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"A certain zest to his own enjoyment": Homoerotic Competition, Race, and the Rise of a Southern Middle Class in *The Marrow of Tradition*

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“A certain zest to his own enjoyment”: Homoerotic Competition, Race, and the Rise of a Southern Middle Class in *The Marrow of Tradition*

by

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Dedication

For my parents and Craig.

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Abstract

"A certain zest to his own enjoyment": Homoerotic Competition, Race, and the Rise of a Southern Middle Class in *The Marrow of Tradition*

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This essay contends that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "between men" thesis (1985) provides a particularly apt methodology for engaging *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), a post-bellum novel concerned with the structure of the New South in the United States. While the novel contains myriad "between men" pairs, reading the homosocial bond between Lee Ellis and Tom Delamere has the potential to change the way we think about the novel's interest in the complex relationships among class, social mobility, race, whiteness, and the erotics of power. If "the political and the erotic necessarily obscure and misrepresent each other . . . in ways that offer important and shifting affordances to all parties in historical gender and class struggles," then we can read the Ellis/Tom/Clara

erotic triangle as dramatizing the rise of a white middle class whose professional capital encroaches upon and supersedes the central role of a plantation based aristocracy without significantly challenging either the essential hierarchy of white over black or the bloody lynch law that helps enforce that hierarchy (Sedgwick 15). Sedgwick's broad definition of desire as "the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred, that shapes an important relationship" can usefully be applied to the rivalry between Lee Ellis and Tom Delamere, a rivalry that epitomizes the Girardian theory that "the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle [is] stronger [and] more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved" (Sedgwick 21). An examination of the erotic triangle and the function of the courtship plot enable us to theorize the implications of this expropriation of the aristocrat by the white southern middle class and this ascendant class's role in remaking a whiteness that at the novel's end still reigns supreme.

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"A CERTAIN ZEST TO HIS OWN ENJOYMENT": HOMOEROTIC COMPETITION, RACE, AND THE RISE OF A SOUTHERN MIDDLE CLASS IN *THE MARROW OF TRADITION*

Introduction: The Romantic Triangle

The second chapter of Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) depicts a domestic scene that introduces most of the novel's key white players and the nature of the relationships between them. "The Christening Party," which celebrates the birth of a long-awaited Carteret heir, also becomes the occasion for our initial introduction to the novel's romantic triangle and the rivalry between Lee Ellis and Tom Delamere. Ellis, who is talking with Major Carteret when Tom arrives late to the party, covers the newcomer with a "jealous glance" (477).[1] Because Clara Pemberton, the woman at the center of this male rivalry, has yet to arrive and is only later introduced as a love object, it at first appears that Ellis jealously guards Carteret's attention. Thus, we see that the initial erotic triangle seems to include Carteret as the beloved and Ellis and Tom as rivals. Only when Clara enters the room does the potential homoerotic triangle take shape as a more familiar heterosexual triangle. Yet Ellis's passion for Clara still passes through his feelings for another man, as homosocial bonds remain always implicit within the romantic triangle. Ellis's desire grows along with "his appreciation of Delamere's unworthiness," and his sentimental midnight walks past Clara's window are similarly intensified by the rivalry (541). Ellis wonders, "Who would say that a spice of

[1] Quotations hereafter are taken from *The Marrow of Tradition* in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, and Essays*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2002. 467-718.

jealousy does not add a certain zest to love?" (597). Later in the text, Tom admits to similarly finding affective pleasure in their rivalry: "That he should be giving pain to Ellis added a certain zest to his own enjoyment" (539). That the male-male rivalry adds a desirable and highly piquant quality to both men's courtship of Clara, suggests that the romantic triangle brings sexuality and power into relation. We can read Clara as the conduit through which Ellis and Tom negotiate a homosocial affective bond defined by intense competition.

Despite each man's obvious desire to master the other, critics have failed to consider the ways in which the Lee Ellis/Tom Delamere/Clara Pemberton romantic triangle intersects with the novel's story about Southern race relations. Given that we are led to believe Ellis has triumphed over Tom and will succeed, after the book's ending, in marrying Clara, the romantic triangle also affords a vantage point through which to interpret the novel's vision of the future. Indeed, I will argue that Ellis's romantic victory over Tom is key to the novel's ultimately pessimistic appraisal of Southern race relations. Critical neglect of the erotic triangle becomes more startling when we consider *Marrow's* early attention to its dynamics and the skillful ways in which Chesnutt continues to weave the courtship plot throughout the novel's treatment of Wellington race relations. In other words, we cannot fully grasp the novel's attempts at racial prognostication without approaching the romantic triangle as an integral part of *Marrow*. Tellingly, a substantial one fifth of the novel explicitly concerns itself with the unfolding romantic triangle. If we also consider scenes that have implicit bearing upon the triangle's

outcome and significance, the number of relevant pages within the novel swells to a point where the courtship plot and Wellington race relations must be read together.

Critics have only recently begun to note *The Marrow of Tradition*'s courtship plot. Strikingly, however, Ellis remains absent or marginalized even within these analyses. In *The Color of Sex*, Mason Stokes argues that Chesnutt, by linking masturbation—a ravager of society—to Tom, reroutes sexual threat from the black to white male body (114). Tellingly, his analysis excludes Ellis and instead almost exclusively focuses on Tom's failure to perform an appropriately heterosexual whiteness.[2] Yet what of the rivalry's victor? Surveying the full corpus of Chesnutt criticism reveals that Ellis's function within this romantic triangle has precipitated only two brief treatments. Most recently, Julie Iromuanya concludes her essay, "Passing for What? *The Marrow of Tradition's* Minstrel Critique of the Unlawfulness of Law," with a consideration of Ellis's ability to undergo the effects of whitening, which occurs "through the inheritance of reputation, property" (201). For Iromuanya, winning Clara's affections amounts to Ellis's transcending a difference marked by his non-slaveholding Quaker background. Yet, even as she argues that the novel's racial work is accomplished through Ellis, Iromuanya treats him as an ancillary figure in the novel, Tom's "counterpoint." A second treatment of the courtship plot occurs in Dean McWilliams's

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[2] Stokes chapter title, "Charles Chesnutt and the Masturbating Boy: Onanism, Whiteness, and *The Marrow of Tradition*," is a riff on Sedgwick's "Jane Austin and the Masturbating Girl." See also Matthew Wilson's *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Wilson argues that Tom is feminized throughout and exists in a dialectical relation to the discourse of black degeneracy (136-7). Again, Ellis does not significantly figure in to Wilson's interrogation of whiteness.

Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race. McWilliams cursorily addresses the rivalry between Ellis and Tom as "the novel's fourth plot" and spends a moment considering the rivalry's political implications (163). Identifying the marriage of Clara and Ellis as a union of the old and new, McWilliams concludes that Ellis's triumph "is one of the novel's few rays of hope" (163). McWilliams truncates his potentially productive critical interrogation of Ellis, however, leaving us to ponder exactly what sort of "hope"—and for whom--is "gained in the transition from old to new in the South" (164).

