

# Dropping Voices: Southern Black Agrarian Revolt in Charles Chesnutt's Fiction

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## Abstract

This essay places Charles Chesnutt's work at the intersection of race and class in order to address the still debated question of Chesnutt's relation to the black working-class and reinterpret his now canonical fiction as deeply entwined with the political and economic life of the black agrarian masses of the US South. I argue that the conjure tales' centrality to turn-of-the-century American literature is in its full-throated representation of the economic demands of the black agrarian masses. Furthermore, when Chesnutt 'dropped' Julius as his 'mouthpiece' his writing ultimately left behind the masses and began to speak in the accents of metropolitan self-making. I address a range of Chesnutt's works to demonstrate the key developments in how Chesnutt imagined racial uplift and how the black agrarian masses were to be employed in razing American apartheid. This essay then gives evidence to show Chesnutt's growing skepticism of large dispersed political movements of the masses like Black Populism in favor of the concentrated exemplars of outstanding individuals.

## Keywords

Charles Chesnutt, Black Populism, self-made, African-American literature, working-class studies, free-labor ideology, conjure tales, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), 'The Partners' (1901)

In 1900, Charles Chesnutt imagined that a future 'amalgamation' of the races in the US would mean 'There would be no inferior race to domineer over; there would be no superior race to oppress those who differed from them in racial externals. The inevitable social struggle, which in one form or another, seems to be one of the conditions of progress, would proceed along other lines than those of race.'<sup>1</sup> Resolving racial strife, Chesnutt makes clear, does not mean the end to civic struggle. Other social cleavages, 'inevitable' he calls them, will condition the US for 'progress.' But does Chesnutt mean future social inequalities will continue to provoke the interminable but progressive fight for greater social equality? Or does he define 'progress' Republican free-labor advocates would, as the present justification for rather than the future opposition to the greater prosperity of certain individuals against the common masses?

To borrow Chesnutt's phrasing, this essay proceeds along a line other than race to foreground a class struggle that, rather than waiting until the color line resolved itself through 'mixture,' actively

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Chesnutt, 'The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time,' in *Charles W. Chesnutt Essays and Speeches*, eds. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz III, and Jesse S. Crisler (Redwood City, CA: Stanford U. P., 1999), 125.

shaped Chesnutt's political and artistic intervention of the nadir.<sup>2</sup> The following essay agrees with recent economic criticism that Chesnutt's fiction illustrates the double-bind of Southern race-hate and Northern money-love facing African Americans in the South.<sup>3</sup> Truly, Chesnutt's work brilliantly satirizes the Northern middle class's tales of innocence in regards to US racial apartheid. But recent economic criticism wrongly exaggerates Chesnutt's sharp tales about US apartheid into attacks on the systemic causes of economic inequality.<sup>4</sup> Even while they pressure certain facets of Republican free-labor ideology, Chesnutt's narratives of the nadir stop short, just as his future America stops short, of imagining economic equality as inseparable from racial equality. They imagined the exact opposite in fact. Powerful critiques by Kenneth Warren, Walter Benn Michaels, and André Williams reveal Chesnutt sought class division and discrimination between rich and poor grounded in 'standards of thought and feeling' to replace the color line.<sup>5</sup> Scholars, though, have yet to fully examine Chesnutt's writing in relation to the particular form of Black working-class politics that restructured Black political life in the South during Chesnutt's publishing career. By doing so, I wish to show the literary means by which Chesnutt first responded to and then eventually elided a viable political and economic alternative to his own Republican free-labor ideology.<sup>6</sup> Of particular concern for my reading is Chesnutt's use of metropolitan self-making to ignore the most articulate and mobilized revolt of the Black agrarian masses in the post-Reconstruction era: Black Populism.

Black agrarian revolts, like the Leflore County boycott of 1889, the regional Cotton Picker's Strike of 1891 spearheaded by the Colored Farmers' Alliance, and the national fusion politics of the People's Party, constellate what historian Omar Ali calls Black Populism: 'the largest movement of African Americans in the United States until the modern civil rights movement.'<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, readings of postbellum African American literature have yet to fully address the historical argument that 'the most effective means to struggle against discriminatory practices, disfranchisement and racism, all of which affected prosperous black Southerners as well as the poor—was Populism.'<sup>8</sup> Critics have preferred instead to summarize the efforts by Southern Blacks to own land and stay in the agrarian South as the work of one person, Booker T. Washington, and to reflexively label the landscapes of the South as carceral rather than as something workers wanted.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.; The term nadir is often used to describe the turn of the century as the worst period for African Americans and is meant to articulate living against lynching, political oppression, the theft of livelihoods, and mob violence after the promise of Reconstruction had faded.

<sup>3</sup> See John Mac Kilgore, 'Cakewalk of Capital in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*,' *American Literature* 84, no. 1 (2012): 61–87; and Francesca Sawaya, *The Difficult Art of Giving: Patronage, Philanthropy, and the American Literary Market* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Kilgore, 'Cakewalk of Capital.'

<sup>5</sup> Charles Chesnutt, 'Social Discrimination,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 424, and a key quote for Williams's, *Dividing Lines*, 132–133.

<sup>6</sup> Arlene A. Elder claims Chesnutt's writing from the conjure tales to his last published novel codifies a move 'away from the common Black experience' toward a 'gradual identification with the liberal, white middle-class.' *The 'Hindered Hand': Cultural Implications of Early African-American Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 148. My argument traces a similar arc, but I do not hold that Chesnutt's writing identified as white.

<sup>7</sup> Omar Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South, 1886–1900* (Oxford, MS: U. P. of Mississippi, 2010), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Stein, 'Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others': The Political Economy of Racism in the United States,' *Science & Society* 38, no. 4 (1974/1975): 445.

<sup>9</sup> See Houston Baker, *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/re-reading Booker T* (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 2001).

Turning to the primary means of long endurance and open revolt by the agrarian Black masses frames Chesnutt's engagement with rural folk characters and dialect as the necessary adoption of the political and economic demands of political allies. Too long has critical attention been paid to Chesnutt's use of dialect as a 'bridge,' to use Eric Sunquist's term, between elite and folk cultures.<sup>10</sup> To view Black rural subjectivity as simply a difference in language evades the irreconcilable economic and political differences between rural and urban, poor and secure, which were negotiated within African American literature at this time.<sup>11</sup> The most important evidence of Chesnutt's relationship to a Black folk is not in his use of dialect, but in his inscription of the Black masses' proprietary desire for land in the South. The social investment in property was in fact one of most radical actions available to rural African Americans at the time, as W. E. B. Du Bois recognizes when he labels the Freedmen's Bureau and its efforts to regulate agrarian labor conditions as the 'dictatorship of labor' that 'succeeded only at the expense of a taxation on land and property which amounted to confiscation.'<sup>12</sup> Rereading Chesnutt's works with this legible Black rural polis in mind articulates both a moment in which an economic justice movement necessarily attacked the mechanisms of racial hegemony and how a middle-class author wrote class difference into that moment.

