



The Advent of “The Nigger”: The Careers of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Henry O. Tanner, and Charles W. Chesnutt¹

Matthew Wilson

Pretext: The Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition as Racial Locus

In 1893, America celebrated itself in the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago² in the aptly named “White City.” Although the term came from the dazzling quality of the architecture surrounding the Court of Honor, the term “white” was inevitably racialized at the end of the nineteenth century. An example of this racialization is a poem by Richard Watson Gilder, the editor of the *Atlantic*, entitled “The White City.” In this paeon, he connects the exposition to the world of ancient Greece: “Her white-winged soul sinks on the New World’s breast. / Ah! happy West - / Greece flowers anew, and all her temples soar!”³ He constructs a tradition in which the Greeks were “white” and the United States the fruition of that whiteness, a connection reinforced by the pastiche of classical allusions in the architecture of the fair. Thus, the White City could be read as emblematic of the triumph of whiteness in a decade that saw the repression of African American political and economic aspirations.

Since the end of Reconstruction and the withdrawal of federal troops from the South following the election of 1876, African Americans had been progressively robbed of their political rights. As Charles Chesnutt himself noted in his essay “The Disfranchisement of the Negro” (1903), “the rights of Negroes are at a lower ebb than at any time during the thirty-five years of their freedom, and the

race prejudice more intense and uncompromising.”⁴ In addition, the lynchings in Atlanta in 1892 of three African American businessmen and the coup d’état/pogrom in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898 (the subject of Chesnut’s *The Marrow of Tradition*) signaled that African Americans in the South would not be allowed to compete economically with European Americans. And this deprivation of African American rights received the sanction of the Supreme Court in its 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In his brief in support of Homer Plessy, an African American light enough to pass as white who had been arrested for riding in a whites only railroad car, Albion Tourgée asked the court whether it would “‘hold that a single drop of African blood is sufficient to color a whole ocean of Caucasian whiteness?’”⁵ Indeed that was the court’s finding, and under the rubric of “separate but equal,” the seemingly permanent inferiority of African Americans was written into the fabric of American legal and social practice.

Given these developments, it is no surprise that African Americans were largely invisible at the fair, and their official absence was bitterly resented in the African American community. At the time, the writers of the “Preface” to the pamphlet, “The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition,” asked: “Why are not the colored people, who constitute so large an element of the American population, and who have contributed so large a share to American greatness,—more visibly present and better represented in the World’s Exposition?”⁶ For instance, African Americans were not allowed to participate in the planning of the fair; on Dedication Day, there was no person of color on the platform; African Americans were excluded from the exhibition halls; and they were discriminated against in hiring.⁷ All the Commissioners of the Exposition were white; the entire Board of Lady Managers was white; the Columbian Guard all white—in total, apart “from porters, the Negro staff included an Army chaplain . . . a nurse, two messengers, and three or four clerks.”⁸

While relegated to invisibility and excluded officially from the representations of the fair, African Americans (and Africans) were permitted to fill the role of spectacle, as part of what Alan Trachtenberg has termed “pedagogies of culture,” as object lessons in mainstream ideology at the turn of the century. These pedagogies were enforced through “a reality composed . . . in the mode of theatrical display, of *spectacle*” which Trachtenberg contends represented a “new form of urban experience” and “a new way of experiencing the world.”⁹ The 21 million visitors to the World’s Columbian Exposition¹⁰ became spectators at a “frank illusion, a picture of what a city, a real society, might look like. The White City represented itself *as* a representation, an admitted sham. Yet that sham, it insisted, held a truer vision of the real than did the troubled world sprawling beyond its gates.”¹¹ The primary locus of racial spectacle at the fair was the Midway which contained, among the various “ethnological” exhibits, a Dahomian village. Edward B. McDowell reported in his article in *Frank Leslie’s Popular*

Monthly that some sixty-nine “natives” were present “in all their barbaric ugliness, blacker than buried midnight and degraded as the animals which prowl the jungles of their dark land. It is impossible to conceive of a notch lower in the human scale than the Amazon, or female Dahomey warrior, represents.”¹² McDowell did, however, acknowledge that they had “some human traits,” but clearly these traits were outweighed by the animalistic, bestial ones, and these he linked to African Americans: “[i]n these wild people we can easily detect many characteristic of the American negro.”¹³ Although he went on to say that blacks in America had “learned the language of civilization” and were thereby “raised above the deplorable level” of the Africans, one can easily see how African Americans were read by the white majority, in the late-nineteenth century, as essentially little different from Africans. Frederick Douglass recognized that connection when he wrote that “as if to shame the Negro, the Dahomians are here to exhibit the Negro as a repulsive savage.”¹⁴

McDowell’s representation of the Dahomians’ place in the spectacle of barbarity could also be seen in the exposition proper. Consider, for example, this contemporary photograph from the exposition, entitled “An African Bimba”(see figure 1).