By treating the romantic triangle and Ellis's role within it as vital, rather than ancillary, to the novel's plot, this essay conducts a sustained interrogation of the homosocial bonds we first witness in "The Christening Party." I argue that the romantic triangle has profound political implications and that attending to it reveals that in the New South, as in the Old, racial loyalty trumps the class and professional solidarity that Dr. Miller, and indeed the novel, desperately hopes might act as an antidote to white prejudice. Importantly, racial loyalty wins out for Ellis, who initially seems one of the least racially prejudiced whites in the novel, suggesting that his romantic triumph over Tom, while it might initially seem to extend a hope of cross-color professional alliances, instead crushes it. In attempting to parse through how the courtship plot effectively determines the novel's treatment of Southern racism, this essay utilizes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critical integration of desire and power, a methodology made famous in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. In the twenty-five years since its 1985 publication, Sedgwick's seminal work has been taken up in efforts to

explore homosocial power dynamics in texts ranging from *The Blithedale Romance* to *McTeague* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and, I hold, it can be equally instructive in reading Chesnutt's male characters.[3]

This essay contends that the "between men" thesis provides a particularly apt methodology for engaging *Marrow*, a post-bellum novel concerned with the structure of the New South in the United States. While the novel contains myriad "between men" pairs, reading the homosocial bond between Ellis and Tom has the potential to change the way we think about the novel's interest in the complex relationships among class, social mobility, race, whiteness, and the erotics of power. If "the political and the erotic necessarily obscure and misrepresent each other . . . in ways that offer important and shifting affordances to all parties in historical gender and class struggles," then we can read the Ellis/Tom/Clara erotic triangle as dramatizing the rise of a white middle class whose professional capital encroaches upon and supersedes the central role of a plantation based aristocracy without significantly challenging either the essential hierarchy of white over black or the bloody lynch law that helps enforce that hierarchy (Sedgwick 15). Sedgwick's broad definition of desire as "the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred, that shapes an important

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[3] Coviello, Peter. "The Tenderness of the Beasts: Hawthorne and the American History of Sexuality." University of Texas-Austin. 30 Apr. 2009. See also Denise Cruz, "Reconsidering McTeague's 'Mark" and "Mac': Intersections of U.S. Naturalism, Imperial Masculinities, and Desire Between Men" in *American Literature* 78.1 (2006), pages 487-517 and John P. Anders's "'Something Soft and Wild and Free': Willa Cather's Sexual Politics," in *Cather Studies*, 4 (1999), pages 244-63. In the book's "Coda," Sedgwick introduces the possibility of applying the "between men" thesis to American literature, even as she explores Walt Whitman not "as he writes in America, but as he is read in England" (202).

relationship" can usefully be applied to the rivalry between Lee Ellis and Tom Delamere, a rivalry that epitomizes the Girardian theory that "the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle [is] stronger [and] more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved" (Sedgwick 21). An examination of the erotic triangle and the function of the courtship plot enable us to theorize the implications of this expropriation of the aristocrat by the white southern middle class and this ascendant class's role in remaking a whiteness that at the novel's end still reigns supreme.

The Southern Middle Class

While the structure of the Old South economy readily brings to mind a bifurcated class system comprised of planters and slaves, most historians consider the era of the New South as the period during which an emergent commercial and professional middle class solidified. Eugene Genovese's *The Economy of Slavery* details how slavery bound the interests of a nascent antebellum bourgeois class to the interests of the planter. Consequently, the Old South is often characterized as premodern with appropriately truncated class divisions. Historical studies such as C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913,* narrate the postbellum period, and especially the post-Reconstruction era, as the decay and decline of southern aristocracy and the subsequent ascendency of a middle class.[4]

Thus, at a time when Americans, and particularly Southerners, were deeply aware of the class structures dividing them, Ellis is easily coded as middle class within the novel

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[4] Woodward claims that the antebellum planter class did not maintain significant cultural, political, and economic power after the war. By the 1870s, the post-reconstruction "Redeemers" of the South "were of middle-class, industrial, capitalistic outlook, with little but a nominal connection to the old planter regime" (20). I am aware that a significant number of studies since the 1970s have argued against this contention, citing evidence of persistence among the planter class from 1850-1880. Whether or not we can assign a discreet date to the final decline of the planter class is less germane to my argument and Chesnutt's novel. Historians generally agree that a significant shift in power occurred between the old aristocracy and the middle class in the post-bellum era. As even Woodward notes, his argument does not preclude those southern Redeemers who strongly associated their "point of view and leadership with the ante-bellum order" (20). See also Stuart M. Blumin's *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City 1760-1900.* Though his study primarily focuses on northeastern cities, Blumin nonetheless firmly positions middle-class emergence in the postbellum decades: "A middle class was *not* fully formed before the war, and developments of the postwar period . . . contributed to further articulation of the American middle class" (13).

and set apart from Belmont, Carteret, and Old Mr. Delamere.[5] This difference is clearest when Jerry, one of Major Carteret's African American servants, makes the very class distinction that critics have often failed to note:

> Mr. Ellis was a young man, whose Quaker father had never owned any slaves, and he could not be expected to have as much pride as one of the best "quality," whose families had possessed land and negroes for time out of mind. On the whole, Jerry preferred the careless nod of the editor-in-chief to the more familiar greeting of the subaltern. (488)

Jerry's astute articulation of white class structures, structures from which he is excluded, suggests that these distinctions are firmly entrenched within the South's postbellum culture. Whether or not one's family owned slaves clearly remains a key means of class division even after Emancipation.[6] Thus, while Ellis, whose father did not own slaves, belongs to the respectable Clarendon Club and rubs elbows with the elite, he is distinguished from Wellington's "best quality" and instead occupies the cultural space of the white middle-class. According to Howard N. Rabinowitz in *The First New South:*

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5 As is true of most *Marrow* criticism, Stokes incorrectly identifies Carteret as middle class, failing to nuance this class assignment by considering former land and slave ownership (128).

6 This distinction is detailed in Sven Beckert's "Propertied of a Different Kind," page 287. We might also consider Carteret, a member of "one of the oldest and proudest" families in the state, to be a prime example of Woodward's post-Reconstruction "Redeemers" (*Marrow* 467). Although he invests in the local cotton mill and founds the *Morning Chronicle*, Carteret's point of view as the editor and publisher of the newspaper and his leadership within Wellington is heavily associated with antebellum structures of power (*Marrow* 488, 467). Still, the aristocratic Carteret knows better how to retrofit himself for a post-slavery economy than, for instance, Old Mr. Delamere.

1865-1920, the habit of networking with and maintaining proximity to the aristocratic class actually marked the middle-class southerner. Frequently, the middle class was also related to the elite by marriage, a detail that resonates with the novel's courtship plot and Ellis's role within it (165).

Yet it is not just from Carteret that Ellis is distinguished. Ellis's middle class respectability also emphatically contrasts with the derision *Marrow* reserves for the upwardly mobile Captain George McBane. Significantly, neither the novel nor the people of Wellington consider all upwardly mobile whites created equal. Unlike Ellis's non-slaveholding, Quaker family, McBane's forefathers "had done the dirty work of slavery," his father an overseer before him (491). "Sprung from the poor-white class, to which, even more than to the slaves, the abolition of slavery had opened the door of opportunity," McBane is marked by "questionable political services" and "a contract with the State for its convict labor," both jobs "for which men of gentler breeding did not care" (491). When we first meet McBane, he is rich enough to desire even greater wealth, political office, and social recognition, ambitions that find him allied with General Belmont and Major Carteret despite the disdain they often feel towards him. Whereas the preeminent figures of Wellington respect Ellis, Jerry and Carteret essentially agree on McBane's general make up. Jerry deems him "nothin' but po' w'ite trash nohow" and "no gentleman" (492, 494). Carteret finds that McBane "grat[es] upon his aristocratic susceptibilities. The captain is an "upstart," an "illiterate and vulgar white man of no ancestry" with whom it is distasteful to "rub elbows" (533). Clearly a figure for our disdain, McBane uses the word "nigger" when his politer company uses "niggro"

or “negro” and is frequently observed with several buttons of his vest undone and a solitaire diamond blazing “in his soiled shirt-front like the headlight of a locomotive” (493, 506).

