

Time and Mobility in the Writing of Charles W. Chesnutt

Recent criticism of Chesnutt's fiction has been marked by a shift from decoding positive markers of race to scrutinizing figures of absence and moments of illegibility. Whereas earlier criticism was dominated by the question of Chesnutt's cultural and political identity, his relationship to more or less entrenched positions on either side of the color line, recent readings have begun to recognize the very ambivalence, amorphousness and elusiveness of his writing as both esthetically and politically the most challenging aspect of his art.

Rereading *The Marrow of Tradition*, for instance, Stephen Knadler and Samira Kawash have detailed the ways in which Chesnutt destabilizes the exclusive and opposed categories of racial identity that underpin the demand for retributive justice central to the political plot of conspiracy and riot, which is commonly seen as constituting the novel's principal interest. Highlighting the importance of the sub-plot involving the sisters Olivia Carteret and Janet Miller, both critics consider the greatest achievement of *Marrow* to consist in its working towards a "Utopian open-endedness" (Knadler 443), evoking a space of future possibility beyond the ideological terms that dominate the novel's political material. Kawash specifically associates this open-endedness with the concern over the survival of Dodie, Olivia's son, whose life, while inseparable from the sins of the past, is as yet no more than an "empty cipher" (Kawash 122). As Kawash points out, Dodie's as yet undetermined future comes to the fore at the very moment the major characters of the novel disappear in the suspension (not the resolution) of the conflicts that defined and moved them throughout the novel.

Dodie's unrepresentable future recalls the equally unrepresented futures of John Walden/Warwick in *The House Behind the Cedars* and Tom and Mandy in *Mandy Oxendine*, which similarly indicate a space of possibility beyond these novels' fictional confines. In an essay considering Chesnutt as an example of "the black creative intellectual at the turn of the century [who] emerged as a social type by resisting the lure of the prevailing ideology of the

authentic” (324), Ross Posnock likens the blankness left by John’s departure from *House* to the blank pages of Baxter’s book in “Baxter’s Procrustes” (*The Short Fiction* 413-22). In both cases, according to Posnock, blankness figures as a metonymy for the freedom toward which Chesnutt’s writing gestures so that “illegibility becomes a source of potent possibility in Jim Crow’s identitarian regime” (346). In a similar vein, Charles Duncan reads John’s disappearance in *House* as “an act of double passing, both textual and social” (15). John’s disappearance “into (not out of) the culture at large” (15), as Duncan points out, is potentially subversive precisely because it coincides with his departure from the relentlessly segregationist environment of the novel’s plot. In Duncan’s view, John’s move into illegibility mirrors Chesnutt’s own practice as a writer, “author[ing] an identity for himself that remains, finally, inscrutable to his readers” (7).

Together with the recent first publication of previously unpublished Chesnutt manuscripts (novels, letters, essays and speeches), such rereadings of his well-known fiction have helped to refocus critical interest in Chesnutt. Building on, rather than invalidating, earlier readings that established Chesnutt’s place in the canon of African American literature, especially Eric Sundquist’s detailed excavation of the signifying depths of Chesnutt’s discourse, these new interpretations nevertheless raise new questions about Chesnutt by foregrounding previously little-noticed figurative patterns in his fiction. We may of course relate the persistent elusiveness of Chesnutt’s writing to his own uncertain sense of identity as “neither fish, flesh, nor fowl” (*Journals* 157) and agree with Joseph R. McElrath and Robert C. Leitz that “the literary historian can still legitimately pose the question he did: what was Charles W. Chesnutt? How should we construct a frame of reference appropriate for him?” (4) The subversive and even utopian connotations of illegibility and disappearance noted above, however, remind us that Chesnutt’s writing is deliberately transgressive, actively probing beyond the history that conditions it. The appropriate frame of reference for Chesnutt thus paradoxically appears to be one that his writing seeks to depart from, raising the more

critical question of the notion of a self in the process of uprooting itself that this implies. If history, or what Chesnutt tends to refer to as circumstances, imposes limits on the self that prevent it from coming into its own, what is, in Chesnutt's fiction, a viable self? What does it mean, in Chesnutt's fiction, to break out of the web of circumstance? And what indeed is the significance of choosing to write fiction as the way toward self-realization? For Chesnutt, whose ambition, judging from his journals, was powered in no small measure by an ideal of the self-made man, neither chose to pass for white nor sought a professional career in teaching, medicine or law.

I

In *Culture of Letters*, Richard Brodhead observes that “[f]or Chesnutt, the wish to write is never separable from the will to a certain sort of social mobility” (191). In fact, in his journals the 23 year-old makes no bones about what this means: “I want fame; I want money; I want to raise my children in a different rank of life from that I sprang from” (154), he writes on March 26, 1881. While this is straight-forward enough, the choice of literature as the way to achieve these goals does not seem obvious and may even appear somewhat romantic, based perhaps less on an informed assessment of the conditions of literary success in America than on a certain desire to reproduce and surpass the singular successes of Stowe and Tourgée. As documented in his journals, however, Chesnutt's literary aspirations were not a hasty project but were formed and nurtured over a prolonged period of exposure to and reflection on a fairly wide range of literature, both classic and contemporary. In various journal entries during the years 1880 to 1882, Chesnutt weighs his chances of succeeding as a writer and compares the benefits of a literary career to other prospects. Thus in early 1880 the financial success of Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* prompts an astute analysis of the literary interests of Northern readers from Chesnutt and inspires him with the possibility of “writ[ing] a far better

book about the South than Judge Tourgée and Mrs. Stowe has written” (*Journals* 125). In May of the same year we find him pondering his qualification for a literary début: “A fair knowledge of the classics, a speaking acquaintance with the modern languages, an intimate friendship with literature, etc.; seven years experience in the school room, two years of married life, and a habit of studying character have I think, left me not entirely unprepared to write even a book” (139). The thought of conditions in the South enters the reflection immediately after this, first as suitable material for literary representation, and then, famously, as the “high, and holy purpose” his writing will serve: “The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites” (139). By March 1881, Chesnutt is assessing the advantages of a literary career in comparison with other professions: “In my present vocation [as a teacher], I would never accumulate a competency, with all the economy and prudence, and parsimony in the world. In law or medicine, I would be compelled to wait half a life-time to accomplish anything. But literature pays—the successful” (154). Financial reward, expediency, as well as social utility thus all appear to speak in favor of writing as a promising career move in the eyes of the young Chesnutt.

