to run from speaker and speaker, often writing as they dashed from seat to seat.¹⁸ Moreover, their work was predicated upon their ability to be skilled and automatic, both human and machine. They embodied the contradiction of nineteenth-century racial ideology itself. Their very skills and abilities, which were necessary to the job, needed to be ignored to imagine the stenographic transcript as a perfect re-creation of an unmediated aural experience.

The practice of stenography offered potential for a higher income, class mobility, geographic flexibility, and it also promised engagement with the modern rhetoric of scientific progress. Shorthand promised a way to sidestep cultural illogics such as unintuitive spellings or biased summations. Stenographic manuals’ objective and scientific tone promised an engagement with definitive and reproducible truths. Sound and speech could finally be mastered. For virtually the first time in history, speech and the aural experience were believed to be reproducible. Through stenography, history could be experienced, not merely recounted.

For a young man of mixed race living in the South during the late-nineteenth century, stenography might have represented a way to engage with society on equal and rational terms, as opposed to terms always defined by the cultural illogic of race. The supposed impartiality of stenographic practice might have appealed to a disciplined man intent on making the racial biases that shaped the American experience visible. It was not only a potentially lucrative trade, but it was also a singularly appropriate way for someone who wasn't visibly marked as Black but who culturally identified as such to make a living.

While early methods of shorthand and stenography had featured some attempts at phonetic representation, it is essential to recognize that the Pitman method, which claimed to be based primarily upon phonetics, was the one that met with the greatest success in the early-nineteenth century. By the end of the century, it had been largely replaced in the U.S. by other popular styles, notably the Gregg style of shorthand. Other shorthand systems tended to incorporate the Pitman emphasis upon phonetics, as opposed to being primarily dependent upon the symbolic representation of words or letters. This is notable because, as scholars Lisa Gitelman and Ivan Kreilkamp have argued, the nineteenth century became fixated upon the new sense of orality that was imagined as representable. Gitelman explains: "phonetic shorthand emphasized the oral character of language at the same time that it sought to perfect a technology for linguistic representation."¹⁹ Indeed, shorthand was understood to be not only objective and scientific (and not shaped in any way by its human medium) but also humanizing. On the one hand, it would eliminate all sense of arbitrary meaning (by eliminating non-intuitive spelling, for example) and, on the other, it would "promise a means by which writing might be infused with orality and the living breath of articulation."²⁰ Truly, shorthand boosters saw a modern yet humanized future with this new notion of writing. It is easy to see what might have attracted Chesnutt, a progressive artist of the human condition, to its practice.

What is most significant about Chesnutt's engagement with stenography is how he saw imagination as a critically misunderstood part of stenographic practice. Indeed, what interested him most about stenography seems to be its shortcomings as a technical tool devoid of imaginative shaping. This notion was worked out cleverly in his speech to the Ohio Stenographers' Association in 1890 titled "Some Requisites of a Law Reporter." Chesnutt argued, with some disingenuity but a touch of truth, "To be thoroughly at home in this work, to do it easily and well, a reporter should know everything."²¹ Chesnutt's slyly provocative comment that "everything" needed to be mastered was more than just an ego-boosting comment to the assembled

audience of stenographers, many of whom had accumulated tremendous and unrecognized skills to do their work correctly. Advice such as this would have been especially and ironically familiar for so many African American skilled workers who were grossly overqualified for the few middle-class professions they were allowed to practice. This was a fact that Chesnutt, as a credentialed lawyer who could only find steady employment as a stenographer, knew all too well. His comment was also a self-educated man's wry recognition of the uneasy balance between class, status, and skills. After arguing that a stenographer should be an accomplished linguist, a skilled scientist, and a knowledgeable lawyer, he then segued into the observation that a law reporter should be "a gentleman"—and "It is not necessary to define the meaning of the word 'gentlemen' to this audience."²² Many of those present were likely unaware of how race had shaped Chesnutt's status as gentleman according to the racist presumptions of dominant white culture. Thus the poignancy of his speech may have been lost on them. But the spirit of congratulatory praise to an underappreciated profession could not have been missed.