The boat was located in the Transportation Building, and the text below the photograph notes that this exhibit “was constantly surrounded by visitors, who could only with difficulty believe that it had been used as a canoe in an African

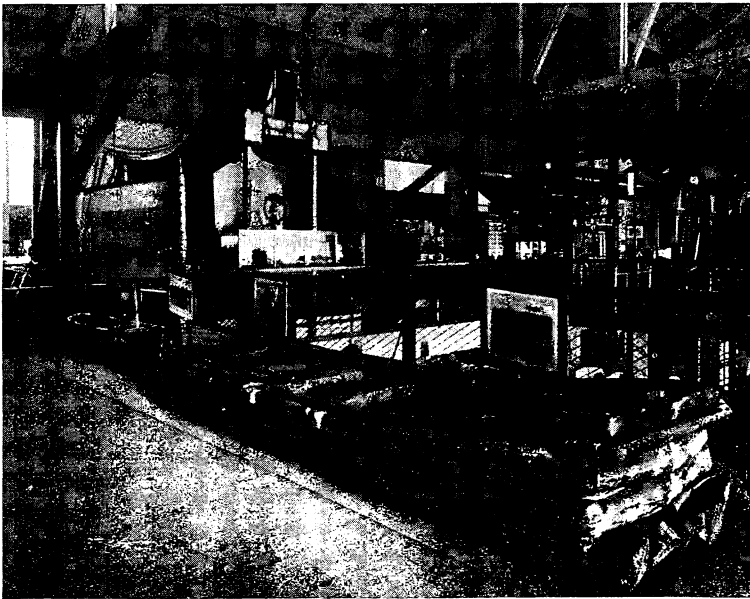


Figure 1: “An African Bimba,” from *The Dream City: World’s Fair Art Series*, (November 23, 1893).

river.” After listing a number of boats at the fair, the writer concluded “this bimba seemed to be the worst boat at the World’s Fair.”¹⁵ Africans (and their material culture) functioned, then, as a kind of gauge of “progress,” as a baseline of barbarity against which to measure the accomplishments of American civilization, and the representations of African Americans as “essentially” African performed much the same cultural function. Indeed, Frederick Ward Putman, who organized the ethnological exhibits, explicitly stated the aims of those exhibits which would be “arranged to teach a lesson; to show the advancement of the evolution of man.”¹⁶ “Man,” obviously, had evolved toward civilization (while all others had remained essentially the same), and as Gail Bederman has pointed out, like the word “man,” the term “civilization” itself was a racialized term at the turn of the century; it was a “*racial trait, inherited* by all Anglo-Saxon and other ‘advanced’ white races.”¹⁷ And by “celebrating civilization, the organizers celebrated the power of white manhood.”¹⁸

As a counter-response to this triumphalist vision of white manhood and to the subject positions that had been imposed on them through high and low culture representations, African Americans attempted to claim the power to represent themselves at the fair by organizing a Congress on Africa (August 14-21, 1893) and by celebrating Colored People’s Day (August 25, 1893). The congress was designed to fill the absence of material culture of Africa which a newspaper noted was “a deficit” at the fair—but it was also designed, wrote Frederick Perry Noble, whose brainchild the congress was, to “throw new light on the negro question,” and to “surprise people with negroes as able in debate as white men.”¹⁹ As one speaker observed on the first day of the meeting, the Congress on Africa was to help “save American negroes from an obscurity and mortification which the failure to award them place in the Exposition has caused them to feel keenly.”²⁰ Conceived “as anything other than a cultural conclave, the Congress on Africa combined the intellectual with the ideological, religious, philosophical and scientific. . . .”²¹ The congress had a dual focus: first to discuss how to move Africans and African Americans closer to the cultural and social assumptions of Europeans and Americans, how to create “a new person . . . who conformed more readily in temperament, disposition, and level of civilization to Anglo-Saxon standards.”²² The second was to protest the current treatment of African Americans in the United States and to use this international forum to apply pressure to American’s broad acceptance of the second-class status of African Americans. The congress could be seen, then, as a fundamental challenge to the racialized premise of the fair, one which bifurcated the world into realms of civilization and barbarism, of high and low culture,²³ into the fair and the Midway.