The journal entries of these years show Chesnutt as a keen observer of the literary scene of the early 1880s and as an apprentice serious about his chosen profession, but there is a sense that even he recognizes his arguments in favor of a literary career as in part rationalizations of a desire that he cannot easily account for. He speaks of it as a “cherished dream,” admits to feeling “an influence that I cannot resist calling me to the task” (139) and even considers the fascination of writing as a “calling that draws a scribbler irresistibly toward his doom” (154). Such characterizations suggest a lingering affinity between the literary vocation and “the unprofitable and dangerous occupation of ‘aerial architect’” (119) that Chesnutt told himself to abandon in an 1879 journal entry. Chesnutt's investment in literature was originally in a very real sense escapist, a way to dispel the idleness and

boredom of life in a “supernaturally dull and prosaic town” (137). As Richard Brodhead points out in his introduction to Chesnutt's journals, “by his twenties Chesnutt thinks of writing largely as a way *out*, a way to achieve a selfhood not bounded by his local scene” (20).

Although his literary ambitions would eventually lead him to the North, the mobility that literature lends Chesnutt, and which distinguishes it from other career options, is not primarily sectional or socio-economic but more properly a function of literature's departure from history as actuality. The appeal of literature returns in Chesnutt's journals whenever the contrast between the world of his reading and his actual surroundings makes itself felt most strongly, especially after a failed attempt to secure a position as a stenographer in Washington in the summer of 1879. But as his project for a literary career matures over the subsequent three years, and as the diary becomes increasingly devoted to his reflection on writing, Chesnutt's perception of literature as a means to social advancement also appears to undergo a change. During these years, Chesnutt consolidated his position as a (self-)educated colored man in the South and attained an eminence auspicious of a distinguished career and further rise in society, as he himself recognized in a journal entry in 1881:

At an age when most men are in school, I find myself at the head of a State institution, at a salary which many an A.M. of a good Northern College would be glad to get; a growing reputation; the respect and confidence of the best people in the community; a faithful and affectionate wife; two lovely and interesting children; a long and brilliant career of usefulness probably before me. (167)

Such an expression of his appreciation of his successfulness represents a rare moment in Chesnutt's journals, which, as Brodhead has observed, in general give little evidence of the author's satisfaction with his early achievements. In Brodhead's view, Chesnutt “seems discouraged by his success, discouraged that the furthest he can go is where he is already” (Introduction 25). But Chesnutt's enumeration of his achievements indicates that he rightly

perceived his early success as a strong foundation for a possible career rather than its pinnacle.

If the appeal of literature for Chesnutt continues to grow in spite of, not for want of, promising opportunities of worldly success, I would suggest that this is because his early success along with his ongoing exposure to literature accentuated his aspirations in a form that only literature, by virtue of its imaginative and textual nature, could satisfy. What began as an exercise in self-discipline, reading and writing for self-improvement, and a surrogate for stimulating company, thus gradually emerges as a desirable way of life in its own right, so that at the moment when his disciplined course of self-study has successfully launched him in a profitable line of work, Chesnutt, in March 1882, expresses his fear “that I will spoil it all by working too much” (172). From this point of view, the diary’s increasing preoccupation with literary matters becomes a record of time spent away from his schedule attending to work and family and at the same time nourishes the confidence in the possibility of a life that bypasses the coordinates of his personal history. For in this changed perception of literature, as the accessory becomes itself the goal, the moment of imaginatively and textually inserting his self into social relations of another time and place, which literature posits, holds a greater attraction for Chesnutt than any particular position that his education might procure him. This is not to say that Chesnutt effectively abandoned his social aspirations; they clearly continue to figure as a strong stimulus in the formation of his literary career. But literature fully emerges as a “congenial occupation” (172) toward the end of his diary when Chesnutt recognizes its orientation towards the contingent and unpredictable in history. In other words, the congeniality of literature for Chesnutt is closely associated with its orientation toward posterity and indeed the posthumous, which symbolize for him the dimension of self-realization beyond the crucible of race that he craves. This thought dominates the young Chesnutt’s last reflection on literature before the diary definitively turns into the notebook of a prospective author:

Shut up in my study, without the companionship of one congenial mind, I can enjoy the society of the greatest wits and scholars of England, can revel in the genius of her poets and statesmen, and by a slight effort of the imagination, find myself in the company of the greatest men of earth.... I hope yet to have a friend. If not in this world, then in some distant future eon, when men are emancipated from the grossness of the flesh, and mind can seek out mind; then shall I find some kindred spirit, who will sympathize with all that is purest and best in mine, and we will cement a friendship that shall endure throughout the ages. (172)

Profit, expediency, utility, and a thirst for stimulating company thus all figure into Chesnutt's consideration of literature as a suitable profession at some point and to some extent. But what appears to have motivated him most strongly in 1883 to quit an auspicious career and move North in pursuit of another, was literature's promise to unplug him from the social relations that tied him to a particular time and place, which in his last reflections in his diary he came to embrace as a requirement to forsake friendship and company in his present situation. This confidence in literature may seem overly idealistic, calling to mind Howells's declaration that in literature "there is, happily, no color line" ("Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories" 298), which Chesnutt himself would later vehemently deny.¹ But if a Howellsian ideal of a "republic of letters where all men are free and equal" ("A Psychological Counter-Current" 82) could not but appeal to the young Chesnutt, his diary suggests that in his mind it was associated primarily with the idea of an afterlife, rather than with any particular place. Seen in this light, his relocation to the North may have been undertaken less in the hope of finding a promised land there than in an attempt to put a necessary distance between himself and the world of his formative years, which would provide the substance of most of his literary creation. For all its idealism, there is in Chesnutt's commitment to literature, as expressed in his diary, a strong sense of daring and of defying odds, and even an anticipation

¹ In a letter to his publishers Chesnutt wrote in 1901: "My friend Mr. Howells, who has said many nice things about my writings—although his review of *The Marrow of Tradition* in the *North American Review* for December was not a favorable one, as I look at it—has remarked several times that there is no color line in literature. On that point I take issue with him. I am pretty fairly convinced that the color line runs everywhere so far as the United States is concerned, and I am even now wondering whether the reputation I have made would help or hinder a novel that I might publish along an entirely different line" ("*To Be an Author*" 171).

that “silence, exile, and cunning” (Joyce 247) will be indispensable to his quest for self-realization.