What is incidentally telling, though, is a minor comment he made in his speech after a litany of sarcasm about the accomplishments necessary to a law reporter: "It is true that a certain grade of reporters have to draw on their imagination, have even to exercise their judgment at times, in deciding what is the best thing with which to fill up a hiatus in a report; but this exercise is denied to the skilled reporter, who gets what is said."²³ Coming on the heels of his previous passages of gentle sarcasm, this comment can only be read with an eye to Chesnutt's ultimate distrust of stenography as ever being accurate without an infusion of imagination. It would not be an idea to push easily among the audience of earnest stenographers eager to elevate their profession to the status of a modern social science. Still, Chesnutt's understanding of stenography was always deeply tempered by a belief that its inadequacies for representing the human experience were ultimately more interesting than its abilities to do so. No stenographer could ever be fully and perfectly prepared. The stenographer's common sense would eventually serve him wherever perfect knowledge of language and intentions would fail. Only by accepting such scriptive limitations and even celebrating them, Chesnutt suggests, can a stenographer engage with his work properly. A stenographer must accept his role as a creative interpreter.

In an imaginative and figurative sense, the connections between stenography and Chesnutt's fiction merit analysis, for while it is tempting to be content with the assumption that stenography merely trained Chesnutt's ear well enough that, when it came time for him to depict dialect, he could do it vividly, I argue instead that it was the limitations not the advantages

of stenography that gave him fodder for creative shaping of dialect fiction. The dialect he created was more in conflict with popular understandings of stenography than in tandem with it. Chesnutt's self-training as an artist of the tradition directed him to suppress his mastery of the vernacular while experience as a successful stenographer and author demanded that he value the vernacular as having a special claim to transmitting truth.

Stenography is neither a speed writing system nor is it simply a phoneticization of verbal speech. Most systems, including the variants which Chesnutt practiced, relied upon an amalgamation of phoneticization, symbols used to indicate syllables, common terms or word endings, and actual writing. It was thus filled with phoneticization sprinkled with the occasional ideograph, or conceptually-represented units.²⁴ A key characteristic of stenography, I argue, is that it is an essentially indecipherable system of writing to the uninitiated. Stenography as a term arose from the Greek "steganos," meaning "hidden," and "graphein," meaning "to write," and its literal and figurative position as a secret writing system speaks directly to the issues confounding Chesnutt's always racialized prose. While a stenographer might argue that its indecipherability to the masses was a sad byproduct of the system and not intentional, it did mean that stenographers could self-perpetuate their own employment. Since only they could understand their own systems (and despite attempts at standardization, individual quirks in stenography were common), only they could be employed to "translate" their stenography into plain text for an official record.

While stenography is decipherable to those who are properly trained, its very existence is predicated upon secrecy and coding. Anxiety over stenography arises from the irretrievability of the dictated passage to the stenographically illiterate. Indeed, the illegibility of the text highlights its material presence and the necessity for a human subject to retrieve its "immaterial" value. Suddenly it is the "invisible" person, the stenographer, who holds the key to the code. In some cases, though, holding the key might not even imply a knowing responsibility. During the Great War, for example, shorthand stenographers worked for the U.S. military, transcribing prisoner interrogations even when they were in languages unfamiliar to the stenographer. The stenographer's presence was seen as both integral and irrelevant. They were no threat to national security because they were, in theory, transcribing sounds, not meanings. It would be up to military interpreters to alter or "translate" the codes shorthand writers were not supposed to comprehend.²⁵ For a Black writer whose career success became tied to his ability to "transcribe" and essentially decode impenetrable dialect of otherwise culturally silent and "invisible" characters, the thematic patterns of Chesnutt's career and his writings begin to take form.

Transcriptive Flexibility

Chesnutt's earliest encounters with the power of misaligned verbal reproduction may have prepared him for the world of stenography he was to enter later. He was born in Ohio, the son of free and light-skinned parents and, while money was scarce, his family was nonetheless well off in comparison with many African Americans living in penury, much less slavery, in the South. An incident from his father's life, however, suggests how real the suffering of antebellum African Americans was to the Chesnutt family and how the incident was resolved may have planted in young Chesnutt early respect for the power of transcriptive flexibility. As Chesnutt's daughter tells it, in 1856 a runaway slave was recaptured near Oberlin, Ohio. Word quickly spread that slavecatchers and a U.S. Marshall were taking advantage of the 1851 fugitive slave law to return the runaway in exchange for a hefty reward or at least a finder's fee. A quickly assembled posse of both white and Black abolitionists chased down the wagon with the captured man. After successfully overtaking the wagon, the group quickly hustled the fugitive onto the underground railroad. Such lawless behavior had consequences, however, and a local judge found himself trying several Black and white men, including Chesnutt's father, on charges of violating the Fugitive Slave Act. As Helen Chesnutt recounted the tale, the judge was sympathetic to their cause and thus manufactured excuses to let as many of the rescuing posse off as possible. In Chesnutt's father's case, the judge released him because the writ of arrest had read "Andrew Chestnut" and not "Andrew Chesnutt."²⁶ The shifting "t" in his father's name was the means of his liberation.²⁷