The conjure tales' Julius stands as the closest representative Chesnutt would produce of the agrarian agitation that historians now refer to as Black Populism. Julius aside, Chesnutt only briefly refers either to the Colored Farmers' Alliance or the People's Party. In his 1892 address 'Why I am a Republican' Chesnutt conflates the newly formed Populist Party with the Democratic Party saying, '[The Democrats] boast of being the people's party, the party of the poor, and what have they done to lighten the burden of poverty which it seems must needs fall on some of us?'<sup>13</sup> The wording claiming poverty to be inevitable for some may illuminate how Chesnutt defines progress for his 'future American.' But more importantly, the calculated conflation betrays a pressing need on Chesnutt's part to negotiate a troubling alternative to his own vision of progress and Republican free labor ideology. This politically motivated erasure of Populism is writ large in his later novels. *The Colonel's Dream*, set at the same time as the rise of the Colored Farmers' Alliance of the early 1890s and written to directly address agrarian peonage, ignores the workers' movement in favor of a protagonist who gets his money in a Wall Street buyout. *The Marrow of Tradition* likewise only briefly notes the Populists of Wilmington's fusion government and narrates the dilemmas and tragedies of Dr. William Miller instead. In effect, Chesnutt's fiction removes the agrarian masses from their place in the conflicts of history.

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<sup>10</sup> See *ibid.*; and Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard U. P., 1993), 7, 301.

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth Hewitt argues that Chesnutt's role as author and Julius's use of stories to work for himself rather than wages 'suggests an analogy.' Hewitt's reading, correctly emphasizing that Chesnutt's writing sought materialist ends, deflects Chesnutt's representations of an economic class other than his own as the prerogative of an author. In my view, not to interrogate the intraracial class dynamics of an author and those he writes about implies that the effort to 'accumulate capital' by one middle-class, urban author is coextensive with the efforts to own by the poor, rural Black millions. 'Charles Chesnutt's Capitalist Conjurers,' *ELH* 76, no. 4 (2009): 933, 941.

<sup>12</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: an Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 622. Eric Foner tempers Du Bois's praise for the Freedmen's Bureau adding that the Bureau viewed much of its relief effort as temporary and went to great pains to avoid becoming an agency of poor relief. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 152.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Chesnutt, 'Why I am a Republican,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 97.

As early as 1889, Chesnutt thought he would 'drop' his 'used up' Julius. After Julius, when Black working-class characters appear in Chesnutt's fiction, they almost invariably act as the foils to a Black professional-class character, as in Chesnutt's short story 'The Partners' (1901).<sup>14</sup> And he went further. He created a hierarchical relation within the intraracial class bond with mobility—both economic and spatial—as the privilege of the Black professional, and violence—victim of and returner of—as the privilege of the Black worker. Chesnutt drops a revolutionary voice for the Black masses of the South with the dropping of what Julius spoke to. The spectacular violence in the subsequent novels *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), while still a mark of Black agrarians' indelible presence in the discourse of the color line, is but a shadow of the recognition of the politicized Black agrarian masses in the conjure tales. Chesnutt's decision to drop Julius may have been motivated by an uneasiness in allying the voice of Blackness with the voice of rural folk.<sup>15</sup> But more than simply a symptom of class anxiety, his portrayal of agrarian working-class *violence* as the dead end of cross-class bonds summarizes agrarian *revolt* as a dead end of history, and thus is a calculated dismissal of the political agency of the masses.

### I. Taking Their Place: The Desire for Property in Chesnutt's Conjure Tales

'[N]either fish[,] flesh, nor fowl' writes a deeply frustrated Chesnutt in regards to his middling position, both racial and economic, in the South:

Too 'stuck-up' for the colored folks, and, of course, not recognized by the whites. Now these things I would escape from, in some degree, if I lived in the North. The Colored people would be more intelligent, and the white people less prejudiced; so that if I did not reach *terra firma*, I would at least be in sight of land on either side.<sup>16</sup>

Chesnutt's personal revolt—what he notably characterizes as a reckoning with animalia given the many instances of circular and deadly metamorphoses in the conjure tales—readily conforms to what Melvin Dixon reads as African American literature's creative means to assuage the geographic anxiety resulting from diaspora. The landscape—which Dixon catalogs as the wilderness, the underground, and the mountaintop—becomes the medium through which one might 'ride out' from bondage to find 'self-understanding' and, thus, a sense of 'rootedness.'<sup>17</sup> Chesnutt's conjure stories, as told by Julius, warn that the strong desire to remain—for instance in the characters Sandy and Ben—only allows enslavers to reach deeper, farther, and more firmly into their victim's lives. The parasitic link between land and person precludes any hope to remain in the South and not be owned. The grapevines speak the enslaver's conjure in 'Goophered'; the distant swamp in 'Po' Sandy' comes within the enslaver's reach; the creek dissolves everything outside of the enslaver's recognition in 'Lonesome Ben.' Enslaver and land become metonymic for each other in the enslaved's environmental ontology.<sup>18</sup> Here then is a figurative landscape that

<sup>14</sup> Charles Chesnutt, 'Albion W. Tourgée, 26 Sept. 1889,' in *To Be an Author: Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889–1905*, eds. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Robert C. Leitz, III (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1997), 44.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Dividing Lines*, 133.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 1993), 157–158.

<sup>17</sup> Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 3, 32.

<sup>18</sup> In an ecocritical reading of *The Conjure Tales*, Jeffrey Myers suggests that Chesnutt portrays Black agrarians as having a 'symbio[ti]c' relationship to the land they work that the white owners lack. 'Other Nature: Resistance to

represents the antithesis of Dixon's identity formation: an environment that saps one's sense of self and compels the reluctant agrarian masses of the South to 'ride out.'

Yet, despite his tale's admonition not to delay flight, Julius does not leave. He instead attempts to overcome his own personal taxonomic insecurity (is he free or is he slave) by telling stories about the land, by claiming the land beneath his feet as *terra firma*. I suggest the tension between a Southern setting which compels flight and a narrator who doggedly remains derives from the nadir's necessary political bond between the different classes and the different geographies of Black America. Chesnutt, personally and politically, preferred Northern, urban forms of uplift, yet at this time, the vast majority of Black America was rural and Southern. Given this social and economic landscape and Chesnutt's resolve to write for racial justice, he must, to paraphrase Warren, work through class.<sup>19</sup> In other words, class difference and the opportunity to attenuate that difference for a moment for the sake of countering programs of white supremacy, informs the thematic structure of the conjure tales.