II

Chesnutt knew that his success as a writer depended on his finding a voice and an audience, and as the testimony of his growing commitment to literature, the journal documents his deliberate efforts to gain a literary voice and to tailor it to a possible audience. The journal’s function in this endeavor is threefold. First, it is a stylistic laboratory in which Chesnutt seizes every opportunity to try his hand at a variety of genres and topics in order “to improve [him]self in the art of composition” (85). The bulk of the diary is indeed made up of stylistic exercises—poems, sketches, stories, travel narrative, open correspondence, paraphrases and critical discussions of his readings—in which Chesnutt hones his voice with a hypothetical audience in mind and rehearses his part in the cultivated conversation of a literary society. His literary voice emerges here as a composite artifact, carefully crafted through imitations and reproductions of fragments of speech and writing. Second, the journal functions as a mechanical device ensuring the portability of Chesnutt’s literary voice. The journal “is a sort of mental Phonograph, into which I speak my thoughts by means of the pen; and at any future time I can recall them by simply opening the book” (121). By lifting his observations and ideas from the context of their first occurrence and preserving them, the journal makes them, as well as his stylistic exercises, available for future use as formal elements. Third, the diary functions as the vehicle for Chesnutt’s reflection on the relationship between the writer and his audience. This reflection confirms for him that reproducibility and portability are essential qualities of the literary voice as a commodity. Tourgée’s success taught Chesnutt that the value of a literary voice was less a matter of its authenticity than of its ability to evoke and bridge the distance between its subject and its audience. It thus not only helped him recognize

the value of Southern black life as a literary commodity, as Brodhead (*Culture* 193) has observed, but also made him aware of the Carpetbagger's voice itself as a commodity that a Southern black writer might in turn reproduce.

Understanding reproducibility as a defining quality of a commodity, Chesnutt may have seen in it both an opportunity for and a defense against exploitation. Part of his response to Tourgée's success was jealousy. If Tourgée could "make himself rich and famous" (125) by writing about the lives of Southern blacks, "a colored man who knew all this ... [and] possessed the same ability" (125) would not only be better qualified to write such a book but also more entitled to enjoy its success. This was of course Chesnutt's expression of his own ambition to rival Tourgée's success, although he added that "if I can't be the man I shall be the first to rejoice at his *début* and give God speed! to his work" (126). When a few months later a cousin of his, John Green, anonymously and in the guise of a Carpetbagger published a book in the vein of Tourgée's, Chesnutt could not well disguise his misgivings that someone else might have appropriated an idea that he felt belonged to himself. "I suppose I must get a copy" (149), he tells himself, only to add: "This is one of those ephemeral productions which have sprung up in the wake of the 'Fool's Errand.' This remarkable book has, I suppose, created an appetite for this sort of literature" (149). He takes heart, however, from the reasonable assumption that this market will not be saturated too quickly and immediately resolves to "wait awhile before I publish my book,—wait till I am better prepared to do justice to the subject and to myself" (149).² When he was able to make a connection between his own literary method and ambition to unplug himself from his environment and a Northern audience's interest in remote experiences, Chesnutt found the formula that would land him his first literary success. In his conjure stories he incorporated both the voice of the Southern black man and that of the Carpetbagger, while effectively shrouding himself in silence. The

² Chesnutt was distinctly aware that the profits of the commodification of literary and intellectual efforts did not naturally return to where they originated. A week before the entry on Green's book, he reports an incident in which the superintendent of schools in Fayetteville had a sample of the work of Chesnutt's German teacher published to his own credit and sympathetically notes his teacher's anger and frustration (*Journals* 148).

ability to attach his literary voice to various and conflicting subjectivities, however, would become a hallmark of his fiction throughout his career and accounts in no small measure for its elusiveness.

The recognition that a voice can be lifted from the context of its emergence and carried away, to be made audible in another time and place, is thus central to Chesnutt's concept of writing and indeed to his view of himself as a colored writer who is not blind to the persisting restraints and injustices that keep black people in their place in post-Reconstruction America. The idea is most explicitly evoked in the anecdote of the theft and delayed restoration of a voice at the end of Chesnutt's 1901 essay on "Superstitions and Folklore of the South" (*Essays and Speeches* 155-61), which, as Peter Caccavari has pointed out, highlights a parallel to Chesnutt's own project of "restoring the stolen voice (as Emancipation had restored the stolen body)" (146). If this is the case, the implications of Chesnutt's handling of the story merit unpacking as they will help us understand his perception of the role of literature in redressing historical grievances.

In Chesnutt's telling, the voice is an asset and its theft an act of jealous revenge, cunningly performed by a woman whose lover was seduced by another woman, "who sang very sweetly, and who, the jilted one suspected, had told lies about her" (*Essays* 159). Concluding as it does an essay in which Chesnutt discusses the oral traditions of the South and his own use of them in his fiction, the story indeed evokes an irresistible analogy between the rivalry of the two women and that expressed in the relationship of John and Julius in the conjure stories, which also in part involves the heart of Annie, John's wife. But if it does foreground this nexus, it is important to note that the story blurs rather than focuses the distinctions between the two opponents, since the lack of differentiation between the two women suggests a structural resemblance between the parts played by Julius and John in the conjure tales. This lack of differentiation may reflect the ambivalence of Chesnutt's own literary practice, the pattern of commodification underlying his first literary success. If this

pattern can be described in terms of theft, Chesnutt appears to be stealing from both sides, making use of the black storyteller as well as appropriating white literary models, and the ambivalence is due to the impossibility to determine precisely where the profit of this “transaction” accrues: is Chesnutt an opportunist, merely taking advantage of his access to both black and white literary institutions? Is he—wittingly or unwittingly—participating in a system of cultural exploitation (the commodification of black culture in the white literary marketplace) or in a scheme of cultural recuperation (redirecting the tropes of white plantation mythology in acts of signifying)? Or is he perhaps a middleman in a cultural exchange from which both sides stand to profit?

To what extent Chesnutt perceived the story as a gloss on his own literary craft and was aware of such questions, it is impossible to tell. But his elaboration of the tale, which occupies one sixth of his essay, and his tongue-in-cheek admission of a personal interest in its resolution, suggest that as a case of incomplete justice the story appealed to him as a fiction writer. Equally distant from both women, Chesnutt is primarily interested in the procedural aspects of both the theft and the attempt at restoring the stolen object, which both involve elements of conjuring. While the jealous woman tricks her rival into lowering her guard and then steals her voice by an act of pure magic, the victim is assisted by a conjure doctor who plays the role of an investigator and prosecutor, capable of identifying and punishing the culprit but incapable of restoring the stolen voice. The theft indeed resembles an act of commodification, the conversion of an organic and intangible personal attribute into a movable property, which is not reversible on demand, so that the case is not amenable to a settlement that insists on the restoration of the original situation. It is significant, however, that when the story reaches this impasse, Chesnutt enters the text and declares that he will “sometime take steps to find out how it terminates” (160), for the announcement suggests that fiction may succeed where legal proceedings fail. The writer’s intervention subtly reorients the story from the past to the future and thereby shifts the moral ground on which justice is to

be sought. Given its own investment in the commodification of voices, fiction is not able to restore a voice as an individual property, but it promises to connect the case to a circuit in which the possibility of balance exists. In this reorientation, the isolated theft, which is already an example of a forced exchange (voice for lover) between two rivals, emerges as a formal element in an ongoing system of exchange in which justice is redistributive rather than retributive, a matter of probability and thus time rather than legal argument.