While the novel marks McBane as “poor white trash,” unconvincingly masquerading behind accumulated riches, Ellis best epitomizes how Chesnutt envisions the professional middle class and what exactly is at stake in the erotic triangle’s homosocial power brokering. Certainly one cannot imagine Ellis frequenting the selective Clarendon Club with a tobacco stain on his shirt, and McBane’s “square-cut jaw, his coarse, firm mouth” are offset with the narrator’s description of Ellis as “a tall, loose-limbed young man, with a slightly freckled face, hair verging on auburn, a firm chin, and honest gray eyes” (506, 476). To go along with his honest eyes, Ellis is, as we’ve already noted, an untarnished “young man, whose Quaker father had never owned any slaves” (488). He is thrifty, a trait attributed to his Scottish ancestry, and attuned to financial details. He has “never had so much money that he could lose track of it” (541). As the young city editor for Carteret’s newspaper, Ellis is the unpropertied southern middle-class professional in whom we see all of the productive qualities of his class.

The narrator initially portrays him so positively that Ellis’s own negative portrayal of Tom is more shocking for the contrast. His bitter appraisal reflects not only the evaluations of a rival but also the desperation of a postbellum southern middle class eager to move beyond what they perceived as a backwards attachment to an exclusively agricultural economy. This rejection of the continuing influence of the aristocratic

planter partly helped facilitate a transition from the Old South to the New.[7] In the decades following the Civil War, the southern middle class often took up as their own Northern criticisms of the planter class. Such criticism emphasized the importance of pious ambition as a basis for personal and national progress; the need for formal, values-based education; and the respectability of living calm, orderly, temperate, and purposeful lives.[8]

When Ellis judges him based on these staunchly middle-class criticisms, Tom falls short. The narrator informs us that Ellis is "an excellent judge of character." Thus imbued with a measure of authority, Ellis describes Tom as "a type of degenerate aristocrat" (539). The slender, perfectly contoured, dark, and fashionable aristocrat of medium height has small hands and feet and is the handsomest young man in town. But, as the narrator explains, "no discriminating observer would have characterized his beauty as manly. It conveyed no impression of strength, but did possess a certain element, feline rather than feminine, which subtly negatived the idea of manliness" (478). This feline quality, associated with femininity in the Western literary canon, suggests a slyness or cunning that is itself unmanly.[9] Unlike his rival, Tom is careless about money matters, frequently borrowing sums he never intends to repay. Ellis bitterly reflects that it "is the

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7 See Jonathan Daniel Wells's *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class*, esp., pages 235-236.

8 James Marten's "Bringing Up Yankees: The Civil War and Moral Education of Middle-Class Children" in *The Middling Sorts*, page 87.

9 Stokes similarly notes the ways in which Chesnutt calls Tom's masculinity into question at every turn so that he becomes "a sexually degenerate and dissipated remnant of white aristocracy" (109).

prerogative of aristocracy . . . to live upon others, and the last privilege which aristocracy in decay would willingly relinquish" (541). Throughout the novel, Tom's activities further link "an aristocracy in decay" with the perverse and the decadent as he dresses in blackface in order to participate in cakewalks, theft, and murder. Thus, while Stokes and Wilson argue that a degenerate Tom performs blackness, the novel also suggests he performs femininity in falling short of the middle class values that Ellis represents.

Not only does *Marrow* place Tom in opposition to the productive values of a middle-class Ellis, but it also positions him in a stark decline from the cultural and moral heights represented by Old Mr. Delamere: "If, as [Ellis] had often heard, it often took three or four generations to make a gentleman, and as many more to complete the curve and return to the base from which it started, Tom Delamere belonged somewhere on the downward slant, with large possibilities of further decline" (540). Echoing the criticism of many of his northern counterparts, Ellis sees Tom, as a "shadow without substance" and an "empty husk without grain" (540).[10] Though he can be well mannered and charming, Tom lacks the courage and strength he ostensibly claims by tracing his lineage to English cavaliers. Significantly, "cavalier" is itself a racial term employed by Southerners to justify secession. By virtue of their superior aristocratic, chivalric, and pure Norman racial inheritance, the South believed it would win the war (Watson 18). Thus, Tom is both a degenerate aristocrat and racial type. Ellis's proof of his hypocrisy lies in choice recollections such as the time he saw Tom "turn pale with fright and spring

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10 According to Marten, Northerners saw southern planters as all charm and no substance (88).

from a buggy to which was harnessed a fractious horse, which a Negro stable-boy drove fearlessly" (540). This "carpet-knight" is only valiant in parlor exercises like whist, euchre, impersonations, and cakewalks. Perhaps worse still, Ellis has witnessed Tom's cruelty, "seen him kick an inoffensive Negro out of his path and treat a poor-white man with scant courtesy" (540). As far as Ellis is concerned, this behavior smacks of hypocrisy.

Old Mr. Delamere contrasts markedly with his grandson and is, for Ellis, the sort "who might be taken as the apex of an ideal aristocratic development" by distinguishing himself through "courage and strength of will, courtliness of bearing, deference to his superiors, of whom there had been few, courtesy to his equals, kindness and consideration for those less highly favored, and above all, a scrupulous sense of honor" (540). He is the kindly plantation owner somehow untainted by his former role within the institution of slavery. Indeed, there is not a man in the text who does not esteem Mr. Delamere, including Dr. Miller. When Carteret says with perfect sincerity that Mr. Delamere is "an ideal gentleman from an ideal time," the focus on his ideality invites us to read Carteret's sentiments critically rather than literally, invites us, that is, to examine how class ideology is mobilized through the idealized pastness that Old Mr. Delamere represents (630). In other words, the "ideal" exists only on a conceptual and imaginary level, so that Old Mr. Delamere represents Carteret's highest conception of the paternal slave owner "from a past which he himself so much admired and regretted" (630). While Todd McGowan reads the novel as nostalgic for the aristocratic slaveholder's subject position and agency, these moments instead reveal the machinations of a class ideology

that idealizes the outdated modes of the earlier feudal, aristocratic system through the figure of Mr. Delamere only to foreground a newer system that undermines the original basis of those very values. The idealized and paternal plantation owner is so easily taken up as a cultural ideal and used by the novel's postbellum white classes precisely because it never existed to begin with but, rather, functions as a retroactive means of comparison. Old Mr. Delamere thus serves as an anachronism in a New South. He has "outlasted his epoch" and dies along with his shattered illusions about Tom's character (628).[11]

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[11] Wilson argues that Old Mr. Delamere is the best of the Old South and a character that would have been familiar to Chesnutt. Plantation fiction, popular at this time, was replete with such paternal figures (131).

The Erotic Triangle: Professional Competencies as Capital

With the traits of the middle class already privileged within the text, we can begin to identify how the erotic operates as a signifier for power relations in its intimate and shifting relations to class. If we take seriously the relationship between desire and power, then the Ellis/Tom/Clara erotic heterosexual triangle is about more than the love of a good woman. Thus, the "jealous glance" at the christening party not only establishes a homosocial rivalry for Carteret's attention but also links that rivalry with the novel's positioning of courtship within the larger realm of economy and exchange. As the guardian of Clara's inheritance and a kind of surrogate father, it is Carteret, rather than the lady, whom the rivals must woo. Tom is well aware that he cannot "afford hard words with Clara's guardian and his grandfather's friend" (538). Because his and Clara's prospective marriage is figured as an "alliance" between two fine old families, he stands to lose much if he angers either gentleman (538). Clara's wealth and connections make her a desirable prospect for Tom. This emphasis on marriage as a monetary and political alliance renders Clara's singular beauty a secondary consideration (538).