In the conjure tales, Julius, a freedman of North Carolina, attends John and Annie, big money people from Ohio, in their ventures either to spend or make money. He invariably finds the opportunity to tell a story to acquire something he wants, usually property big and small. In this regard, Julius and John rehearse the economic contest of the vast majority of African American laborers in the South. Through Julius's daily economic revolt we can see a representative of the Black agrarian politics which shaped the post-Reconstruction South.<sup>20</sup>

A solitary story among Chesnutt's conjure tales depicts unsanctioned mobility without the return of planter terror. Julius's 'A Deep Sleeper' relates the tale of Skundus who 'git res'less' and disappears when the woman he hopes to marry is sent to work at a neighboring plantation for several weeks.<sup>21</sup> She eventually returns as does Skundus, claiming to have been asleep. Skundus's reappearance just before the harvest when his labor is most valuable rehearses a potent form of protest that moves within Southern landscapes rather than without. Julius relates to his employers that his young relative Tom is a grandson of Skundus and susceptible to the same 'deep sleep' that Skundus claimed kept him from work. As John's household economy employs Julius, Tom, and 'other members of [Julius's] family,' the tale hints at these employees' ability to leave and pressure that economy at multiple nodes and under a more systematic strategy than just Julius's artifice. John's own words in the opening to 'A Deep Sleeper' properly measure the potential scale of Julius's stratagem. 'They were,' John says of poor whites, 'like Julius himself, the product of a *system* which they had not created and which they did not know enough to resist.'<sup>22</sup> Its significance is made more evident when we consider that 'A Deep Sleeper' was published only a year after the

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Ecological Hegemony in Charles W. Chesnutt's 'The Conjure Woman,' *African American Review* 37, no. 1 (2003): 6. But more often than not, as Paul Outka claims, Chesnutt uses symbiosis between slaves and the natural world to illustrate slavery's ability to reify humans into beasts, and not to applaud an environmentalist ethos. *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 106.

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth W. Warren, *What was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 2011), 109.

<sup>20</sup> Sixty-five percent of African Americans in the rural South from 1880 to 1900 were wage laborers; an additional 27 percent sharecropped on white-owned land, meaning the vast majority of Black agrarians were directly dependent upon white landowners. Ali, *Lion's Mouth*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Charles W. Chesnutt, 'A Deep Sleeper,' *Two Tales* 5, no. 53 (March 11, 1893): 5, *The Charles W. Chesnutt Archive*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, emphasis added.

formation of the Populist Party, a national agrarian party that formed partly from Colored Farmers' Alliance members efforts and garnered some significant support from Black agrarian laborers despite the racism of their white counterparts.<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, Julius's tale resists John's authority as it gives Tom the time needed to procure the watermelon that John had ordered Julius harvest for his table. As Julius tells his employers the story of Skundus's flight to the swamp and his family's direct relation to that deep sleeper, he voices his and his family's awareness of the system they live and work in and a mobile labor force's role in systemic resistance. For landless Black agrarians the ability to leave and seek the best pay for their labor provided what was often one of the only means of protest, but its potency as a threat to local apartheid economies was unmistakable. The 'Redeemed' state governments quickly enacted policies to contain the contingency of a mobile and free labor force. Black populists responded in kind. As in the person of Reverend George W. Lowe of Arkansas, who organized Black populist resistance as part of the Colored Wheels, an agrarian economic movement, and wrote letters of support for people wanting to emigrate to Liberia, Black populists leveraged their mobility within the labor market for fairer wages as they pressured apartheid policies for the opportunity to remain and own land.<sup>24</sup> Julius employs the same pressure in the conjure tales.

Readers questioning whether Chesnutt exploits Black agrarian culture or whether he astutely helps that culture survive must come to see Julius's use of language as entangled in the primary concern of Black agrarians: property. In other words, Julius's argument with John inscribes the Black agrarians' contest against dispossession and alienation from the land. Julius's means of protest—'ifs,' 'woulds,' and 'coulds'—punctuate the conjure tales, moving the reader's conception of landed property away from assumptions of white male prerogative. Julius says to John and Annie when they first meet him in 'The Goophered Grapevine' (1887), "Well, suh, you is a stranger ter me, en I is a stranger ter you, en we is bofe strangers ter one anudder, but 'f I 'uz in yo' place, I wouldn' buy dis vimya'd."<sup>25</sup> In 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt' (1899), John asks for advice regarding clearing a patch of land by the swamp and Julius replies, "I ain' denyin' you could cl'ar up dat trac' er lan' fer a hund'ed er a couple er hund'ed dollahs, —ef you wants ter cl'ar it up. But ef dat 'uz my trac' er lan', I wouldn' 'sturb it, no, suh, I wouldn'; sho's you bawn, I wouldn'."<sup>26</sup> Julius follows the conditional possessive imaginings with knowledgeable assertions about the tract of land that he could have only learned as a field hand.<sup>27</sup> While Julius acknowledges John's ownership, the conditional phrasing invites an imaginative displacement of John, one that broaches the possibility that freedwomen and men could be in John's 'place.'

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<sup>23</sup> See Ali, *Lion's Mouth*.

<sup>24</sup> Lowe echoes Skundus's 'restlessness': "There is a great restlessness among [my people] on accoun [sic] of discriminating laws that are being made."; quoted in Ali, *Lion's Mouth*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *The Conjure Stories: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, eds. Robert B. Stepto, Jennifer Rae Greeson (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 6. Representations of Black Southern dialect were used by white authors of this time to cement the image of Black Americans as ignorant and only suited to servitude. Studies of Chesnutt's writing have long debated Chesnutt's use of dialect, but most hold that Chesnutt's use of dialect counters such racist writing. See, for instance, Sunquist, *To Wake the Nations*; Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> Chesnutt, *The Conjure Stories*, 81.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Chesnutt would later claim, 'the wind-up of each story reveals the old man's ulterior purpose, which, as a general thing, is accomplished.'<sup>28</sup> Julius's purpose and John and Annie's acquiescence have been read as moments of failed understanding, rather than as a rural laborer 'accomplish[ing]' what he wants. According to Sarah Wagner-McCoy, 'John misunderstands Julius's stories as elaborate cons for ham, a schoolhouse, or a new suit of clothes. . . . Material equivalency fails to acknowledge the mythological proportions of what has been lost.'<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Glenda Carpio casts the reading of Julius as telling tales to 'receive limited financial gain' as coming from the 'limited perspective' of Julius's white listeners, John and Annie.<sup>30</sup> The pittance certainly, at times, demonstrate John's limitations. But they still frame, as Chesnutt argues, the 'wind-up' of the conjure stories, and we should appreciate the contest for material equivalency as the recurrent contest for economic justice in the South between those who own the land and those who work the land. Rather than attempting to get paid to only satisfy a pressing hunger or need, Julius seeks the 'ulterior purpose' of material gain to interrogate the imagined future of the South.<sup>31</sup> Julius's conjure stories can be called strategic to the extent that they enable him to remain, make a living, and fight for his own future purpose. Like Julius, Black Populists organized because they realized that their ability to remain, make a living, and plan a future in the South would only be secured through a more strategic political power.