This confidence in the ability of fiction to establish a moral balance is reiterated in the image which Chesnutt goes on to evoke by way of analogy with the stolen voice, of “words which were frozen silent during the extreme cold of an Arctic winter, and became audible again the following summer when they had thawed out” (160). The analogy, focusing on the portability of the voice, is not obvious, since it translates the moral circumstances of theft and restitution into the natural process of the change of a substance from one aggregate state to another and back, but it is characteristic of Chesnutt in its movement from an appeal to the laws of society to an invocation of the laws of nature. Justice in this view is not the result of a static insistence on compensation but a natural element in a cyclical change, and insofar as the images focuses Chesnutt’s assumption of the potential of fiction to redress the moral balance, literature is conceived here in terms of a naturalizing metaphor of circulation. This recalls an earlier statement in the essay that “[c]reative talent, of whatever grade, is, in the last analysis, only the power of rearrangement” (156). This deceptively disparaging remark indeed appears to lie at the heart of Chesnutt’s literary vision, for it resonates with the idea of the fluidity of the imagination, which the protagonist of his last novel propounds in his philosophical “Essay on the Imagination” and which the author unequivocally endorses:

Imagination does not concern itself with denials. It is the great inspirer, the primal incentive, the “ultimate force” of Herbert Spencer, the “life force” of Bernard Shaw, the *élan vital* of Bergson.

Reason is static, imagination is fluid. Reason deals with facts. Imagination overleaps the boundaries of the known and soars into the empyrean of conjecture. (*The Quarry* 184-85)

This view of literature shows Chesnutt's affinity with a naturalist conception of commodification in terms of an organic metaphor of circulation, as it can be found, for instance, in Frank Norris,³ but the association of transgression and fluidity with rearrangement adapts such a view to the historical concerns of black people at the turn of the century by pitting the imagination against the prevailing circumstances. The cognitive boundaries that the imagination challenges are thus primarily the ideological barriers that control and restrict the flow of ideas, people and commodities in a racially segregated society. This preoccupation with internal cultural boundaries lends Chesnutt's literary vision its distinctively bi-focal orientation in time, which is anti-progressivist in that it moves in apparent collusion with cultural and economic structures that exploit black people and restrict their mobility while counting on and expediting the eventual obsolescence of these structures. Thus the overleaping of boundaries is characteristically associated with the idea of an afterlife, while Chesnutt's literary practice proceeds by infiltrating and hollowing out the bulwarks and dikes of custom and prejudice.⁴ Such a view suggests further connotations to whiteness in the image of the freezing and thawing of words, which not only evokes the seasonal (or epochal) change that writing anticipates but also reflects on writing as an agency of preservation as well as circulation. On the one hand, the image of freezing can be seen to symbolize the absorption of black voices in a white textuality as a transformation from a state of fluidity (or volatility) to one of solidity that preserves the voices by severing them from the breath that lends them their tonality, thus temporarily muting them. On the other hand, the

³ On Chesnutt's use and complication of a life-giving metaphor of circulation, see Brook Thomas's reading of *The Colonel's Dream*, especially pages 186-90.

⁴ From this perspective, Chesnutt's later meta-fictional statements are remarkably consistent with his first formulation of his literary project in 1880, according to which the object of his writing would not be to shock but "to accustom the public mind to the idea [of black equality]; and while amusing them to lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling" (*Journals* 140). For a reading of Chesnutt's work on the "Rena Walden" manuscript (that would eventually be published as *The House Behind the Cedars*) in terms of mining and infiltration, see Sedlack.

temporary silencing of the words can also be read as a moment of passing, the deliberate crossing of the color line and disappearance in whiteness, which the image figures as a moment of freezing. But the sense of loss and suppression that is implied in both textual absorption and passing as moments of freezing is tempered by the anticipation of seasonal change and the probability of thawing. From this angle, the whiteness implied in the freezing of words also signifies the blankness of writing as an empty form, the vehicle for a potential significance that depends on a moment of posterior reception. Writing in this view appears to assist a process of cultural hibernation, preserving voices during adverse conditions and allowing them to re-emerge and take effect in a more congenial time and in an altered cultural constellation.

The relevance of these reflections on writing and posterity has of course been accentuated by the recent publication of three previously unpublished novels and the even more recent promotion of Chesnutt to the ranks of the Library of America, but by 1901 Chesnutt was sufficiently familiar with the literary market of his time to recognize the virtue of patience and the importance of veiling the incongruity between his most urgent themes and the prevailing literary forms. Although he had by all appearances reached the height of his literary career, Chesnutt's correspondence with literary editors had taught him that his authorship was in fact a narrowly circumscribed space and that his more daring attempts at fictional rearrangement would continue to meet with a cold response for some time. The experience of rewriting his "Rena Walden" manuscript throughout the 1890s, which may well have been on his mind when he wrote that creative talent was "only the power of rearrangement," tells the story of trying to fit a powerful aspiration into a literary model whose scope it exceeds. Given his own literary desire to untie himself from his genealogical moorings, the vindication of Rena's aspirations was not only Chesnutt's most cherished project but also a test for his utopian conception of literature, and his indefatigable determination to see the manuscript into print despite waning hopes of finding a sympathetic

audience testifies to his commitment to this ideal. In the process, he was led to partly suppress Rena's ambition and to cast her in the role of the tragic mulatta while dispersing his exploration of the uprooted self more widely over the entire narrative in a way that would not offend his contemporaries but could still be recognized by a posthumous audience.⁵ The difficulties of getting *The House Behind the Cedars* published may in part have deterred Chesnutt from pursuing the publication of the second novel of passing he had written in the 1890s with equal determination, but the publication of *Mandy Oxendine* one hundred years after its first submission to the *Atlantic* suggests that his confidence in posterity was not entirely misplaced.⁶

III

Although Chesnutt rarely explicitly reflects on his writing in meta-fictional narrative,⁷ the figure of the portable voice and its deferred reception features prominently in much of his fiction. Suppressed, lost, or misplaced papers play a conspicuous role in the plots of most of his novels and always affect the lives and fates of his protagonists. Most often taking the form of legal or official documents, these papers and their vagaries not only highlight the circuitous course of justice but also the arbitrariness of heredity.⁸ As tokens of withheld, forgotten or

⁵ On the various revisions of the "Rena Walden" manuscript, see Sedlack.