Marrow's foregrounding of money and family before love reveals that a consolidation of political power is at stake.[12] Initially, Ellis finds himself seriously disadvantaged on account of both money and power. Unlike his rival, he can't even afford the smile with which Clara greets Tom, one for which "Ellis would have given all

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[12] McWilliams similarly notes, "This rivalry is important for the novel's political implications, for Clara will inherit wealth and social position. The man who shares her wealth and status will be able to decisively shape Wellington's future for good or for ill" (163).

that he possessed, --not a great deal, it is true, but what could a man do more?" (478). As Olivia Carteret notes, Ellis has "neither the family nor the means to make him a suitable match for the major's sister" (574).

Yet I argue that Ellis's knowledge and tact come to constitute a different form of capital, and because the novel repeatedly distinguishes Ellis through his attainment and objective use of knowledge, we are invited to read him as exemplifying the rising southern professional class. As Samuel Haber discusses in his study, *The Quest for Authority and Honor in the American Professions, 1750-1900*, professions rose to new prominence in the last decades of the nineteenth century by achieving a measure self-regard and self-definition (xiii). Ellis is city editor at a time when journalism becomes a more highly esteemed profession. Historian Michael Schudson attributes the late-nineteenth-century journalist's increasing cultural importance to newspapers becoming a more profitable, widely circulated vehicle for advertising (150). The newspaper's rising status was accompanied by a concurrent institutionalization of the profession; the nation saw its first journalism textbooks in the 1880s (150).[13]

Of course, newspapers of the 1880s were not the newspapers of today, and the contents of the *Morning Chronicle* don't readily bring to mind the tact and knowledge that I argue Ellis exemplifies. The openly partisan *Chronicle*, "the acknowledged organ" of the State's Democratic party, is reminiscent of early nineteenth-century newspapers, which, according to Michael Robertson, existed to "promote the viewpoint of a political

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[13] In addition, clubs established in larger cities were some of "the first institutionalized signs that journalism was become a self-conscious occupational group" (150).

party or faction" (2). As we see in chapter three, "The Editor at Work," Carteret indeed pens many of his editorials in hopes that they will help return the Democratic Party to power (489). But while it is possible to read the *Chronicle* as an anachronism, an early-nineteenth-century throwback that evidences the South's arrested development when contrasted with the print culture of the rest of the nation, this openly *partisan* newspaper also functions similarly to the openly *political* journalism of the 1880s and 1890s. Channeling William Randolph Hearst's "journalism that acts" (Roggenkamp 90), one Carteret editorial narrates Mrs. Ochiltree's murder and seeks to provoke the newspaper's readers to react: "If an outraged people, justly infuriated, and impatient of the slow processes of the courts, should assert their inherent sovereignty . . . it would serve as a warning and an example to the vicious elements of the community" (608).[14] Carteret utilizes Hearst's highly sensational model of reporting, a practice best epitomized by "yellow journalism," which helped propel the U.S. into an 1898 war with Spain (Roggenkamp 91). He writes the post-murder editorial with a cast of recognizably melodramatic characters: "a poor defenseless lady" and "a brute in the lowest human form" (608).[15] By insinuating that an African American man may have violated the pure,

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[14] In *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers and Fiction*, Karen Roggenkamp details how Hearst's *Journal* furthered the concept of "journalism that acts" through his intense rivalry with Pulitzer (90). As a practitioner of "new journalism," Hearst sought to motivate readers "by narrating the facts of the case within a literary frame" (91).

[15] During the height of "yellow journalism," Hearst famously used the lady/brute generic form. According to Roggenkamp, "as the United States inched toward conflict with Spain over colonial control of Cuba, [the Evangeline Cisneros story] served as a rallying point for Americans intent on war" (91). While Cisneros was imprisoned in Cuba for

white Mrs. Ochiltree, Carteret uses a familiar and potent rape narrative to elicit a desired reaction. Clearly, his editorial strikes a chord, and nearly all of white Wellington turns out to hang the accused man, Sandy.[16] As both editor and publisher, Carteret determines the tone and point-of-view of the paper, which city editors and reporters like Ellis must presumably observe.[17]

Yet when Ellis is left in charge, the *Morning Chronicle* becomes an altogether different publication. That Ellis's editorials are argued along the lines of law and reason suggests that he anticipates a professional emphasis on objectivity that would only come to its full fruition in the 1920s (Schudson 151). As Schudson details in *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*, an emphasis on journalistic objectivity insists that "one can and should separate facts from values. Facts, in this view, are assertions about the world open to independent validation. They stand beyond the distorting influences of any individual's personal preferences. Values, in this view, are an individual's conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be" (5). Even Ellis's editorials, an opinion-based genre, argue against lynching based on the facts of law and "time-honored methods of establishing guilt" (632). His columns, notably lacking the sensationalist component so palpable in Carteret's work, rely on the law as

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conspiracy, Hearst "concocted an emotionally laden version of the story for his rapt readers: suggesting that Cisneros was held captive because she chastely refused the advances of a Spanish guard" (90).

[16] The newspaper similarly convinces the town to act when it incites a race riot by reprinting an article from the African American newspaper along with "Carteret's inflammatory comments" (657).

[17] According to Schudson, reporters remained under the thumb of editors and "were well aware of the tone their publishers wanted the papers to have" (150).

objective fact, as that which *is*. Rather than encouraging the public to act, Ellis tries to curb unlawful reaction.

As Ellis cultivates the objective professional eye, it is also his "position as a newspaper man [that keeps] him in touch with what [is] going on about town" and further elevates his status within the novel (540). Ellis's dual roles as city editor and reporter place him in an ideal position to know Tom's habits. They also account for the fact that multiple characters believe him, as the novel's designated truth-teller, to be responsible for exposing Tom's indiscretions. While the misconception that Ellis has revealed Tom's bad behavior initially incurs Clara's anger, the status of knowledge as capital means that this misunderstanding contributes to the power Ellis gradually attains. It is Mrs. Ochiltree who precipitates our clearer understanding of knowledge's status within the novel when she turns to Ellis for confirmation of Tom's purported hard drinking and scandalous gambling. She contends that he alone can decide for her if there is "any truth in the story" (541). She approaches him because she "know[s] that [he] wouldn't lie" and, unlike Sandy, the Delameres' faithful servant, he has no obvious reason to protect Tom (542). Although Ellis refuses to confirm or deny the rumors, Mrs. Ochiltree finds her suspicions corporeally confirmed: "You are a very open young man, Mr. Ellis, and I can read you like a book. You are much smarter than you look, but you can't fool me" (542). By virtue of his continual contrast with Tom's hypocritical cunning, the novel figures Ellis's wielding of knowledge as an embodied honesty uniquely belonging to the professional middle class.