A second, more complicated, response to the failure to include African Americans in the fictive “unity” of the fair was the establishment of Colored People’s Day, the idea of which “originated with whites and appeared as a salve on a festering sore.”²⁴ As Colored People’s Day evolved, it became the antithesis of the Congress on Africa²⁵ with its intellectual emphasis; the focus on Colored

People's Day was cultural. Intended as a celebration of the accomplishments of African Americans in the United States since the end of the Civil War, in particular their accomplishments in high art,²⁶ the program was divided into four parts: a speech by Frederick Douglass; oratory by a number of whites; classical musical selections; and musical numbers and recitations.²⁷ In the last two sections, a number of African American singers performed, among them composer Harry T. Burleigh as well as various other tenors and a "mezzo contralto." Douglass' grandson, Joseph, played violin, and Marion Cook presented "an act from his opera *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," and Paul Laurence Dunbar read a poem.²⁸ The seventy-five-year-old Frederick Douglass, serving in the official capacity as *Haitian* commissioner at the exposition, agreed somewhat reluctantly to support Colored People's Day, while Ida Wells-Barnett advocated a boycott. The white organizers of the exposition, on the other hand, clearly intended the day as a "joke,"²⁹ as a way of relegating African Americans to what was their traditional place in the economy of racial spectacle. There were also fears in the African American community that the day "might just as easily deteriorate into a 'Jubilee Day,' during which the most objectionable features of black folk culture and expression in the eyes of the elite might be exposed to white view."³⁰ While this did not happen, the satirical magazine, *Puck*, (which had a circulation close to 90,000 in this period)³¹ expressed the racial imaginary. African Americans were Sambos, an attitude captured in Frederick Burr Opper's drawing, "Darkies' Day at the Fair" (see figure 2).

The anonymous writer of the accompanying poem, "Darkies' Day at the Fair: A Tale of Poetic Retribution," imagines an occasion like the Congress on Africa in which all the "Sons of Ham" assemble from through the world: "from far Soudan," the Congo, and "far-famed Zanzibar/Together with their Yankee friends/The Darkies all were dar!" These Africans and African Americans congregate:

The plans were laid for a big parade
Of great impressiveness
With bands so grand, on every hand
And gorgeousness in dress.
No eye to right must show the white
Each head must pose erect.
With proud reserve each must preserve
His dignity circumspect.

However, a "Georgia coon, named Major Moon" resolves to disrupt the parade by buying 500 watermelons, and the predictable, within the American racial imagination, happens; they become performers in a racial spectacle:

'Tis a glorious sight, and all goes right
The ranks are firm and bold



Figure 2: Frederick Burr Opper, “Darkies’ Day at the Fair,” from *Puck* (August 21, 1893).

Until at a turn all eyes discern
 Those melons DRIPPING COLD.
 Teeth gleam white. With carver bright
 Forth stands the tempter there.
 He slits a melon and starts a-sellin-
 ‘Tis more than flesh can bear.

And so *Puck* relegates those Africans and African Americans to their “proper” places; they are incapable of even having a successful parade in their lust for “the luscious fruit.”

With one loud whoop, with one fell swoop
 They swarmed down on the stand;
 The sons of Ham in the foremost jam
 With big slice in each hand.
 And this is the end. For foe and friend
 Gave no thought to parade.
 As they gaily loot the luscious fruit
 And hie them to the shade.³²

At the actual celebration where Frederick Douglass was scheduled to speak, the gap between the intentions of the organizers of Colored Peoples' Day and its reception among white people was further emphasized. As soon as Douglass began to read his talk, "neither his serious mien nor his topic—"The Race Problem in America"—promised amusement, and the young men in the gallery opened up with jeers and catcalls." Although Douglass was taken aback by this interruption, he was also angered enough to dispense with his prepared text and to speak extemporaneously for an hour. "Full, rich, and deep came the sonorous tones, compelling attention, drowning out the catcalls as an organ would a penny whistle. The pranksters in the gallery listened in spite of themselves. . . . [sic]"³³ Douglass emphasized in his speech that there was no "Negro problem. . . . It is called Negro for a purpose. It has substituted Negro for Nation, because the one is despised and hated while the other is loved and honored. The true problem is a National problem."³⁴