Locating moments of material redistribution then begins to acknowledge an economic politics within the conjure stories that arises from the Black agrarian masses in the South rather than from an urban elite. Chesnutt grasped the economic strategies and motivations of rural workers and put them into his conjure stories. Whether Chesnutt believed those workers could be successful is another question.

That Julius never gains the ground he works suspends him on the threshold of migration or an even more dangerous response. Even as 'if I was in your place' within 'The Goophered Grapevine' and 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt' disrupts a capitalist's rhetorical control of space, those stories end with Julius absent and John controlling the narration. Julius's absence insinuates a historical finality to the contest for space in the South not repeated in other tales. Julius ends his bloody revenge tale, 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt,' with 'w'at I be'n tellin' you is de reason I doan lack ter see dat neck er woods cl'ared up. Co'se it b'longs ter you, en a man kin do ez he choose' wid 'is own.'<sup>32</sup> 'I cleared up the land in question,' John perfunctorily relates.<sup>33</sup> He finds no haunt, as the conjure tale threatens, but a tree full of honey. Julius's tale of death and ghosts (fabricated to protect a honey 'monopoly' John tellingly believes) attempts a haunting form of proprietorship. Yet when Julius's words directly touch on the ownership of land, he is effectively silenced. Julius's absence sends a message. John knows the driving desire and telos of the stories is for Julius to take John's place,

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Chesnutt, 'Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem,' in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels and Essays*, ed. Werner Sollers (New York: Library of America, 2002), 906.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Wagner-McCoy, 'Virgilian Chesnutt: Eclogues of Slavery and Georgics of Reconstruction in the Conjure Tales,' *ELH* 80, no. 1 (2013): 214–215.

<sup>30</sup> Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford U. P., 2008), 48.

<sup>31</sup> Christine A. Wooley's persuasive argument that Chesnutt hoped for sympathy to translate into the redistribution of property, demonstrates that the 'desired state of feeling' necessarily means a sensitivity to labor and the proper recompense for that labor. 'The Necessary Fictions of Charles Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream*,' *The Mississippi Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2012): 189.

<sup>32</sup> Chesnutt, *Conjure Stories*, 89.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

and that is something which John will never permit no matter the soft-hearted appeals of Annie. Consequently, even as Julius proves his right to the land he knows so well, his *terra firma*, his determination to stay under the surveillance of Northern sympathy and New South economics, Chesnutt's tale argues, keeps all of the plantation South's porous boundaries between remaining and being owned open.

## 2. Class Bonds, the Division of Character, and Economic Inequality in 'The Partners'

A young Chesnutt once dreamed of what economic uplift for the Black agrarian masses would look like: 'The security of property encourages the acquisition of real estate, and as the colored people constitute the majority of the laboring class in the South, not only in the more menial employments, but in the mechanical trades, it is from them that the influential 'middle class' will be largely recruited in the future.'<sup>34</sup> Only one particular work of Chesnutt's, 'The Partners,' explores this evolution of the freedwomen and men from agrarian laborers to middle-class freeholders and traces the multiple lines of influence and alliance that structure the class politics at work in Chesnutt's late novels. 'The Partners' captures how Chesnutt naturalizes class differences within the complex intraracial alliances necessary to upend US apartheid. Here, as in his last published novels, Chesnutt replaces Julius with two characters meant to shoulder different class positions. The overlooked short story raises important questions about Chesnutt's beliefs about the potential of the agrarian working class to act in its own interests and its relationship to a Black middle class. Chesnutt's above journal entry anticipates a future America where an 'influential' (read powerful) middle class forms itself by the discerning 'recruit[ment]' of select individuals. 'The Partners' is the story of this middle class selection supplanting a strange and potentially revolutionary form of economic equality.

The 'partners,' William Cain and Rufus Green, meet in a Union army camp and agree to bond themselves to one another, going so far as to create a type of marriage certificate. The men, writes Chesnutt, are partners 'at whatever their hands find to do,' and 'What they makes shall belong to one as much as the other, and they shall stand by each other in sickness and in health, in good luck and in bad, till death shall us part, and the Lord have mercy on our souls. Amen.'<sup>35</sup> This remarkable pledge to economic equality clashes with the story's formulations of difference in ability, character, and prospective worth. Here, as in another story about a marriage bond, 'The Wife of His Youth,' Chesnutt portrays the class tensions that surface when alliances are made between social unequals. William's 'relative superiority manifest[s] itself' in whatever the partners do, and their division of labor notably places Rufus mixing with his 'hoe,' and William applying the whitewash.<sup>36</sup> Outside the bonds of the pact, Rufus would 'lead the life of obscurity,' but inside the bond, the men 'ate together, slept together, and had a common purse.'<sup>37</sup>

The communistic bond is both challenged and enforced by the 'advice and oversight' of a Northern philanthropist. With this unnamed do-gooder's capital, William and Rufus gain 'a piece of the soil which . . . is the common heritage of mankind' and become 'freeholders and farmers upon

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<sup>34</sup> Chesnutt, *Journal*, 107–108.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Chesnutt, 'The Partners,' in *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Sylvia Lyons Render (Washington D. C.: Howard U. P., 1974), 254.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 259, 254.

adjoining tracts of land.<sup>38</sup> This philanthropy, however, comes with ideological presumptions related to free-labor and laissez-faire individualism. When the philanthropist learns of their partnership, he explains that such a relationship is:

incompatible with the development of self-reliance and strength of character, and that their best interests would be promoted by their learning each to fight his own battle. A thoughtful student of history might have suggested to the philanthropist that the power of highly developed races lies mainly in their ability to combine for the better accomplishment of a common purpose. The good man meant well, however, and his method was admirably adapted to separate the wheat from the chaff.<sup>39</sup>