Family lore, therefore, was fixated not only on Andrew Chesnutt's considerable courage in risking his own life and security to free a fugitive slave but also upon the fact that so much depended upon transcription and its ability to reflect, if not reality, then a perception of reality that might be turned to one's advantage. When, in later years, Charles Chesnutt came to fame with the dialect fiction featured in his collection *The Conjure Woman* as well as in similar genre stories set in the rural South, it is not surprising that we see similar flexibility of language particular to the African American experience to that flexibility which may have saved Andrew Chesnutt's life.²⁸

After the Civil War, the entire Chesnutt family moved to Fayetteville, North Carolina, and Charles was enrolled in what was one of the best Reconstruction-era schools for Black students, the Howard School. There he quickly rose to become the assistant and protégé of the principal. When he wasn't teaching, he was an indefatigable autodidact and his journals

of the period reveal an earnest and almost frighteningly ambitious young man. He mapped his time out according to courses of personal study and over the course of several years, working on French, Latin, and German. Most significantly, he became fixated on mastering shorthand, which came to provide him with a reliable livelihood.

Stenography was a useful skill for young men seeking white-collar work, and Chesnutt learned by ordering books on the subject and practicing during his free time.²⁹ Although he was doing well in his career as an educator, he nonetheless worked intensively on stenography and picked up the occasional reporting job, such as his transcription for the local newspaper of a speech by Frederick Douglass in 1880, all with an eye towards creating a different life. Eventually, he quit the Howard School and moved to New York, determined to make his living as a stenographer and earn enough to bring his family from the South. This venture proved unsuccessful and after six months of working unhappily as a stenographer in New York, he moved to Cleveland where he found a stable job in the offices of the Nickel Plate Railroad firm doing bookkeeping, secretarial work, and stenography. He earned enough to have his family join him there and his life began to take another crucial turn.

Chesnutt became fascinated with the legal issues and contracts he transcribed and copied for the railroad firm. He once again set out an ambitious course of study and became fixated upon becoming a lawyer. Without the benefits of law school or formal tutelage, he achieved something which, even if he had never gone onto a literary career, would have made his historical mark: in 1885, Chesnutt passed the Ohio bar exam, reportedly the first Black person to do so in the state and, moreover, with the highest scores of any examinee that year.³⁰ Unsurprisingly, even in relatively liberal Ohio, race relations during the postbellum era were difficult. Virtually no white person in the state would hire a young lawyer who identified as Black and few African Americans were apparently willing or able to hire him, perhaps fearing his lack of clout in racist courts. Chesnutt may have been ready for the bar but the bar wasn't ready for him. He could find no steady employment as a lawyer and, faced with a growing family to support, he instead began his own stenographic and court-reporting business. The success of this business enterprise enabled him to support his family in middle-class comfort and even send his children to Harvard, Smith, and Western Reserve University but it was, nevertheless, a frustrating profession because it prevented him from writing full-time.³¹

Chesnutt began publishing short fiction in the mid-1880s and had considerable success with syndicated stories written for S. S. McClure's Associated Literary Press that were distributed to hundreds of newspapers

throughout the country. The syndication circuit was so huge that any of his tales might reach seventy thousand readers.³² Although much of his early writing concerned issues of race, his racial background was not generally known. The editor who first thrust Chesnutt into the national spotlight, Thomas Bailey Aldrich of the *Atlantic Monthly*, seems to have had no idea that Chesnutt was African American.³³ Perhaps because of this ignorance or despite it, the three short stories that Aldrich published in the late 1880s, “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887), “Po’ Sandy” (1888), and “Dave’s Neckliss” (1889), marked the first entry of a major Black fiction writer into the white-owned mass media of the United States.