This exchange, reported with plenty of smug satisfaction on the part of Mrs. Ochiltree, opens Clara's eye to the nature of Ellis's attachment and gives him a newly elevated status within the romantic triangle. It puts a "different face upon his conduct," so that his looks, sighs, and enigmatical remarks to her are imbued with new meaning (543). Because Ellis "left the inference to be drawn" concerning Tom's behavior, Clara reads this action in light of the rivalry of which she now suspects him, which makes her feel that she can no longer refuse to "[take] his attentions seriously" (543). Clara's subsequent anger and studied indifference only prove to Ellis that he is perpetually on her mind, and he reasons, "the next best thing . . . to having a woman love you, is to have her dislike you violently, --the main point is that you should be kept in mind, and made the subject of strong emotions" (576). Through the erotic triangle's homosocial tensions, knowledge and its dissemination are revealed as the source of both Ellis's burgeoning class power and his romantic potency. He is certainly in no hurry to disabuse the ill-informed Clara, and is satisfied instead with "the compensating glow of martyrdom" and recognition as a rival (577). By refusing to enlighten Clara and actively defend himself, Ellis ensures that he continues as "the subject of strong emotions" and will prove to best advantage when Clara realizes the true extent of Tom's bad behavior.

Ellis's professional competencies prove similarly potent when Carteret warns Tom off the cards and liquor. Tom suspects that Ellis is the source of Carteret's information, a suspicion that profoundly disrupts his sense of security as he realizes he may have underestimated his rival's chances of success, as well as the extent and nature of his rival's arsenal. Although Tom once enjoyed the idea of Ellis sitting "around

sighing for the unattainable" as the feminized suitor, he now feels unsettled by the leverage of Ellis's knowledge (539). Suddenly, Tom finds that a difference in knowledge amounts to a difference in power. Together with the "cleverness and tact" that makes Carteret enjoy Ellis's company, knowledge becomes a signifier of membership and mobility, causing both Tom and Clara to finally view Ellis as a serious rival (574).

The implications of his thoroughly cultivated professional skills extend beyond the triangle itself, as they seemingly enable him to see and judge all things. For instance, Ellis is the only observer who notices something strange about the conspicuously dressed and "grotesque contortions" of a particular cakewalk performer (558). Even the other African American dancers fail to observe this performer's oddity and exaggerated movements. Ellis also witnesses Mrs. Ochiltree's murderer under a streetlamp, and, burdened by his "personal responsibility," relives that moment over and over until he realizes "with a thrill of horror" that Tom, in blackface, impersonated Sandy in both instances (633). Ellis is shown to indeed be that "excellent judge of character," the powers of observation and objectivity cultivated in his profession as a newspaper man enabling him to realize the truth despite the racial bias that leads the rest of the town automatically to assume Sandy's guilt (539). With all of his professional competencies, this newspaperman is perceptive. Ellis fingers a white man for the crime, the same white man whose character he so assiduously judged by observing flashes of cruelty, dishonor, and cowardice. That Ellis is more interested in the truth than in making a political statement through lynching presents him in the guise of the apolitical and, thus,

authoritative and honorable professional with a gift of unbiased perception that is not unlike the diagnostic abilities of both Dr. Burns and Dr. Miller.[18]

Distinct from the cunning so essential to Tom's character, Ellis's cleverness is coupled with tact and a level of emotional distance. The weight of "personal responsibility" rather than jealousy spurs his conclusions, and even when he realizes the man beneath the lamppost was actually Tom, he never considers using this knowledge to his advantage. Ellis wants to stop Sandy's unjust lynching, but he is still concerned about a lack of proof to support his theory (633). He does not want to make any unwarranted accusations or bring shame upon two of Wellington's most respected families. Thus, Ellis participates only in the sanctioned use of this knowledge, and, instead of immediately denouncing Tom Delamere as the murderer, he appropriately confides in the consummate southern patriarch, Old Mr. Delamere.

Ellis's apparent neutrality is a key component of the romantic rivalry, which is often figured as a card game in which the homosocial bond is one of mastery and subordination. Unsurprisingly, the two men engage in pivotally different game strategy. In the chapter, "Delamere Takes a Trump," Tom attempts to solidify his standing by convincing Clara to hasten their marriage. In "Ellis Take a Trick," Clara gives Ellis her hand, doing so in full view of his jealous rival. While Tom is almost always engaged in a literal card game and actively attempts to secure Clara from his rival, Ellis takes his tricks by withdrawing from the role of rival within the active register. His plan is essentially a

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[18] According to Haber, apolitical connotations were key to the prestige of nineteenth-century professionals (205).

passive one: “Many things might happen in a year, especially to a man like Tom Delamere. If, for any reason Delamere lost his chance, Ellis meant to be next in the field” (541). By refusing to use his unsettling knowledge actively to destroy Tom’s standing within the Carteret family, Ellis controls the homosocial at a higher cognitive level. He merely has to witness and record Tom’s self-destruction while maintaining the appearance of relative neutrality. The novel thus privileges Ellis’s passive and understated participation in the figurative card game between romantic rivals over Tom’s penchant for active manipulation and literal card play.

In fact, Ellis’s figurative card play precipitates Tom’s fateful trip to the St. James Hotel, the initial scene of his undoing. On the night they return from the Sound, Clara gives Ellis her hand because she is angry over Tom’s late arrival. Consequently, Tom feels “somewhat out of sorts as the combined results of his afternoon’s debauchery and the snubbing he had received at Clara’s hands” (586). It appears that Ellis has truly taken a trick and the upper hand simply by being “next in the field” when Tom messes up (541). Tom hopes playing cards at the St. James Hotel will provide a few hours of distraction. Instead, however, Tom loses a large sum of money to Captain McBane, who acts as a surrogate for Ellis during literal card play. Taking advantage of Tom’s emotional distress and love of gambling, McBane instigates a homosocial rivalry characterized by compulsion and intensely volatile mastery. While the “presumption of this son of an overseer and ex-driver of convicts” renders Tom effectively impotent, Ellis ultimately reaps the benefits of his subordination (586). McBane’s overly volatile, and sometimes violent, means of mastering other men leads to his death during the race riot.

He'll enjoy no class ascendency in a post-riot Wellington but effectively helps secure it for Ellis.

Caught in a rapid downward spiral, Tom's desperate desire for money with which to pay off Captain McBane precipitates his exposure as a cheater during a quasi-sting operation, proving once again that this young aristocrat is unable to navigate and dominate Wellington's homosocial networks. Tom's final, emphatic undoing is another occasion for the narrator to emasculate the aristocrat: Tom's fall resembles "a well-bred woman who has started on the downward path, --the pace is all the swifter because of the distance which must be traversed to the bottom" (592). Forced to quietly resign from the Clarendon Club and ordered to repay $1500 in debt, Tom shockingly perpetrates the robbery and murder for which Ellis will later finger him.

The Companionate Marriage and the Rise of the Middle Class

The spectacle of Clara narrowly avoiding a ruinous marriage to Tom is just the right lubricant for adjusting the differentials of power between the aristocracy and the rising middle class. In Ellis's triumph over Tom, we also witness a movement away from the aristocratic and more explicitly patriarchal model of marriage and towards the middle-class ideology of the companionate marriage. As suggested by Clara's betrothal almost from birth, Southern guardians still had considerable control over the choice of spouse, and family and property were primary motivations in the aristocratic union.[19] The "alliance" Carteret desires between his family and the Delameres is figured as an archaic contract based on the needs and traditions of larger kinship groups, rather than on the bonds of love (538). Fittingly, Tom can only love Clara "as well as he could love anything of which he seemed sure," which is to say, not well at all (538).