Tempering the separation of ‘wheat [read William] from chaff [read Rufus]’ is the otherwise foolhardy philanthropist ‘waiving for the moment his theory of self-reliance—of which indeed his whole generous scheme was a contradiction’ and ensuring that at least two men become solvent farmers.<sup>40</sup>

Though bonded, the partners are not equal. The men still partly undergo what George W. Cable calls an ‘energetic process of selection, and as much as some go down, others go up.’<sup>41</sup> The partners’ social contract based on the accord of race attenuates the ‘process of selection,’ but it does not deny the innate inequality of character. Those inequalities of character distract the reader from the subtle development of economic difference and power. Thus, the course of events proves the pact—as much as it was intended to prevent difference—to be a dead letter. With William’s ‘advice’ regarding crops; his ‘superior knowledge’ of livestock; his ‘trustworthy intuitions’ concerning the weather; his ‘instinct of a wise farmer’ to plant rice; his selling surplus sweet potatoes, which ‘always kept well,’ ‘at a nominal price’ to Rufus, whose sweet potatoes ‘had not been properly put up’; and his ability to hire laborers, with all these, the profits and subsequent luxuries slowly accrete to William’s favor.<sup>42</sup> Jealousy finally creates a rift between the friends. Complicating the feud between the freedmen is a descendent of the planters, who, working as a surveyor, capitalizes on an error in Rufus’s deed of sale, and while securing the cooperation of a descendent of the philanthropist (an allusion to reconciliation between North and South after the Compromise of 1877), attempts to eject Rufus from his land.<sup>43</sup>

Critically, William’s ‘relative superiority’ remains constant from the characters’ ‘hand to mouth’ subsistence to their propertied excess.<sup>44</sup> The philanthropist’s charity, far from distorting the partner’s bond, only brings into greater relief the natural differences between the two men that had been there from the start. After the partners seem to receive an equal footing, we can then only understand economic inequality as reflecting differences of inherent worth and character. Echoing again the greater ‘sacrifice’ on the part of Mr. Ryder (Sam Taylor) in ‘The Wife of His Youth,’

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 254–255.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 254–255.

<sup>41</sup> George W. Cable quoted in W. E. B. Du Bois, ‘The Housing of the Negro: VI. The Southern City Negro of the Better Class,’ *The Southern Workman* 31, no. 2 (February 1902): 65.

<sup>42</sup> Chesnutt, ‘The Partners,’ 255–257.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 254.

'The Partners' concludes with William taking up Rufus's case at his own expense, a man true to his class-marriage bond.<sup>45</sup>

Economic justice, in the story's conclusion, is at the discretion of the 'better classes.'<sup>46</sup> The apparent justness of William's action obscures the fact that the bond is a dead-letter, and the act enshrines the bond's antithesis: the inevitability and benefits of economic difference. His moral and fiscal indebtedness enmeshes Rufus in a bond he can no longer refuse; subjugated by the goodness of his 'partner,' Rufus can only feel power through association. While the influence of Northern speculation and philanthropy seems to interrupt the communal bond of Black America, 'The Partners' internalizes and *justifies* the definite emergence of class difference under that bond's contract. Thus, a middle class process of uplift pretends to be what was there from the very beginning, and the historical moment and the political potential of the statement 'What they makes shall belong to one as much as the other' are forgotten.<sup>47</sup>

### 3. Self-Making across the Section Line in *The Colonel's Dream*

The social and economic inequalities in Chesnut's fiction between uplifted Black working class and the uplifting Black professional class become legible along the section line of the nineteenth-century US in the later novel *The Colonel's Dream*. *The Colonel's Dream* takes the process of class differentiation so evident in 'The Partners' and spatializes it. Flight—individual not communal and urban not rural—ends the novel and is how the middle class separates itself from the working class. Chesnut's last portrayal of the moneyed North's incursions into the recalcitrant South follows Wall Street investor Henry French as he travels back to his old home in the South. Vestiges of his former life when he was known as Colonel French reappear, and his nostalgic visit turns into a concerted effort to stay and impel Clarendon into modernity. French reclaims the abandoned cotton mill, hoping that it will one day ameliorate the deathly practices of the neighboring mill (employing white workers) and the convict-labor farm (driving Black workers) both owned by the once lowly but now wealthy Bill Fetters. French partially realizes late that racial justice must underlie his economic revivalism but fails in all.

The story of a well-intentioned capitalist meeting the morass of Southern white supremacy and, consequently, failing to modernize the region echoes Albion Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* (1879). In that novel, the South's cultural, racial, and economic stagnation results from self-inflicted

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<sup>45</sup> Seeing the bond the professional class fashions with the working-class as 'sacrificial' is Chesnut's own idea. The central text for Eric Sundquist's analysis of Chesnut's abridgment of class difference within the Black community is the short story 'The Wife of my Youth.' Andrea Williams's analysis of that story notes a 1907 letter Chesnut wrote to Celia Parker Wooley, who was adapting the story for the stage and had made changes. Chesnut raised this objection: 'My own idea of dramatizing the story would not have taken the action back to the days of slavery, but would have begun with some preliminary development concerning the relations between Mr. Ryder and Mrs. Dixon, emphasizing the difference between Mr. Ryder and his old wife, and thereby of course enhancing the sacrifice which he made for a principle' Chesnut, 'Celia Parker Wooley, 11 July 1907,' in *An Exemplary Citizen: Letters of Charles W. Chesnut, 1906–1932*, eds. Robert C. Leitz, and Joseph R. McElrath, (Redwood City, CA: Stanford U. P., 2002), 28, quoted in Williams, *Dividing Lines*, 150n6.

<sup>46</sup> The 'better class' and 'dangerous class' were weighted class-conscious terms used within nineteenth-century social discourse, including by African American writers to discuss Black class structure.

<sup>47</sup> Chesnut, 'The Partners,' 254.

wounds.<sup>48</sup> *The Colonel's Dream*, in contrast, answers that Northern industrialism always already feeds the South's systems of racial oppression. The collapse of the sectional division between North and South in the novel's critique resonates with a collapse between antebellum and postbellum to argue that peonage, what Chesnutt calls elsewhere a 'new slavery,' is a sin of national scope and obvious heritage.<sup>49</sup>

Still, if Chesnutt's 'intimate historical compressions,' to borrow Don James McLaughlin's phrase, productively resurrect slavery in the South to damn peonage, they also pay little heed to the intervening political and economic actions of Black agrarians.<sup>50</sup> What came after Reconstruction on a significant scale was not just the isolated rise of a few special individuals capable of self-making under the rigors of free-labor Republican ideology, nor merely the fitful interventions of Northern moneyed-men in a handful of institutions but the continued organization among Black communities for economic justice when and where they stood.