⁶ Chesnutt submitted the novel to Walter Hines Page for serial publication in the *Atlantic*, adding: "If 'Mandy Oxendine' is not available for magazine publication, I would like to know, since it must be read anyway, whether Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. would consider bringing it out in book form; and if they think it worth publishing, whether they would advise doing so now or waiting for a while?" (*To Be An Author* 97).

⁷ The most notable exception is of course "Baxter's Procrustes," Chesnutt's satire of genteel bibliophilism. Most obviously a critique of the inadmissibility of blackness in the white literary market, the story also shares other connotations with the story of the stolen/frozen voice. The publication of his book establishes Baxter as an author and his act of not-writing as a literary event, which may have an unpredictable afterlife like any other literary text. This is partly acknowledged in the belated appreciation of the value of the book by the president of the Bodleian Club at the end of the story, but Chesnutt's text also suggests the possibility that Baxter's invisible text may in time become "readable" as the enigmatic expression of a man who is "too full for utterance" (*The Short Fiction* 421). Baxter's poem, consisting of an evocative title and blank pages, is thus the most radical embodiment of a text as an empty signifier, awaiting a moment of posterior reception and a reader bringing it to life.

⁸ Examples include the wills, promised but never written in *The House Behind the Cedars*, suppressed and destroyed in *The Marrow of Tradition*, whimsically composed in *Paul Marchand, FMC*; the inherited notes of

forged patrimony, such documents play a pivotal role in Chesnutt's explorations of the possibility of a selfhood that is not bound by genealogy alone. Thus the diversion in the paths of inheritance forces or allows Chesnutt's characters to rearrange the social ties that define their selves in a way that resituates familial bonds as matters of opportunity and choice, to be confronted or missed, assumed or rejected, much as ordinary social relations may be. Chesnutt's alternative to hereditary determinism is in fact never a detached and fully self-determined self, but rather a movable self that bypasses the paths of inheritance and finds its realization in a capacity for multiple and variable attachments. This focus on the transplantability of the self, its ability to occupy a variety of places, appears to be Chesnutt's response to his society's preoccupation with black mobility, which he frequently tests in plot patterns of (temporary) disappearance and (unexpected) return.⁹ The story of the frozen words, which in time become audible again, indeed can be seen to emblemize this pattern. At the same time, it alerts us to a distinctive achievement of Chesnutt's narrative art, which consists in linking the reader to his characters by ties of interest in such a way that the moment of reading articulates a utopian dimension to the strivings of the protagonists, another time and place in which their desire to extricate themselves from a "narrow past" (*House* 30) and to enter a realm of free social circulation is acknowledged and validated.

To speak of a movable self implies either the commodification of the self or some form of self-commodification, for movability is above all a quality of commodities. Chesnutt explores it as such in one of his earliest conjure stories, "Po' Sandy" (*The Conjure Woman* 44-54), in which slavery can be recognized as a metaphor triggering a reflection on the ineluctable commodification of identity in the cultural economy of post-Reconstruction

outstanding debts in *House* and *The Colonel's Dream*; the burned marriage certificate in *Marrow*; and the mixed-up birth records in *The Quarry*.

⁹ The pattern is most prominent in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories*, where it underpins the plot of a majority of stories, but it is equally at work in conjure stories such as "Po' Sandy" and "Lonesome Ben" as well as in novels like *The House Behind the Cedars* and *The Colonel's Dream*.

America.¹⁰ Sandy's suffering is a direct result of the essential movability of slaves, manifest not only in his own circulation among the members of his master's family but also in the loss of his first wife and in the ill-fated temporary removal of his second wife, Tenie, who is thus incapable of preventing his death in the sawmill. Focusing on movability as a corollary of chattelhood here allows Chesnutt to identify the desire for freedom and self-realization plausibly as a yearning for a permanent bond while raising the question of the viability of a self that has to negotiate multiple attachments.

Sandy's adeptness at a variety of skills and his reliability distinguish him among other slaves and make him a prized possession whose exchange value potentially exceeds his use value. This distinction in fact lends Sandy the status of what Igor Kopytoff calls a singularized commodity, i.e. a commodity that is "confined to a very narrow sphere of exchange" (74). Neither sold nor given away, he is lent out to his master's children and relatives for limited periods of time in a manner that symbolically reinforces "Mars Marrabo's" patriarchal authority. This commodification is of course indifferent to the slave's selfhood, but for Sandy his prescribed mobility poses an acute threat to his self. For him it amounts to a denial of individual identity because it forces him to divide himself into multiple selves, as he complains to Tenie: "hit's Sandy dis en Sandy dat, en Sandy yer en Sandy dere" (*The Conjure Woman* 47). Sandy's sense of selfhood is defined by attachment, preferably to a person of his own choice, but permanence takes precedence over choice, as his complaint suggests: "I ain't got no home, ner no marster, ner no mistiss, ner no nuffin. I can't eben keep

¹⁰ Focusing on the violence of Uncle Julius's tale, Richard Brodhead and Eric Sundquist have emphasized the dehumanizing effects of slavery, which turns people into objects of economic value. While Brodhead considers the "milling of Sandy [as] one of American literature's great images of the violence of manufacture" (*Culture* 201), Sundquist notes the parallel between the economy of slavery and conjure's power of metamorphosis, pointing out that Tenie's transformation of Sandy into a tree, although meant to protect him from the wearing cycle of his life as a slave, in fact hastens his destruction as "a material object of the plantation economy" (377). In this, as Sundquist also observes, Sandy's fate resembles that of Dave in "Dave's Neckliss" (*The Conjure Woman* 123-35) and Ben in "Lonesome Ben" (146-57), who both also fall victim to "the reification of the human under slavery" (Sundquist 405). Rather than challenge these readings, my argument interpreting slavery as a metaphor supporting a reflection on commodification in the post-Reconstruction cultural economy, follows Brodhead's suggestion that while in "content the conjure stories have antebellum slavery as their historical referent [...] at the level of their telling they gauge dominances and resistances in another social situation, the new economic order of the postbellum South" (*Culture* 201).

a wife” (47). At this point it appears that Sandy’s desire to escape the cycle of exchange takes the form of a wish to be the monopoly of a single owner, i.e. to be promoted as a commodity further along the line of singularization. In the end, however, he hopes to extricate himself from the status of a commodity altogether by demoting himself to the state of a thing devoid of any use or exchange value: “a tree, er a stump, er a rock” (47). Sandy’s self-assertion thus expresses itself in an identification with things that appear to be immovable because they are rooted in the ground like a tree or part of it like a rock. His choice to be turned into a tree is shortsighted, however, not only because it underestimates the violence of the plantation economy but also because he mentions the tree and the stump in one breath, and his recommodification in the form of lumber figuratively bears out Kopytoff’s observation that “unless formally decommoditized, commoditized things remain potential commodities—they continue to have an exchange value, even if they have been effectively withdrawn from their exchange sphere and deactivated, so to speak, as commodities” (76). Nevertheless, the story also suggests that the commodification of the slave cannot entirely eradicate his self, for Sandy’s spirit returns to haunt the building that he was made into.