Tom's dispassionate attentions reflect, as Nancy Armstrong details in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, the middle-class insistence that affection and economic motives could not coexist; neither fortune nor birth should be the primary motivations in marrying. Considered by middle-class ideology to be the only kind of "legitimate monogamy," the companionate marriage thus criticized the traditional "marriage of convenience" (129). Within the tenets of companionate marriage, domestic order was no longer seen as contingent upon one's relative socioeconomic position but on

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[19] Laurence Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, page 392. In Chesnutt's South, this is particularly true for descendent of the aristocratic planter class. Notably, the novel's resident professionals, such as Ellis and Dr. Miller, choose their wives.

the moral qualities of one's mind (130).[20] By these standards, Ellis is perfectly suited to play the role of "husband," and despite his good blood, Tom has become decidedly disqualified in a dramatic destabilization of the aristocratic privilege initially encountered in the novel. Ellis's objective use of knowledge and his tact are the "means" that now actually "make him a suitable match for the major's sister" (574).

Because companionate marriage was based mainly on temperamental compatibility and active love from its participants,[21] we must gloss the pivotal moment in which Clara appears as an active agent. We find out after the fact, via the narrator, that Clara returned to the Sound to seek the truth about Tom's whereabouts and activities on the day of their visit. On her solo return trip, Clara interviews the hotel staff and thus comes to an independent conclusion regarding both the honorable motivations and deftness with which Ellis acted. In a subsequent note, she asks Ellis to "call that evening and receive the writer's thanks" for his noble actions in concealing the horrid truth about her drunken betrothed (690). In this singular moment, Clara actively seeks out the truth and solicits Ellis's presence whereas earlier it had been passively "enjoyed in a friendly way" (543).[22] As companionate marriage comes to replace the aristocratic marriage,

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[20] While both Armstrong and Stone examine the history of the companionate marriage within British literature and culture, respectively, they are nonetheless vital and applicable resources for the ways in which they link the companionate marriage to the rise of the middle class in America.

[21] Stone, page 392.

[22] Lest it seem like Clara has too much agency to be trafficked between men in the Gayle Rubin/Sedgwick meaning of the term, Clara's agency is limited to saying "yes" to one of these men. Based on this final missive, we aren't given reason to believe that "no" is in her vocabulary.

guardians seem to lack relevancy, and property is no longer a legitimate basis for marriage. Rather, Ellis's middle-class version of inner nobility and his discrete ability to know when and how to use the knowledge of which he is so often a locus are decided attractions, especially in light of Clara's narrow escape from the matrimonial ruin sure to follow her marriage to Tom.

Armstrong argues that companionate marriage was key to the "rise" of the middle class; *Marrow* dramatizes this class ascendency through its resolution of the Ellis/Tom/Clara erotic triangle. After the full extent of Tom's indiscretions becomes widely known, he can never again approach Clara as a lover. In fact, the degenerate aristocrat is so thoroughly disgraced that he must leave Wellington for several months due to his intense unpopularity. If, as Sedgwick argues, sexuality acts as a signifier of political power, then Ellis's romantic triumph positions him, and the professional middle class he represents, as the primary arbiter of such power. When his rival is thrown over, Ellis is afforded a sense of security once attributed to Tom; as a result, he doesn't need to immediately begin actively making love to Clara. Ellis's romantic triumph effectively renders his power and class ascension already complete, a fact made particularly salient with the absence of an actual marriage, which might otherwise seem like a significant omission within a courtship plot.[23] Certainly the text indicates that nuptials will occur: "He murmured fervently, taking both her trembling hands in his own broad palms, where they rested with a surrendering trustfulness which he has never since had occasion to doubt" (705). The absence of doubt in the couple's final scene reflects the extent to

[23] Consider, for example Jane Austen's *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

which Ellis's power does not rely upon spectacles such as the cakewalk, riots, lynchings, and even wedding ceremonies but instead on quiet knowledge and confidence.

In fact, Ellis's brand of recessive power is so effective that it even determines how the narrative speaks about the ascendant middle class. *Marrow* spends a considerable amount of time talking about the rise of a distasteful, poor white class, yet doesn't explicitly theorize at all about the professional middle class. In order to focus on Ellis's role in the novel, such textual silence requires us to self-consciously redirect our gaze from the novel's more spectacular events and more obviously interesting characters. Part of Ellis's power resides in successfully negotiating homosocial power relations without calling even the narrator's attention to that very fact. Critics have consequently followed the narrator's lead by not devoting ample critical space to Ellis, but if we look at his role in the narrative and his probable future, Ellis becomes pivotal rather than ancillary to the novel's treatment of class and race relations in the New South.

By virtue of his imminent marriage and the novel's numerous intimations that his role at the newspaper will continue to increase, Ellis's class ascension is effectively complete.[24] Through the disgrace of Tom Delamere, the death of old Mr. Delamere, and the perpetually and precariously ill Carteret progeny, Dodie, *Marrow* witnesses the rise of a middle class whose professional capital encroaches upon and supersedes the central role of a plantation-based aristocracy. Because the novel is so invested in envisioning the contours of a future Wellington, and progeny is always an occasion for thinking about

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[24] As the novel opens, Ellis is already one of Carteret's "intimate friends" (475). He is also left in charge of the newspaper and is permitted to write anti-lynching editorials during Carteret's absence (632).

posterity, Dodie's health crises, the most significant of which remains unresolved at the novel's end, suggests the implausibility of Carteret's only son ever acting as the manipulator of signs, capital, and influences in the New South. *Marrow* clears cultural space for Ellis through the death, discrediting, sickness, and infertility of its aristocratic characters. McBane's long-fated death by Josh's hand similarly forecloses the possibilities available to the upwardly mobile class of "poor white trash." As a member of the ascendant professional middle-class and the man most likely to someday take over the *Morning Chronicle*, Ellis-as-heir will assume both Clara's inheritance and Carteret's newspaper legacy.

Whiteness, Racism, and the Ascendant Middle Class

A Sedgwickian reading for the sake of a Sedgwickian reading isn't particularly useful. In answering the "so what?" question rightly begged of a "between men" reading, we must consider the ways in which the courtship plot is inextricably linked to the novel's treatment of racism in the New South, which culminates in the novel's climatic event: a race riot based on the historical election day riots in Wilmington, North Carolina on November 10, 1898.[25] I argue that, when considered together, the erotic triangle and the shift of cultural power from the southern aristocracy to the nascent middle class effectively determine *Marrow*'s pessimistic conclusions concerning the future of race relations in the South.

In fact, *Marrow* is deeply concerned with whether or not Ellis's class ascension signals the possibility of the best people of each race coming together to form an alliance based on the sensibilities of a professional middle class. This is a hope most clearly articulated by one of the novel's mixed race middle-class professionals, Dr. Miller.[26] He

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[25] See Nancy Bentley and Sandra Gunning's Bedford introduction and Brodhead's Chesnutt chapter in *Cultures of Letters* for additional historical and background information.

[26] In "Charles Chesnutt's Dilemma: Professional Ethics, Social Justice, and Domestic Feminism in *The Marrow of Tradition*," Susan Danielson argues that the social promise of a new professional class proves inadequate and instead reads Janet as the novel's hero: "True healing of the disease (of racism) that afflicts the community (nation) at large can only take place under domestic largess rather than professional surveillance" (77). See also Bryan Wagner's article "Charles Chesnutt and the Epistemology of Racial Violence." He reads Dr. Miller as a personification of "the novel's ideology of African American bourgeois achievement" based on self-help, individual achievement, and racial uplift (318). Whereas Danielson argues that the novel doesn't unquestioningly endorse

laments with Mr. Watson, a lawyer, about the condemnation of an entire race based on "general principles": "Try as we may to build up the race in the essentials of good citizenship and win the good opinion of the best people, some black scoundrel comes along, and by a single criminal act, committed in the twinkling of an eye, neutralizes the effect of a whole year's work" (611). Here Dr. Miller envisions the possibility and frustration inherent in seeking recognition from a white middle class from which he and Watson are both excluded on the basis of race.