Other prestigious publications followed, thanks in part to Chesnutt’s friendship with publisher Walter Hines Page and also to W. D. Howells’ favorable reviews of Chesnutt’s first two books of short fiction—reviews that helped garner national attention for Chesnutt as an important literary figure.³⁴ Chesnutt became in effect the first Black fiction writer to be nationally recognized and his work afterward was forever associated with his racial identity. Howells had previously championed Paul Laurence Dunbar and Booker T. Washington, but his favorable reviews of Chesnutt’s work marked Chesnutt as a creative writer who could begin to represent and re-configure race relations in the United States for a national audience. Sadly, Chesnutt’s career never soared in the way he had hoped it would, taking a deep dive when, in 1901, Howells famously criticized *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt’s novel about the race riots of Wilmington, North Carolina, as being “bitter, bitter” and for having a political agenda that interfered with its artistry.³⁵ Despite this disappointing assessment, Chesnutt nonetheless achieved a measure of “respectability” in national cultural circles that were almost unequalled for a Black man for the next thirty years. He was published by Houghton Mifflin, one of the most prestigious presses in the United States, and his stories and essays were routinely distributed nationally.

Chesnutt’s promising literary successes of the 1890s led him to believe that he could earn a living solely by writing, but poor reviews and sales of *Marrow*, combined with family financial pressures, weighed him down and, after almost three years as a professional writer, by the end of 1901 he resumed his stenography career. He nevertheless managed to maintain his literary output, albeit at a slower pace, and published other novels, short stories, and essays over the next twenty-seven years.³⁶ Despite this dedicated literary productivity, his brief national prominence was never matched again during his lifetime. He was, for a period at least, rendered invisible in the American literary canon.

A Business Career

The problem of stenographic invisibility is illustrated most obviously not in Chesnutt's dialect fiction but in his novel *A Business Career*, written in 1898 but unpublished during his life.³⁷ In its low-key and rather low-stakes exploration of how transcribed and written documents could both reflect and alter reality, we see how later treatment of a similar theme in the Conjure-themed tales represents a sophisticated evolution of representative analysis of the troubled role orality could play when captured by documentation. That *A Business Career* remained unpublished until 2005 further suggests a certain failure of scriptability that is also played out quite differently in his later works.

A Business Career was, in many ways, a stock romance or a New Woman/Working Girl novel of the era. The book features a young white woman, Stella Merwin, who embarks on a stenographic career and eventually emerges from invisibility to be seen by her boss, Wendell Truscott, whom she ultimately marries. Nonetheless, her transition from object to subject in the eyes of her supervisor hints at the psychological toll such a degrading comparison might take. Stella reflects at one point that

There was a certain humiliation in the thought that this masterful, resourceful man might regard her as a mere piece of office furniture—a modern business appliance, like the telephone or the telegraph. She had noticed that men called the writing machine and the operator “typewriters,” indiscriminately; whether the custom grew out of a poverty of language or confusion of ideas, she did not know. In either event, the fact was not flattering to the operator's intelligence.³⁸

After dictating to her for weeks, as a result of some misunderstandings and mild intrigue Truscott finally recognizes in her an individual worthy of notice and care. As might be expected in melodrama, he uses his white male power and class standing to lift her from automaton status and sees her instead as a desirable and sexualized being. By the close of the novel, he proposes. The book is slight in its literary complexity but is notable here for its portrayal of the demographic shift in stenographic practice: where male stenographers had previously dominated the field, Stella Merwin typifies the modern secretary. The novel makes no explicit references to race, but it does nonetheless portray stenography as a skill promising upward mobility for at least some of the targets of discrimination. Not only is Stella lifted from poverty by her stenography, but a sweet and distinctly lower-class office boy is also encouraged by her to pursue stenography. *A Business Career* supplies a gentle and somewhat intentionally naïve portrait of how stenography was understood in turn-of-the-century American culture.