The 'avowed purpose novel' takes place in the 1890s—the apex of Black Populism—and was written 'to expose peonage and the convict lease system'—a central issue for Black Populist activism.<sup>51</sup> Chesnutt rehearses, instead, the same political moment prior to the ascendancy of Black Populism as *The Fool's Errand*, and ultimately the same free-labor Republican ideology. Like Comfort Servosse before him, French keeps his power, money, and standing after the failure to impel Clarendon into free-labor modernity and to outlaw the convict-lease system. The final chapter, though it reads like an epitaph, paradoxically revivifies, in part, this capitalist's project, for 'was not his, after all, the only way?'<sup>52</sup> Referring to the good ends of racial reform the Colonel belatedly adopts—the end to peonage and the convict lease system; the adoption of 'new thought,' 'just laws,' 'orderly administration'; and the spread of education—the passage also delimits the 'way' to those ends as being through men like French.<sup>53</sup> No hint of an agrarian political and

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<sup>48</sup> Francesca Sawaya's analysis of Chesnutt's belief in the radical potential of 'true friendship' as a counter to corporate philanthropy hints at how Chesnutt's social criticism may be enmeshed in and inseparable from his ideas about social discrimination. Sawaya paraphrasing Ivy Schweitzer, historicizes '[t]rue friendship' as an 'elite model of friendship' which 'depends on notions of similitude to figure equality,' but 'nonelites effectively appropriated this model of friendship for politically empowering purposes.' Sawaya, *The Difficult Art of Giving*, 142. The model of 'true friendship' may very well be politically empowering for some. But one does not have to try hard to see the parity between two passages by Chesnutt, the first cited by Sawaya as evidence of Chesnutt's radical use of true friendship: 'for every man at all times equality with those who are no wiser or better than he; fraternity for only with this can equality or true friendship exist.' Charles Chesnutt, 'The Negro's Franchise,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 161–168, quoted in Sawaya, *The Difficult Art of Giving*, 142; and the second, the pivotal passage which Andrea Williams uses to disclose Chesnutt's class politics: 'inspiring friendships, the mental and spiritual stimulus which comes from meeting others of kindred standards of thought and feeling.' Chesnutt, 'Social Discrimination,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 424, quoted in Williams, *Dividing Lines*, 132–133. The discrimination embedded in phrases like 'kindred standards of thought and feeling' or 'those who are no wiser or better' is 'class by another name' according to Williams (133). Briefly then, 'true friendship' requires social equality rather than creates social equality.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Chesnutt, 'Peonage, or the New Slavery,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 206.

<sup>50</sup> Don James McLaughlin, 'Inventing Queer: Portals, Hauntings, and Other Fantastic Tricks in the Collected Folklore of Joel Chandler Harris and Charles Chesnutt,' *American Literature* 89, no. 1 (2017): 3.

<sup>51</sup> Helen M. Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 211.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*. (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1905), 293.

<sup>53</sup> *The Colonel's Dream*, 293–294; Gregory Laski maintains that the novel concludes in a 'politically productive' pessimistic mode and notes that Christine A. Wooley 'mutes Chesnutt's irony' by embracing the ending as optimistic. *Untimely Democracy: The Politics of Progress After Slavery* (New York: Oxford U. P., 2018), 152, 152n51. Setting aside the debate about Chesnutt's optimism or pessimism, while Colonel French is obviously an

economic movement moves the reader's thought into ways other than French's.<sup>54</sup> The novel's survey of the 'heavy-footed Negro or listless 'po' white man,' 'plowing with gaunt mules or stunted steers' paints the South as the everlasting region of poor farming people rather than as a region harboring the potential for agrarian revolt.<sup>55</sup> The 'heavy-footed' and 'listless' working poor do not move, and their politics cannot emerge. Power and the historical record rest in Colonel French.

To the extent that *The Colonel's Dream* obscures the real and historical power of Black agrarians, it suffers in comparison with the other novel about Wall Street's entanglement in the New South, Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), which concludes with a self-sustaining African American rural commune. Thus, through the novel's compression of history, Chesnutt channels power and freedom into the centralizing efforts of metropolitan self-making. It is precisely this solitary escape which *The Quest* revises in favor of a Black Populist-inspired rural community determined and organized to remain.

Already in 1878, Chesnutt had chosen metropolitan self-creation as his own personal narrative: 'I will go to the Metropolis, or some other large city, and like Franklin[,] Greely and many others, there will I stick.'<sup>56</sup> In 1880, pencil in hand, a youthful Chesnutt listened to Frederick Douglass's address in support of James Garfield's presidential bid. He listened and phonographically transcribed, in Pitman's shorthand, Douglass's speech, which included allusions to the 'self-made man' campaign biography crafted by none other than Horatio Alger.<sup>57</sup> Chesnutt noted the speech in a lecture given two years later to a literary society of his pupils at Fayetteville's State Colored Normal School. 'Self-Made Men' (1882) applauds the handful of 'individuals whose mental ability and energy distinguish them from the common herd.'<sup>58</sup> This self-making, laissez-faire individualism, so evident in his Republican politics and his self-reflections, finally impresses itself into Chesnutt's textual denouement of the race problem.

Withering though its critique may be of Northern capitalism's sin in the South, the novel employs the regional divisions of opportunity and freedom that kindle the desire for flight. This sectionalism shapes class difference because the South remains the region most associated with Black agrarianism as well as the Black working-class. The residual sectionalism stages a problematic allocation of movement and violence between the novel's working and professional class representatives. Amidst the white flight which concludes the novel, only a single African American escapes the South—and that only after his expulsion from the tightly knit rural community. The teacher, Henry Taylor, who had hoped to establish an industrial school in Clarendon, works as a Pullman porter when he meets French.<sup>59</sup> His secretive alliance with French to turn in convict-labor escapee Bud Johnson was exposed. Shunned by the African American community, and his school

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object of irony in Chesnutt's novel, what Chesnutt describes as French's 'way' was what Chesnutt advocated for as the 'way' of a more just democracy in essays such as 'Peonage, or the New Slavery.'

<sup>54</sup> This is not to ignore Sawaya's compelling analysis of French's limitations, but Sawaya too reads the end as an evocation of the proper methods of reform. *The Difficult Art of Giving*, 158.

<sup>55</sup> Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 216.

<sup>56</sup> Chesnutt, *Journals*, 106.