Yet in positing that the cultivation of "the essentials of good citizenship" might have a curative effect on white racial prejudice, Dr. Miller takes for granted that racism is actually prejudice against a lower social class marked as criminal. Based on this logic, he implies that whites believe blacks are inferior because their opinions are based on African Americans who have yet to achieve the genteel standards of middle-class whiteness. Dr. Miller "likes to believe . . . that when a colored man should demonstrate to the community in which he lived that he possessed character and power, that community would find a way in which to enlist his services for the public good" (515). Once African Americans achieve middle-class standards, he argues, whites will naturally recognize them as valuable contributors to society.[27]

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this ideology, Wagner argues that this doctrine of bourgeois achievement profoundly threatens the Carterets' class and racial superiority.

[27] Dr. Miller's conviction that the community will see the progress made by African Americans and utilize their skills for the benefit of the larger community is reminiscent of Booker T. Washington's 1895 "Atlanta Exposition Address." Washington argues that the races "can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (277). A community's security can only be maintained "in the highest intelligence and development of all" (277).

These sentiments, which inform Dr. Miller's interactions with the white powers of Wellington, are ones that Chesnutt himself expressed in his essay, "The Future American" (1900). He wrote:

> The steady progress of the colored race in wealth and culture and social efficiency will, in the course of time, materially soften the asperities of racial prejudice and permit them to approach the whites more closely, until, in time, the prejudice against intermarriage shall have been overcome by other considerations. It is safe to say that the possession of a million dollars, with the ability to use it to the best advantage, would throw such a golden glow over a dark complexion as to override anything but a very obdurate prejudice. (*Essays* 133)

In the future America, Chesnutt's essay argues that class will supplant race, and the African American will have "an important and valuable" part (*Essays* 135). According to Chesnutt, capital and education can enervate the forces of racial prejudice once "the more objectionable Negro traits are eliminated, and his better qualities correspondingly developed" (*Essays* 135).

The possibility of a class coalition that crosses racial boundaries is Dr. Miller's, the novel's, and perhaps even Chesnutt's hope, what each "likes to believe." Yet even as it is made to seem possible, this hope is continually thwarted throughout *Marrow*. Dr. Burns, a white doctor, first presents the possibility of cross-race and class-based identification. It is clear that Dr. Miller feels far more kinship with this fellow professional than with the African American agricultural laborers who are "just as offensive to him as to the whites in the other end of the train" (511). Dr. Burns defends

Dr. Miller on more than one occasion, vowing to remain with his friend and colleague when the train conductor attempts to enforce segregated seating. He again rises to Dr. Miller's defense when Carteret insists that the mixed race doctor will absolutely not be permitted to participate in his son's surgery. When Carteret appeals to Dr. Burns as a white man and the doctor retorts, "I am a gentleman, sir, before I am a white man," it seems possible that Dr. Miller's vision of a color-blind middle-class and professional coalition might be realizable (521). At least one white man believes that gentlemanliness is synonymous with qualities of professional skill rather than with whiteness.

Yet, the revolutionary potential of this moment is almost immediately foreclosed. Carteret's second appeal to their common skin color weakens Dr. Burn's resolve: "As between white men, and gentlemen, I say to you, frankly, that there are vital, personal reasons, apart from Dr. Miller's color, why his presence in this house would be distasteful" (522). Wavering, Dr. Burns performs a Pontius Pilate washing of the hands, leaving the matter to Carteret and Dr. Price. A "fine man," he nonetheless shrinks from "strenuous responsibilities," finding it much easier "to theorize about the negro" than to put his opinions into practice (523). Even this Northern doctor bows to the appeal of a fellow white man at the expense of a cross-race, class-based solidarity with Dr. Miller.

With one such failure already depicted, might the middle-class Ellis be, as McWilliams suggests, "one of the novel's few rays of hope" (163)? Is Geordie Hamilton correct that "the narrator hold Ellis up to the reader as an example of how a promising moral student can be successfully educated into better behavior," acting as a kind of "antidote to the white supremacist tradition" perpetuated by the Carteret family (65)? For

most of the novel, Ellis manages to maintain the apolitical position singularly claimed by the late-nineteenth-century professional. Even in his business dealings with Carteret and the newspaper, he maintains a distanced neutrality: "Into the intimate counsels of the revolutionary committee Ellis had not been admitted, nor would he have desired to be. He knew of course, in a general way, the results that it sought to achieve; and while he did not see their necessity, he deferred to the views of older men, and was satisfied to remain in ignorance about anything he might disapprove" (649).

In this instance, ignorance constitutes yet another form of power that Ellis wields. As Sedgwick theorizes in *The Epistemology of the Closest*, the "complex drama of ignorance and knowledge is the more usual carrier of political struggle" (6). For Ellis, the refusal to know amounts to a refusal to become politically engaged. His strategically chosen neutrality towards the agenda of the newspaper's financial backer, Carteret, and the "Big Three" (Carteret, Belmont, and McBane) allows him to focus on courting Clara and securing his superiority over the likes of Tom Delamere. In fact, Ellis's class ascendency is partly due to his cordial reception by the "best people," the aristocracy of Wellington, "though his father had not been of their caste" (541). He is not required to act on what he does not know, and he can instead defer to those upon whom his livelihood and romantic happiness depends. Ellis thus exercises his professional discretion, proving he is savvy enough to know when to leave well enough alone. "Ignorance is as potent" as knowledge when vying for increased status within the community (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 4).

Ellis reasons that he has never had "any special need for any vigorous opposition to lynch law . . . for there had not been a lynching in Wellington since Ellis had come

there, eight years before" (633). So when the Wellington race riot erupts, he is horror-stricken, and this seems like a moment when there might be just that "special need" for vigorous opposition to lynch law. Presumably thinking of Clara, Ellis sympathizes with Dr. Miller and offers to help him search for his wife and child by providing safe passage in his carriage.[28] As these two men, so similar in their professional ethics and class sensibilities, closely occupy the same space for the first time in the novel, there is a vibrating, emergent potential for a class-based coalition. Ellis reflects,

> In his heart he could not defend the deeds of this day. The petty annoyances which the whites had felt at the spectacle of a few negroes in office; the not unnatural resentment of a proud people at what had seemed to them a presumptuous freedom of speech and lack of deference on the part of their inferiors, --these things, which he knew were to be made the excuse for overturning the city government, he realized full well were no sort of justification for the wholesale murder or other horrors which might well ensue before the day was done. (690)

The moment is ripe for cultivating solidarity built on a common disgust over the day's events. If for only this moment, it seems possible that two differently raced middle-class professional men and two of the most sympathetic characters in the novel might forge a personal and political alliance based on shared sensibilities and interests.