The real value of *A Business Career* in consideration of Chesnutt's relationship to the textual world, however, is in the primary plot device. At the outset, Stella is convinced that her dead father had been cheated out of his livelihood and she and her mother out of their rightful legacy by his confidential clerk, Truscott. The promises her father had made to her mother will be validated, Stella believes, by documents Truscott has hidden. Hence, she works in Truscott's office, hoping to come across documentary proof of Truscott's betrayal. And yet, by novel's end, Stella discovers that her father's promises were not as reliable as she had believed. The documents, once unearthed, reveal that he had been a businessman with poor judgment and Truscott had not only tried to save him but, after her his death, had taken care of the family. Spoken words do not prove to be as reliable as documents. Stella's mother's obsession with what she supposed was the truth was wrongheaded. Instead, the documents accurately transcribe events that followed on the heels of her father's impecunious and criminal behavior. In short, *A Business Career* was composed as a novel with some faith in a documentable world.

After the novel was declined, Chesnutt began to write the stories collected in *The Conjure Woman*. It should not be surprising, therefore, to find in these tales an immensely more complex and skeptical expression of the ability of transcribed words to represent the real.

Ultimately, the role of stenography at the turn of the century was to convert experience to text. As Gitelman put it, "Shorthand boosters vaunted the conversion of experience into textual evidence and saw the reporter's body and [shorthand] alphabet as the necessary, structural instruments of that conversion."³⁹ For the first time, history and experience were understood as reproducible—the notion of "verbatim" was culturally assumed.⁴⁰ Instead of being summarized, speech and the listening experience were understood to be "captured"—memory itself could be checked or verified. Fiction, when understood in stenographic terms, could function as a check upon false histories of Black experience.

Stenography as Aural Veil

To understand finally how stenography might be seen as an interpretative lens for Chesnutt's writing, we can look to W. E. B. Du Bois' seminal invocation of the trope of the veil in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as a signifier for the experience of the African American consciousness. Du Bois draws upon the visual imagery that marks out how skin color and self are shaded and colored by perception. We might consider how Chesnutt's stenography offers us another aural dimension of the veil.⁴¹ Stenography

only makes sense to an outsider if it is read aloud, meaning that it needs to be translated back into the world of sound. Indeed, even the experienced shorthand practitioner would most commonly read shorthand aloud to translate it back into English. Much as Du Bois' veil not only created a way in which the individual was perceived but also simultaneously altered the self-perception of the wearer—generating what he termed a “double consciousness”—so might stenographic imagination be invoked to understand another dimension of self-image.⁴² While Chesnutt's work considered the color line in many of its variable shadings, particularly in his novels of passing such as *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), it is not surprising that he used his extensive knowledge of stenography to shape an aural challenge to the visual shading of Black experience. A speaker could finally hear his or her words, thanks to stenography, as others heard them. The stenographic translation might, like dialect, socially code or mark the speaker in a context s/he did not create. Nonetheless, by literally and figuratively reclaiming the sound of one's voice, there could be another dimension of self-awareness.

Ultimately, the verbal/textual tension that fuels Chesnutt's work is literally and figuratively dialectical whether or not it is his dialect-heavy fiction. The historic materiality, here manifested through the stenographic vision, was needed to shape the figurative imagination in a manner particular to African American experience. The enslaved people of the eighteenth century who encountered books occasionally imagined them as able to talk but also able to ignore the Black reader.⁴³ For Olaudah Equiano, John Jea, or James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, the talking book was an object that flaunted its sentient self but ignored their Black reality. In his writing, Chesnutt reconfigures the notion of the talking book by re-inscribing the medium of speech onto the Black body. For Chesnutt, the type itself could speak volumes.

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Notes

1. The story was reported on the front page of the *New York Tribune* on 18 April 1846, but the specific quotation appears in the *Phonotypic Journal*, 5 (July 1846), 220.

2. *William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879): The Story of His Life* (New York: Century Co., 1889), III, 148.

3. DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 35–69.

4. Gray, “Recording the Sounds of ‘Words that Burn’: Reproductions of Public Discourse in Abolitionist Journalism,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 41 (2011), 363–86.

5. *William Lloyd Garrison*, III, 149.

6. Lewis Tappan to S. P. Andrews, 9 January 1846, Lewis Tappan Papers, Library of Congress <lccln.loc.gov/mm75042317>.

7. Quoted in Madeleine Stern, *The Pantarch: A Biography of Stephen Pearl Andrews* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1968), p. 64.