<sup>57</sup> See *Raleigh Signal*, 7 October 1880, 2; and *Essays and Speeches*, 40n15.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Chesnutt, 'Self-Made Men,' *Essays and Speeches*, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 292–293.

aborted with the retreat of Northern capital, Taylor travels north 'to find somthin' better.'<sup>60</sup> After the lucky encounter, French ensures Taylor a position in New York 'where his education would give him an opportunity for advancement,' thereby affirming the potential of flight and self-making for the middling class.<sup>61</sup>

The Black rural masses pattern of movement from the late 1870s to 1890 was not, as one might expect, in the same direction or with the same purpose as Taylor's. Black agrarian laborers moved but moved within the rural South, what August Meier details as a migration to some form of land tenancy or even land ownership.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, 'the migration activity,' during the period of *The Colonel's Dream*, 'was correlated with the agricultural unrest associated with the rise of the Farmers' Alliance.'<sup>63</sup> For Meier, 'The principal, if not the entire, impetus for migration came from among the lower classes,' and that movement was 'chiefly southwestern' rather than toward Northern urban areas as would be the hallmark of the Great Migration.<sup>64</sup> Chesnutt, by contrast, considered migration 'en masse,' as in the colonization schemes or the Exoduster movement, to be impractical, favoring instead a gradual, solitary 'dispersion,' notably to the North.<sup>65</sup> Distinct from that of the rural masses, his preference argues for historically identifiable middle-class assumptions about how to make it in the US.

In *The Colonel's Dream*, laborer Bud Johnson's flirtation with escape ends when he returns to Clarendon and ambushes his former overseers. Johnson's circular movement is just one of Chesnutt's several portrayals of a laborer's movement as a closed loop. Lonesome Ben, Po' Sandy, and the ironically named Pilgrim Gainey of 'Appreciation' all either defer escape too long or return to sites of degradation because of an inability to 'appreciate' or fully perceive freedom. At times, they even go so far as to express a desire for 'masters.'<sup>66</sup> Their inability to enact linear flight reifies their social class and thus forever delays their transition to the freedom and mobility of bourgeois individualism. But more than that, the violence of the 'dangerous class' actually enables the middle class alliance across the color line. Like the boundary between North and South that demarcates bourgeois self-making from the circulating morass of Southern race hatred, the agrarian class forms a medium through which the middle-class 'ride out.' As Taylor tells French 'I found that my race was an enemy to me. So I got out, suh, and I came No'th.'<sup>67</sup> The 'herd,' to use Chesnutt's term, is an object of repulsion.<sup>68</sup> Uplift becomes selective. Flight becomes solitary. Chesnutt undermines the line between North and South to inculcate Northern capital in Southern white terrorism only to separate the Black professional class from the Black working class and their respective methods of power and revolt along that same line. Thus, the novel charts the path of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 293. William L. Andrews notes that 'in Chesnutt's earliest plan for *The Marrow of Tradition*, [the escape motif] required Miller's departure for the North,' pointing to both an underlying connection between the novels but also a significant shift. *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State U. P., 1980), 188.

<sup>62</sup> August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 62.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Chesnutt, 'A Multitude of Counselors,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 82.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Chesnutt, 'Appreciation,' in *Short Fiction* 65; Chesnutt, *Conjure Stories*, 17, 57.

<sup>67</sup> Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 292.

<sup>68</sup> Chesnutt, 'Self-Made Men,' 34.

self-making individualism as possessing a futurity that Black working-class mobilization will never have and thereby impresses a sectional boundary on working-class anger.

#### 4. The Dangerous Class: Misreading Power in the Black Populist South

Bound by race, William Miller and Josh Green in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Henry Taylor and Bud Johnson in *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), and then Paul Marchand and the unnamed men who attack Trois Pigeons plantation in *Paul Marchand, F. M. C.* (1921) model the separations defined by class difference. The 'dangerous class' seeks racial vengeance not economic redress, while the 'better class' takes one step more toward becoming the 'future American.' Perhaps, rather than symbolizing the low and the high options for countering racial oppression, Johnson and Taylor and Miller and Green rehearse what John Mac Kilgore potently reads as 'the impossible choice' between 'resistance and assimilationist politics' under capitalism.<sup>69</sup> For Kilgore, 'it is not the burden of African American individuals to unilaterally decide on a course of action in the face of intransigent white domination. Only the displacement of racialized cakewalk capital, where the burden falls, could alleviate the antagonism.'<sup>70</sup> We may infer that reading *The Marrow of Tradition* for Chesnutt's representations of class could lead nowhere because Chesnutt has structured his fiction to present intraracial class divisions as one more consequence of racial capitalism.

To address Kilgore's 'false choice,' I turn to *The Marrow of Tradition*, which has become central to discussions of Chesnutt's class politics and which works harder than any other piece of writing by Chesnutt to ignore Black Populism. The choice between Miller and Green may very well be one that points to the impossibility of Black action without systemic revolution, but that is precisely what was at stake in the fusion governments formed through Black agrarian politics. *The Marrow of Tradition's* sidelining of Black Populism can only be seen by acknowledging that the sociopolitical movement that the white cabal seeks to dismantle—and that Miller and, in an important way, Green seem apart from—is Black agrarian populism.

Chesnutt's home state of North Carolina staged one of the most 'stunning' victories of the People's Party in 1894 and 1896 through 'fusion' with the Republican party.<sup>71</sup> Historian Omar Ali writes: 'North Carolina's fusion constituency, comprising the poorest elements of the population, black and white, with a hodgepodge of business and industrial allies . . . had effectively overthrown the state's Democratic government.'<sup>72</sup> The civil government in Wilmington represented the culmination of decades of activism on the part of professional and working-class African Americans in the South with an important emphasis on Black agrarian labor needs: the abolishment of the convict-lease system, voting reforms so that the masses could use their vote to fight for their economic interests, and a fair wage for agrarian laborers. In other words, Wilmington's fusion government was part of the last potent form of Black agrarian rebellion in response to the collapse of Reconstruction.

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<sup>69</sup> John Mac Kilgore, 'Cakewalk of Capital in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*,' *American Literature* 84, no. 1 (2012): 82.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 82–83.

<sup>71</sup> Ali, *Lion's Mouth*, 139.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

The political and economic demands of Black Populism translate in *The Marrow of Tradition* as the explosive counteraction of armed resistance to the white supremacists' bloody 1898 coup. The representative man of the masses, Josh Green, whom we meet 'covered thickly with dust,' leads a band of Black militia against the rioting whites and finds vengeance in driving a knife into the heart of a former Ku Kluxer, 'Captain' George McBane.<sup>73</sup> Their fatal conflict and the subsequent détente between the representatives of the 'better class'—Miller and Major Carteret—has often been read as the central point upon which Chesnutt splits the crucial question of class in the politics of racial justice and uplift in the novel. I offer a different reading of just how Chesnutt forges bourgeois idealism within his novel of Southern race violence and Black resistance. Instead of reading Green as the sole bearer of working-class ideals, I look outside him and his antagonism with William Miller for the politics of the masses.