“Po’ Sandy” paradigmatically exemplifies Chesnutt’s view of a selfhood that derives from a social bond. The slave’s self here derives from, indeed can only be said to exist as such in, the attachment to his master and any other attachments, such as matrimonial ones, that the master makes available. Commodification poses a threat to Sandy’s selfhood because it effectively nullifies these attachments, thus uprooting the slave’s self and forcing it into a ghostlike existence. But if commodification threatens the self with dissolution, the story evokes even more memorably the hazard inherent in the desire for rootedness, the clinging to a self that is confined to a single attachment. For Chesnutt, such a desire harbors the danger of a self-destructive obsession, which he on various occasions renders in figures of involuntary

consumption.¹¹ From this perspective, commodification, being indifferent to any particular identity that the association with an owner may confer on a slave, instead of threatening his self with dissolution, as Sandy fears, might indeed represent an opportunity for inventive self-extension. For to the extent that the requirement of exchangeability eviscerates the slave's attachment to his master and diminishes his capability to found identity, the slave's adjunct position is transformed into an empty form, to be assumed and filled performatively. Sandy's calamity is thus also the result of his inability, expressed as a desire for inertia, to take advantage of the potential for self-advancement inherent in the multiple attachments that his status as an exalted commodity makes available to him. In this, Sandy's attitude and fate contrast strikingly with Grandison's in "The Passing of Grandison" (*The Wife of His Youth* 168-202). Like Sandy, Grandison, by virtue of his reliability, is among his master's most valued possessions, and like Sandy, he owes his livelihood, including his matrimonial prospects, to his master. But unlike Sandy, Grandison's self is not fully invested in this attachment to his master, which enables him to take advantage of the opportunity to accompany the colonel's son on a trip North, to make the necessary connections to secure his family's safe passage to Canada, while simultaneously raising his value in the colonel's eyes by returning to the plantation under much hardship. Grandison's freedom is thus not an abstract and remote state, as the colonel's son assumes, but is inherent in his ability to negotiate the attachments that his situation as Colonel Owens's trusted slave makes available to him. As the story's title indicates, this dimension of Grandison's self does not show itself in

¹¹ Apart from "Po' Sandy," "Dave's Neckliss" and "Lonesome Ben" also highlight the self-destructive implications of singular and obsessive attachments. In both of these stories, the protagonists' alienation and isolation result in excessive identification with the dead matter to which their contact is confined. As figures of consuming obsessions, these examples critically illuminate the plot of *Mandy Oxendine*, which derives its dynamic from the obsessive attachments that hold various characters in thrall to one another and lead them (close) to actual self-destruction. Thus Utley's infatuation with Mandy leads to his murder by the jealous Elder Gadson, who is himself bewitched by Mandy's beauty, and Amelia's unrequited love for Tom Lowrey leads her to betray Mandy and to commit suicide. Meanwhile, Tom's and Mandy's mutual love and Gadson's singular obsession with Mandy almost end in multiple self-sacrifice, the pathos of which Chesnutt only avoids by deliberately steering the plot from tragedy to farce, thereby satirizing the conventions of romance that underpin the novel.

his countenance, speech or behavior, but can only be inferred from the consequences of his family's as well as the colonel's and his son's actions.¹²

Although he shares traits of both Sandy and Grandison, Uncle Julius is closer to the latter. His postbellum presence on the plantation suggests that he was a trusted and useful slave and that, like Sandy, he cherished a strong attachment to the place where he lived as a slave. But like Grandison, Julius is able to cultivate and negotiate a variety of personal attachments and to take advantage of the potential for self-advancement inherent in them, and this gains him a happier afterlife on the plantation than Sandy. The key to his success is his active participation in the processes of commodification that circumscribe his life as a freedman as they formerly did his existence as a slave. In his dealings with the new owners of the McAdoo plantation, this participation amounts to an act of self-commodification, as Julius offers up his personal attachment to victims of slavery in exchange for certain material favors from his new employers. Thus his stories seem specifically calculated to authenticate the pathos of the suffering of slaves like Sandy and Dave in a manner that answers a psychological need of his listeners, especially Annie, and prompts them to reciprocate in action. Such transactions are of course inherently compromised, as Richard Brodhead points out by focusing on the gain Annie makes:

By entering into Julius's stories, this person devitalized by her own cultural refinements can imaginatively possess the more amusing, or pathetic, or tragic, in short the more fully *animated* life of blacks in slavery, and thereby reclaim a life force she has forfeited. In exchange for this gain Anne makes concessions to Julius, but he has purchased them at a price. *He has put his peoples' [sic] life at someone else's disposal. He has served one group's life up as the stuff of another group's entertainment.* (*Culture* 205)

¹² Although we may assume that Grandison masterminds his family's escape, the story in fact gives us no indication as to whether and when he actually forms such a plan. The escape is indeed fortuitous and as such the result of the actions of multiple players, which makes it impossible to determine exactly the role played by Grandison. The fact that the party Grandison leads to Canada includes Tom, whom the colonel considered too smart to be trusted to accompany his son, leaves open the possibility that Grandison plays a part that was "written" by someone else. On the invisibility of Grandison's motivation and power, see also Fienberg 218-19.