8. For an analysis of how stenography (and secretarial and clerical work generally) can shape the literary imagination, see the essays collected in *Literary Secretaries / Secretarial Culture*, ed. Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

9. See chapters by Jeffrey W. Miller, Mary E. Brown Zeigler, and Bill Hardwig in *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Ashton and Hardwig (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2017).

10. Jones, "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature,'" *Home: Social Essays* (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco, 1998), pp. 114–15.

11. John Allen Rider, "A History of the Male Stenographer in the United States" (Diss. Univ. of Nebraska, 1966), p. 75.

12. *Ibid.*, 76.

13. *Ibid.*, 51.

14. Andrews, *The Basic Outline of Universology* (New York: Dion Thomas, 1872) and *The Phonographic Reader; and the complete phonographic class-book, containing a strictly inductive exposition of Pitman's phonography, adapted as a system of phonetic shorthand to the English language; especially intended as a school book, and to afford the fullest instruction to those who have not the assistance of the living teacher* (Boston: Phonographic Institution, 1846).

15. Andrews saw stenography as a class equalizer since it was a skill that could be self-taught by those who could not have access to professional tutorials.

16. The plaintiff in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case was Homer Plessy, a fair-skinned Black man ejected from a whites-only railway car. This carefully executed act of civil disobedience was designed to provoke the court case that followed. Plessy lost his case but Chesnutt dramatized the world of train travel post-Plessy in chapter 5 of *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) when he has a fair-skinned Black man thrown off a white railway car.

17. While Chesnutt eventually had a staff of stenographers working under his management, he also put in many courtroom hours.

18. Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), p. 43.

19. *Ibid.*, 24.

20. Kreilkamp, "Speech on Paper: Charles Dickens, Victorian Phonography, and the Reform of Writing," in *Literary Secretaries / Secretarial Culture*, p. 15.

21. *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz III, and Jesse S. Crisler (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), 85. Although I interpret this comment ironically, Chesnutt's own breadth of learning makes this speech almost convincing as a flat statement of truth. His library, much of which was donated to Fisk University, indicates a notable breadth of knowledge. See McElrath, "Charles W. Chesnutt's Library," *Analytical and Enumerative Bibliography*, 8, ii (1994), 102–19. It is also notable here that Chesnutt was involved with a campaign to establish a library for Ohio stenographers, a move which may indicate his seriousness in providing scholarly and reference resources for them. See Dean Keller, "Charles W. Chesnutt and the Ohio Stenographers' Association," *American Notes & Queries* 18 (1979), 57.

22. Chesnutt, *Essays & Speeches*, 87.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Histories of stenography devote themselves exhaustively to the battles and claims different practitioners had for various innovations in stenographic systems. As far as I can tell from an examination of his records, Chesnutt primarily used the Pitman style of stenography, perhaps with some personal variations. In his extant library as cataloged by McElrath, Chesnutt at least possessed an edition of Benn Pitman's work *The Phonographic Dictionary and Phrase Book* (113). He would certainly have been aware of the Gregg style, however, which was increasing in popularity at the turn of the century. Hans Karlgren has argued persuasively that shorthand is an arbitrary invented language that is no more

or less dependent upon signifying systems than any other. See “On the Arbitrariness of Shorthand Signs,” *Studia Linguistica* 32, i-ii (1978), 119–36.

25. Alfred Pitman, *Half a Century of Commercial Education and Publishing* (Bath, Scotland: Pitman Press, n.d.), pp. 83–84.

26. Helen M. Chesnutt, *Charles Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1952), p. 3.

27. While Chesnutt may have valued flexibility in transcriptive practices, he was infuriated when his novel *The Colonel's Dream* (1905) was so carelessly produced that the publisher misspelled his name on the front cover (“*To Be an Author*”: *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889–1905*, ed. McElrath and Leitz [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997], p. 228). Penalties for violating the Fugitive Slave Law varied a great deal, but they often involved significant imprisonment. For a man of mixed race such as Andrew Chesnutt, the risk was especially severe because there was no guarantee he would be allowed to speak on his own behalf.