Yet this moment is foreclosed in an even more resoundingly pessimistic fashion than is the scene with Dr. Burns. Chesnutt's paraphrase of Ellis's thinking implies a

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[28] "When Miller spoke of his wife and child, some subtle thread of suggestion coupled [Clara's missive] with Miller's plight. 'I'll go with you, Dr. Miller,' [Ellis] said, 'if you'll permit me. In my company you will not be disturbed'" (690).

certain helplessness, a sense that this character *can't* react differently to the situation before him: Ellis "could not approve the acts of his own people. Neither could he, to a negro, condemn them. Hence he was silent" (690). Forced to choose by an extreme event between identifying first as a white man or as a middle-class gentleman, Ellis can no longer inhabit the universal, unmarked, and uncolored position of the middle-class professional. He chooses whiteness, "his people," and so the two men remain divided by the color line when he refuses to speak his disgust and can only muster the generic and empty sentiment that he regrets "this deplorable affair" (691). Attained through a skillful negotiation of the romantic triangle, Ellis's class ascendency and attendant political power fail to yield the radical cross-color professional alliance for which the novel clearly yearns. Ellis's racial loyalty and his sympathizing with "the not unnatural resentment of a proud people" (white Southerners) reveal *Marrow*'s pessimism about the possibility of colorlessness in the America (690). In the New South, as in the Old, racial loyalty trumps professional and class-based solidarity. The significant shifts in the South's economic and social structures as well as in its power dynamics, embodied in Ellis's romantic triumph over Tom, will not affect long-standing racial hierarchies.

Marrow is, at its core, a novel anxious about the future. It attempts racial prognostication not unlike that seen in the writings of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson.[29] Chesnutt sent a copy of *Marrow* to Congressman

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[29] In his article, "'Between Absorption and Extinction:' Charles Chesnutt and Biopolitical Racism," Ryan Jay Friedman similarly notes the relationship between Chesnutt's work and prognostication in Washington's address to the Atlanta Exposition

William H. Moody desiring that it might lodge "a new point of view in the mind of a gentleman of influence, whose position gives him opportunity to act" (176).[30] He clearly hoped that his novel might help shape the New South's future, but the racial prognostication meant to occur in *Marrow* proved none too easy a task. Chesnutt famously struggled to choose an ending for his novel, suggesting the complexity inherent in envisioning what happens the day *after* the riot. Two earlier incarnations of the novel definitively portray Dr. Miller curing young Dodie. The "Plot for Short Story: Race Riot" ends with the doctor refusing to stay in town under the white man's protection whereas the "Race Riot Story" concludes with the doctor moving away from town in a Jim Crow car.[31] The conclusion Chesnutt finally chose leaves Dodie's fate undecided and is much less definitive, ending with the line "There's time enough, but none to spare" (718).

In a conclusion rife with antinomy, *Marrow* ultimately cannot envision the day after the riot or the means by which racial prejudice will be wiped from the face of a future America.[32] The future seems one in which race will continue to function as a

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(1895), Du Bois's essay "The Future of the Negro Race in America" (1904), and Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) (56-9).

30 Citation is taken from *"To Be an Author:" Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997).

31 Bedford Cultural Editions has reproduced Chesnutt's literary memoranda in *The Marrow of Tradition*, pages 443-4. Editors Bentley and Gunning note that, in the second memoranda, the word "Forgiveness" is "written and then crossed out, hinting at Chesnutt's divided feelings about the question of racial reconciliation in the novel" (443).

32 The ambiguity of the novel's final line--"There is time enough, but none to spare"—frequently precipitates critical readings such as Geordie Hamilton's that argue for the narrative's overall race relation optimism (718).

powerful line of division, hierarchy, and power. At the novel's end, the potentially transformative cultural ascendency of the middle class represents much of the same. If the disgrace of Tom Delamere and the passing of Old Mr. Delamere is the passing of the paternalistic racism of the Old South, the perennially imperiled Dodie suggests what Chesnutt hoped would be the ineffectual future of the ideological racism practiced by Carteret and preached in the *Morning Chronicle*. In fact, however, ideological racism would remain highly potent for decades to come. By depicting Ellis as the perpetuator of a more modern form of latent racism, Chesnutt prophetically imagines the "liberal racism" that would one day be associated with the North and, later, the post-Civil Rights era. Ellis is horror-stricken by the day's events in part because "a show of force would have been quite sufficient to overawe" (690). He opposes violence because intimidation will do (690). Ellis's is a racism whose currency depends upon the practitioner's appearance of neutrality even as s/he engages in profoundly political acts. With its appeal to logic and restraint and its pretense to political neutrality, this is a racism embodied by Ellis, the ascendant middle-class professional. His rise to cultural and professional power, exemplified by the homosocial power brokering of the erotic triangle, ushers in a new mode of white racism.

In a May 1880 journal entry, a young Chesnutt expresses the hope that his writing will elevate whites from an "unjust spirit of caste" that he sees as "a barrier to the moral progress of the American people" of both races (*Journals* 139). In the novel he would write more than two decades later, Dr. Miller similarly longs for the best people of each

race to transcend unjust racial barriers. Not only is this hope ultimately foreclosed in the final pages of *The Marrow of Tradition* as white supremacy remakes itself in the image of the nascent middle-class professional, but the haunting words Janet utters suggest that the white acknowledgment both she and her husband have desired comes at far too high a price. As Olivia pleads for Dr. Miller to save her son's life, she desperately acknowledges Janet as her sister and joint heiress to the family fortune. Janet spurns this admission as though trash: "I throw back your father's name, your father's wealth, your sisterly recognition. I want none of them, --they are bought too dear! ah, God, they are bought too dear" (718). Such an utterance suggests that the novel is far from being what William Andrews calls an example of "accommodationist literary politics" (174). Rather, *Marrow* finally dispenses with Dr. Miller's belief that with African American improvement would come white recognition and respect, a healing and completion of the national family (174). When the town's whites rioted, Mammy Jane and Jerry's deference could not save them, nor could Dr. Miller's pragmatism or Janet's patient hopes of familial recognition prevent them from paying the high cost of an only son.[33]

As Willie J. Harrell, Jr. argues, "Chesnutt does not offer a solution to racial problems because he recognizes that the future of his race is a dilemma yet uncertain"

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[33] We learn that Mammy Jane "was killed only a few rods from [the Carteret] house, to which she was evidently fleeing for protection" (701). Jerry is swept up with a crowd of the town's African American men into the hospital. When Jerry attempts to flee the building, waving a white flag and protesting his innocence, his cries are "drowned in a roar of rage and a volley of shots from the mob . . . his reliance upon his white friends, all failed him in a moment of supreme need" (702).

(39).[34] While the Chesnutt who wrote "The Future American" is seemingly able to envision how racial uplift might usher in an era of equality, the fictional Wellington's future remains open, as though the author/narrator/reader has peeked over the horizon of the present only to have creative vision reach its limits. It is nearly impossible to speculate what might have changed for Chesnutt between his final "The Future American" essay in September 1900 and the writing of a novel he began planning that very same month. Whether attributable to the creative process or a reengagement with the race riot narrative told to him by a physician from Wilmington, by December 1, 1900, Chesnutt laments in a letter to John P. Green, "If I could propose a remedy for existing evils that would cure them over night, I would be a great man. But I am only a small social student who can simply point out the seat of the complaint" (*"To Be an Author"* 156). "The seat of complaint," tradition and all its attendant hierarchies, is seemingly an insurmountable stumbling block that *Marrow* can point out but not move beyond. While the novel may have reached its author's creative limits and cannot ultimately imagine a future America in which all races are afforded equality or the road our country might take to arrive there, neither can it ultimately dispense with a sense of urgency born of the hope that nonetheless remains. Despite Ellis's failure, and the failure of the white professional middle class he represents, to usher in an era of cross-racial solidarity, "There is time enough." For what, remains inarticulate, just beyond the novel's horizon.

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[34] Harrell argues that this ambiguity is key to the novel's realistic treatment of the riot.

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Vita

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