Brodhead's assessment raises the difficult question of the commensurability of imaginative and material gain, for while in his view Annie's imaginative gain weighs heavier in the balance than Julius's material reward, one might also contend that Julius's offerings cost him little, since they are "only" stories, fictionalized accounts of the lives of blacks under slavery. In absolute terms, the question cannot be decided at this level, where value is defined by subjective interests, but needs to be considered in terms of the transaction's implication in a wider network of fictional exchange, and here it is again important to note that Julius's success, like Grandison's, is fortuitous in that it depends on the recognition of an opportunity and on the actions and reactions of multiple actors. By highlighting the slaves' victimization and suffering as moments of consumption—Sandy's and Dave's deaths in the sawmill and the smoke-house, for instance—Julius not only evokes an ideological continuity between antebellum plantation economy and the postbellum cultural economy, but more importantly also reopens the finality of victimization by lending the victims an imaginative afterlife and a symbolic agency. Indeed, for all their implied competitiveness, the transactions between Julius and his employers represent benign exchanges more than they do acts of (mutual) exploitation. Instead of merely gratifying his listeners' needs, Julius's stories frequently stir Annie and John and prompt them to form temporary attachments to the victims of slavery. For the duration of the story, Julius thus imaginatively transports his employers to a realm remote from their experience, from which they return as if waking from a dream. This function, which is the figurative dimension of Julius's role as a coachman, has the potential to work incremental change, which in Annie's case manifests itself in her peripheral integration into black folk economy and in John's case in his assumption of the value-adding occupation as a collector of black folk tales. The carpetbagger's assumption of authorship may originate in an appropriative impulse but, as Robert Stepto has shown, in the course of his exposure to Julius's storytelling, as documented in John's own development as a narrator, he is transformed from a prejudiced to a reliable listener, who is capable of "*revoicing*" (Stepto 50)

Julius's messages. John's "journey to listenership" (Stepto 51) is the result of his association with Julius, which is to say that the narrative bond that connects the two activates a previously dormant dimension of John's self, which manifests itself in the narrative frames of the Uncle Julius stories, as the representation of Julius gradually changes from a stereotypical folk character to a dignified survivor of slavery. This growing affinity between John and Julius is not only a condition for Chesnutt's actual enlistment of both their voices to express his view but also marks the utopian horizon to which his narrative art, though grounded in commodification, aspires.

The vindication of a movable self, predicated on a revaluation of commodification, indicates Chesnutt's perception of a path "up from slavery," a view that is radical not in its break with the past but in the way it envisions the ineluctability of the past as a gateway to an alternative future. This view challenges the notion that slavery, as the condition of bondage, is the categorical opposite of freedom and humanity—a notion that nourished both the slaveholders' claim that the enslavement of the black race was a proof and guarantor of the white man's freedom and superior humanity and the postbellum claim that the lingering effects of slavery disqualified the freedmen from assuming the full rights and liberties of citizenship. Instead, the view that emerges in Chesnutt seeks to re-imagine humanity and freedom on the basis of the legacy of slavery, in terms of what binds people together rather than their independence. John moves toward such a view when, in the opening pages of "Dave's Neckliss," he acknowledges the challenge Julius's stories pose to his and Annie's concepts of slavery and freedom and recognizes that slavery, although denying fundamental human rights, is a human condition and as such capable of generating a human ethos in its own right: "But in the simple human feeling, and still more in the undertone of sadness, which pervaded his stories, I thought I could see a spark which, fanned by favoring breezes and fed by the memories of the past, might become in his children's children a glowing flame of

sensibility, alive to every thrill of human happiness or human woe” (*The Conjure Woman* 125).

John’s use of the image of congenial weather in conjunction with memories of the past recalls the image of thawing at the end of Chesnutt’s essay on “Superstition,” anticipating a future that is characterized by an altered perception of the past. As such, his reflection on Julius foreshadows the narrator’s reflection, in *The House Behind the Cedars*, on Frank Fowler, which represents one of Chesnutt’s most explicit attempts at reevaluating the legacy of slavery. Volunteering as a coachman himself, Frank resembles Julius in more than one way, notably in his apparent submission to his lighter colored neighbors, which earns him his father’s scorn and which can be seen, in the words John applies to Julius, as evidence of “a mind enslaved long after the shackles had been struck off from the limbs of his possessor” (*The Conjure Woman* 124). For the narrator of *House*, however, Frank’s character offers an occasion for an extended reflection on the legacy of slavery, in the course of which the condition of bondage is refigured as a paradigm for the human condition as such, the basis for harmonious future relations between the races in recognition of their interdependence:

His was one of those rare souls that can give with small hope of return. When he had made the scar upon her [Rena’s] arm, by the same token she had branded him her slave forever; when he had saved her from a watery grave, he had given his life to her. There are depths of fidelity and devotion in the negro heart that have never been fathomed or fully appreciated. Now and then in the kindlier phases of slavery these qualities were brightly conspicuous, and in them, if wisely appealed to, lies the strongest hope of amity between the two races whose destiny seems bound up together in the Western world. Even a dumb brute can be won by kindness. Surely it were worth while to try some other weapon than scorn and contumely and hard words upon people of our common race,—the human race, which is bigger and broader than Celt or Saxon, barbarian or Greek, Jew or Gentile, black or white; for we are all children of a common Father, forget it as we may, and each of us is in some measure his brother’s keeper. (*House* 117-18)

The passage with its biblical overtones may appear overly accommodating toward a white audience, reminiscent in parts of Booker T. Washington’s famous pledge of loyalty in

his Atlanta Exposition address, but the implications of Chesnutt's enlistment of Pauline rhetoric—specifically echoing Galatians 3:26-28 and I Corinthians 3:12—are worth spelling out as they appear to lie at the heart of the endeavor to probe beyond inherited identities, which is the principal concern of *The House Behind the Cedars*.¹³ St. Paul's rhetoric, especially in Galatians 3-4 where he describes the advent of a new time that transforms slaves into sons, can be seen to provide something like a blueprint for Chesnutt's novel. Echoing Jesus's injunction to forsake organic ties of family (Luke 14:26), Paul consistently severs signifiers of identity from their literal referents and turns them into figures of a new identity defined by the Christian bond. While the old terms of identity—Greek, Jew, bond, free, male, female, son, heir—do not disappear in Paul's discourse, they have lost their organic significance and are inhabited by a new significance predicated not on birth but on promise. This rhetoric, characterized by the evacuation and reoccupation of signifiers, appears to inspire Chesnutt's most ambitious novelistic project, in which he seeks a passage from "the blight of inheritance" (*House* 19) and the "sins of the fathers" (21, 51) to a new social bond. Exploring this passage, *The House Behind the Cedars* offers two case studies, that of John Walden on the one hand and that of his sister Rena and George Tryon on the other. While John's story raises the question of the moral basis for judging the passage, Rena's and George's story highlights the obstacles the social system places in the way of its

¹³ In Galatians and I Corinthians, St. Paul emphasizes the power of the Christian spirit to transform conventional communities, based on ethnicity or race, social rank and gender, into a universal community figured as the body of Christ, likening Christians to members of a universal body. Washington possibly alluded to this notion in his famous image of racial harmony concluding his pledge of loyalty to white society in the Atlanta Exposition address: "As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defence of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (*Up From Slavery* 100). Although he evokes a sense of Christian humility and self-sacrifice, however, the Christian language in Washington is less pronounced here than in Chesnutt and more clearly subordinated to a metaphor of corporate organization. Yet Washington's rhetoric, based as it is on an appropriation of dominant discourses, is itself notoriously difficult to assess. Thus while Sidonie Smith claims that "Washington is mastered by the pose" (219) he adopts, Houston Baker maintains that "*Up From Slavery* as a whole projects a model for the mastery of form that serves as type and figuration for the Afro-American spokesperson" (36), a model which indeed, he suggests, Chesnutt followed in the literary domain (41).

accomplishment. Both cases, however, end in alienation, which only a reader's response can overcome.