In a crucial, much-discussed scene, Miller is forced from a first-class railcar into the segregated section of the train.<sup>74</sup> There, a party of vagrant farm laborers, 'noisy, loquacious, happy, dirty, and malodorous' soon drives him to the platform.<sup>75</sup> He muses:

For the sake of the democratic ideal, which meant so much to his race, he might have endured the affliction. He could easily imagine that people of refinement, with the power in their hands, might be tempted to strain the democratic ideal in order to avoid such contact; but personally, and apart from the mere matter of racial sympathy, these people were just as offensive to him as to the whites in the other end of the train.<sup>76</sup>

Miller misreads who at that historical moment had 'the power in their hands,' who, in fact, were shaping the political movement he lives and works in. It is precisely those transient Black laborers on the train, uncouth and lowly, with nothing on their mind save labor and desire who rewrote for a time the paths to power in the South. Those same laborers whom Miller muses drive others to 'strain' the ideals of democracy were demonstrating the power of protected democracy to shift economic and social power. It is their movement's collapse which costs Miller so much in the end. Chesnutt too hedged away from viewing the agrarian masses of the South as a more important political voice of late nineteenth-century politics. That hedge clearly appears in Chesnutt's powerful essay 'A Multitude of Counselors' (1891)—published in the watershed year the Colored Farmers' Alliance led the Cotton Pickers' Strike—which details the options available to African Americans to seek redress and the final securing of their rights. Scholars have frequently used the essay to analyze Chesnutt's (and Miller's) admiration of Green.<sup>77</sup> Chesnutt memorializes those patriotic individuals who mete blow for blow: 'When the Southern Negro reaches that high conception of liberty that would make him rather die than submit to the lash, when he will meet force with force, there will be an end of Southern outrages.'<sup>78</sup> What goes unnoticed though is the

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), 58.

<sup>74</sup> For readings of this scene as exemplifying Chesnutt's troubling class politics see Walter Benn Michaels, 'Plots against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism,' *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 292; and Warren, *What was African American Literature?*, 108.

<sup>75</sup> Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 60.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>77</sup> See William L. Andrews, *The Literary Career*, 198; Matthew Wilson, *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Jackson, MS: U. P. of Mississippi, 2004), 114.

<sup>78</sup> Chesnutt, 'A Multitude of Counselors,' 82.

skepticism of populist economic combination. Chesnutt invokes the 1889 massacre of Mississippi Farmers' Alliance members as demonstrating the futility of a large race-organization fighting for economic freedom in the face of state-sanctioned white violence.<sup>79</sup> Thus, Chesnutt signals his preference for the capacity for violence within the agrarian masses rather than their representative economic counterpublics.

He further states:

it is not strange that young colored people should leave the South. Their departure will better their own condition, and, after all, the progress of any race is dependent on the advancement of individuals. One Vanderbilt, one Stewart, one Depew, one Edison, one leader in any department of human endeavor, would do more to enlarge the opportunities of colored people than double the same aggregate of wealth, or talent, or labor, scattered among a hundred or a thousand of them.<sup>80</sup>

The fulcrum by which Chesnutt's fiction becomes symptomatic of bourgeois ideology is this economic ideal of metropolitan self-making. The dispensation of political and economic power should condense, according to Chesnutt, into individual action, though that action may have community-minded aims, rather than disperse across the community in the form of action '*en masse*.'<sup>81</sup> Vengeance, like wealth, to better effect racial justice, Chesnutt claims, should be 'aggregated' rather than 'scattered.'

Green's last effort to protect the 'little group of public institutions' used by the African American community, while also revenging himself against McBane, expresses without resolving the narrator's two dictums: 'To die in defense of the right was heroic. To kill another for revenge was pitifully human and weak.'<sup>82</sup> In driving his knife into one of the cabal's chief organizers, Green cannot thus be separated from the retribution of a more personal outrage, even if he is signifying the Black community's resistance. Admittedly, this portrayal of working-class violence can be seen as an acknowledgement in itself of the Black agrarian masses' importance within US race politics. But, at best, the distillation of Black agrarian class politics into the form of violent resistance admirably commits to answer any wrong; at worst, it assumes the form of a blood vengeance and becomes a straw man to the larger organizations and larger objects of Black agrarian revolt.

'In every instance Julius had an axe to grind,' writes Chesnutt in 1931, remembering his famed conjure tale orator.<sup>83</sup> Julius envisioned a greater chance of economic freedom and personal empowerment through grinding his ax daily against those who claimed '[t]here is plenty of room for us all.'<sup>84</sup> Though Chesnutt alludes to an underlying strain of violence between Julius and his employers, Julius voices not only a passionate resentment but also a definitive strategy of economic reparations and movement within seemingly carceral landscapes. Chesnutt's later work

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 82, emphasis in original.

<sup>82</sup> Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 114.

<sup>83</sup> Chesnutt, 'Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem,' 906.

<sup>84</sup> Chesnutt, *Conjure Stories*, 5.

becomes more susceptible to what Williams sees as his 'assent to class distinctions.'<sup>85</sup> By his fiction, Chesnutt ably demolished capitalism's Redemption fabula. He preferred to do so through the performances of solitary self-making rather than class solidarity; instead of power exercised collectively by the laboring poor, his fiction prefers the forms of power exercised by those middle-class leaders who *sacrifice* in some way by their alliance with the laboring poor. From the nadir to a future raceless America, Chesnutt's writing refuses to countenance Black Populism's temporality: its past, its presence, and its potential. Absent the possibility of freedom arising in any place by ensuring the conditions of livelihood, cultural forms of escape under Chesnutt's pen become the imaginative futures of the self-made fortunates. Flight for its own sake then becomes symptomatic of inequality's continuance into a future America, rather than its redress. This study of the class politics that Chesnutt's fiction dramatizes and the mode of middle-class individualism it serves is meant to illustrate the necessity and the primacy to attend to themes of economic justice in our readings. If we ignore the injustice of rich and poor in approaching the question of what 'future American' we imagine and the work we do to identify liberating or carceral narratives, then a politically engaged literary criticism will remain inconsistent when tested or encouraged by the different lines of color and class.

### Author Bio

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<sup>85</sup> Williams, *Dividing Lines*, 133.

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