28. *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, and Essays*, ed. Werner Sollars (New York: Library of America, 2002). Scholars have referred to the tales collected in *The Conjure Woman* and his related stories featuring any combination of the characters of John and Julius, conjure, dialect and a plantation setting variously as “The Conjure Stories,” “The Uncle Julius Stories,” and “the John and Julius stories.” These are all problematic terms since some stories don’t feature conjure, dialect appears in many of Chesnutt’s writings in different genres, and John and Julius do not appear in every tale. Moreover, while *The Conjure Woman* was published as a collection of related stories, many other thematically related stories appeared separately over the years of his career. Since I am primarily concerned with his dialect and conjure themes, I refer to these stories loosely as “The Conjure Woman tales” while trying to be sensitive to the fact that this categorical slippage is a bit confusing and can only be cleared up by contextual analysis. For the invocation of some different terms, see Richard H. Brodhead’s introduction to *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1995) and Charles Duncan’s *The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1998); for “Uncle Julius Tales,” see Sylvia Lyons Render’s *Charles W. Chesnutt* (Boston: Hall, 1980); and for “John and Julius Stories,” see Dean McWilliams’ *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2002).

29. Stenography was increasingly practiced by women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries until it became a dominantly female profession by the mid-twentieth. Pauline Hopkins, for one, was a notable African American practitioner of stenography during this era and one of her novels, *Contending Forces* (1900), features a character who discusses how difficult it was to be a Black woman stenographer. Chesnutt’s novel *A Business Career* concerns the career of a more demographically typical stenographer, a young, unmarried white woman. African American writer Fenton Johnson published a short story titled “The Sorrows of a Stenographer” in *Tales of Darkest America* (1920). This tale is essentially a comic monologue of a shallow gum-chewing African American stenographer.

30. Ernestine Williams Pickens, “Charles W. Chesnutt and the Progressive Movement” (Diss. Emory Univ., 1986), 12; Helen Chesnutt, 38.

31. Charles Johanningsmeier argues that Chesnutt was so successful early in his career at what was less prestigious but steady and mildly profitable syndication writing for newspapers that he could quite likely have been a full-time author with income to support his family if he had so chosen. Instead, his inability to make a living from the publication venues in which he wanted to make his mark resulted in his dependence upon the stenography for a regular income. Thus his choice to participate in a particular kind of a literary world (as a bookman and not as a hack) was what brought about his severe professional disappointments, not his decision to participate in the world of print per se (Johanningsmeier, personal interview, 25 May 2005).

32. Johanningsmeier, "What We Can Learn from a Better Bibliographical Record of Charles W. Chesnutt's Periodical Fiction," *North Carolina Literary Review*, 8 (1999), 89.

33. Kenneth M. Price, "Charles Chesnutt, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the Intersection of African-American Fiction and Elite Culture," *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Price and Susan Belasco (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1995), 260.

34. See, for example, W. D. Howells' "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories," *Atlantic Monthly*, 85 (May 1900), 699–701.

35. Howells, "A Psychological Counter-Current in Recent Fiction," *North American Review*, 173 (December 1901), 872.

36. Three Chesnutt novels were published posthumously: *Mandy Oxendine* (1997), *Paul Marchand*, F.M.C. (1998) and *The Quarry* (1999). In "What We Can Learn from A Better Bibliographical Record of Charles W. Chesnutt's Periodical Fiction" Johanningsmeier makes a compelling argument, to its titular question, based primarily on the fact that his early newspaper writings are not well documented. Any count of his publications and writings must be considered partial at best because the scrapbooks, correspondence, and other documentary evidence of his output tend to focus more upon his relatively few stories in high-prestige venues. Recent collections by Stanford University Press of his essays and speeches as well as a collection of his letters begin to fill the bibliographical gap, but his fiction, particularly that distributed by syndicate, still reveals surprises.

37. Walter Hines Page rejected the novel for Houghton Mifflin with some kindness, indicating that he thought the novel would likely find another publisher. He pushed instead for a collection of what was to become the conjure stories. See Matthew Wilson's thorough analysis of the context and inception of *A Business Career* in his introduction to the posthumously-published edition (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2005), pp. v–xviii.

38. Chesnutt, *A Business Career*, 139.

39. Gitelman, 60–61.

40. *Ibid.*, 20–61.

41. For a thoughtful exploration of how historical soundscapes are rendered metaphorically, see Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 261–69.

42. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic Monthly*, 80 (August 1897), 194.

43. Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), especially chapter 4, pp. 139–83.