John's success is based on his apparent willingness to sever the ties with this family and a readiness to move into more promising relations as they open. His self-realization is thus less a process of working his way up than the fortuitous assumption of a vacant position, taking up the management of a slave estate, marrying the daughter of its owner, and eventually inheriting the latter's wealth. John's rise is scandalous in several respects, liable, if its truth were known, to being perceived as a betrayal of one race and an usurpation of the privileges of another, manifest in his occupation and enjoyment of the empty mansion of a former slave owner. Yet the novel challenges such a perception by rigorously questioning the moral basis on which John's move is to be judged. John refuses to be bound by customs and social relations that Chesnutt insistently characterizes as bearing the mark of the "sins of the fathers." The sin, which the novel also identifies as a "false relation to society" (105), emblemized in the house behind the cedars, consists in the pretense that the outward signs of social and racial identity are true manifestations of an inner self. John's departure from the house behind the cedars, though originally motivated by a desire to find a more truthful social identity by claiming what he perceives as his birthright, eventually amounts to a radical rejection of any organic link between the inner self and outward identity and an attempt to redefine this link through action. For him, the signifiers of social identity are thus empty, available for occupation and resignification. There is little that appears to distinguish this attitude from that of a confidence man—indeed, it is difficult not to hear echoes of Melville's novel when witnessing John's behavior on the boat that takes him and Rena "down the river" to Clarence in chapter four. The distinction can only be made on the basis of the motivation and effects of action, and Chesnutt takes pains to show that John's conduct is more honorable

than selfish, requiring to be judged by his actions rather than by his social status.¹⁴ Insofar as he is “a new man” (20), John lives in another time in which the tropes of social identity, which he inhabits like ruins, have lost their old significance. In his very isolation, however, he paradigmatically embodies Chesnutt’s literary project of anticipating posterity while working within the compromised tropes of his age.

It is “the populous loneliness” (45) of his new life that leads John back to the house behind the cedars, trying to convince his mother to let Rena join him in Clarence; and like Dodie in *The Marrow of Tradition*, it is the infant Albert, John’s child from his marriage with the slave owner’s daughter, whose identity is as yet undetermined, who is to provide “a living link” (44) between John’s and Rena’s old and new homes. When George Tryon proposes to Rena, it seems as if a plan John devised is about to be realized. Like John, Rena and George get their opportunity to extricate themselves from the “blight of inheritance” by temporarily severing their family ties and assuming a vacant position in another place, which is accentuated by the roles they play in the Clarence Tournament. But unlike John, they are not spared the test of confronting the truth of their new relationship and their new-formed tie predictably does not survive the shock of discovery. Both Rena’s conscience and George’s race prejudice partly account for this, but the principal reason for the unfortunate conclusion of their romance must be located in the logic of Chesnutt’s plot, which prevents any other outcome. In marked contrast to the spaciousness and distance that enabled John’s success, setting and plot tighten in the second half of the novel in a manner that fully bears out the narrator’s observation that “connected ... we must be; if not by our virtues, then by our vices” (103). Indeed, the contrast between John’s world, which is ruled by chance, and Rena’s and

¹⁴ From a late nineteenth-century (Northern) perspective, John’s attitude and actions can be seen to manifest the emergent success ideology, which, according to Karen Halttunen, replaced the mid-century middle-class ideal of sincerity and which effectively made the confidence man respectable. In contrast, from this perspective, Rena and George appear caught in the genteel code of sincerity and accuse each other of hypocrisy, not being what their (theatrical) performances promised. The difficulty to distinguish the “new man” from the con man may be one reason why Chesnutt chose to abandon the character half-way through the novel, the fact that he was originally introduced as a means to bring Rena and George together being another. Yet John’s disappearance is above all a forceful indication that he lives in another time than the other characters in the novel.

George's world, which is ruled by fate, can be seen as the novel's major inconsistency. Yet, the shift is obviously part of Chesnutt's design and appears to be calculated to guide his readers' response quite as much as Uncle Julius's narration guides Annie and John. The two most likely reader responses, which the novel's evocation of a world in which everything goes wrong that can go wrong elicits, in fact mirror Annie's and John's reactions to the Uncle Julius's tales by either being moved by the melodramatic logic of the events or skeptically dismissing the improbability of this logic. In either case, however, the readers' alienation mobilizes their imagination in the interests of the two protagonists and this is reinforced by Chesnutt's handling of narrative focalization in the second half of the novel. Alternately placing the reader in equal proximity to both Rena and George, the novel highlights the parallels between the two protagonists' fates even more forcefully than their differences, as they both accuse each other of dropping their masks, struggle vainly against the attraction that unconsciously binds them together, and are made to atone for what the narrator refers to as the sins of the fathers. As the plot switches between the two focuses, readers are continuously led to adjust their imaginative positions and to follow the two protagonists in their frantic movements, which repeatedly and inescapably bring them back to the house behind the cedars. The calculated effect of this narrative structure, which alternately attaches the reader's interest to Rena and George, appears to be that the reader's imagination assimilates the two protagonists as kindred spirits, thereby sanctioning the bond that they themselves cannot realize.

Seen in this light, *The House Behind the Cedars* offers its readers a training in mental mobility, similar to the one Julius offers his listeners, imaginatively transporting them, for the duration of the story, to another time, from which they may return with altered perspectives. The moment of reading, or listening, thus articulates a utopian afterlife to the strivings of the fictional characters, engaging Chesnutt's conception of the promise of literature to imaginatively overcome the limitations of history. At this moment, Chesnutt's writing,

steeped in the commodified signifiers of his age, emerges like the sound of a voice coming from an unexpected source—the same sound that in his fiction so often stirs a character’s dormant self.

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