I want to underscore these moments as paradigms for the reception of African Americans in the public sphere in the late-nineteenth century: African Americans were almost completely unrepresented at the Exposition, and the man who was unarguably the most preeminent African American alive was jeered by white people simply because he wanted to speak, and because of what he represented—the unresolved question of the place of African Americans in the coming century. Clearly, the whites who jeered believed that African Americans had no business entering the public sphere (something *Puck* makes eminently clear). African Americans were either to be invisible or part of racist spectacle, and the history of the previous thirty odd years repressed. In contrast, Douglass explicitly connected the past to the present, connected antebellum to postbellum America in his analysis of the context of the Exposition in *The Reasons Why The Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*: "So when it is asked why we are excluded from the World's Columbian Exposition, the answer is Slavery. . . . The people of the south are with few exceptions but slightly improved in their sentiments towards those they once held as slaves. The mass of them are the same to-day that they were in the time of slavery."³⁵ What Douglass fails to say here is that the attitude of the South, in the 1890s, had become that of the whole nation, and that political and cultural climate presented an almost insuperable obstacle to the ambitions of African Americans.

The racial scaffolding that characterized the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition was reproduced in subsequent expositions over the next decade, in Atlanta, Nashville, and Saint Louis among others. As Robert Rydell asserts, the "fair did not merely reflect American racial attitudes, it grounded them on ethnological bedrock."³⁶ Although these subsequent fairs all shared the same set of assumptions about racial hierarchy, the status of African Americans became even more complicated because of two new developments. One was an African American initiative to establish separate Negro buildings while the other

was the establishment of a “‘typical’ antebellum scene . . . [c]alled the Old Plantation”³⁷ which included “facsimile recreations of plantation life, complete with performances of black spirituals and folk dances.”³⁸ The Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta in 1895 was the first fair to include a separate Negro Building, which rose from African American initiatives. The building was designed and built by African Americans, and it included a symbolic program on its pediments:

The one side of the pediment represents the slave mammie [*sic*] with the one-room log cabin, the log church, the rake and basket in 1865. On the other side is the face of Frederick Douglass, a true representative of the growth in intelligence in the colored man. Near him is the comfortable residence, the stone church and symbols of the race’s progress in science, art, and literature, all representative of the new negro in 1895. The plow and well-fed mule is in the centre—for the colored man to-day plows his field, while thirty years ago he, with almost an exception, plowed for another.³⁹

Although some African Americans objected to the logic of “separate but equal” encoded in a separate Negro Building, most felt that any effort at self-representation was better than their near invisibility at the Chicago fair. Clearly, the argument being made by the Negro Building was one of progress, the transformation of the freedmen into people who had begun to make valuable contributions to the American economy. Governor Atkinson of Georgia was fulsome in his praise of the Negro Building in his essay in *The North American Review*; he saw it as evidence for “advance from abjectness and barbarism to . . . a high state of progress in the arts and inventions. . . .”⁴⁰ However, he also used the Negro Building to argue for the racial status quo, writing that the building was evidence that Southerners were in the “process of solution” of the race problem in the South. So the building was used, along with Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise Speech, as a way to signify that African Americans were in their “proper” places and were socially, politically, and economically under control. Even though they had been given the visibility of an exposition space of their own, that space was used as a sign of the circumscription of their economic and political ambitions because “the displays in the Negro Building . . . were largely drawn from the black industrial schools.”⁴¹ The Negro Building was read as a sign that African Americans could participate in America’s industrial development, but only at the lowest levels; it was to be a sign of the tractability of the African American workforce in the South.

In contrast to this effort at self-representation at the Atlanta Fair, there was a counter-representation, on the Midway, a recreation of a pre-war plantation which the Nashville Exposition of 1897 advertised in the following language: “[y]oung bucks and thickliped [*sic*] African maidens as ‘happy as a sunflower’

dance the old-time breakdowns, joined in by 'all de niggahs' with weird and guttural sounds to the accompaniment of 'de scraping of de fiddle' and 'de old bangjo.'"42 The Old Plantation was a nostalgic spectacle which detoxified the slave past and represented African Americans as being quite happy in slavery, a development parallel to the explosion of plantation school fiction in this period. Saturated in nostalgia, the Old Plantation "was one of the popular features of the Midway,"43 a countersign to the narrative of progress told by the Negro Building. The Old Plantation was a way to reinscribe the past in the present. Although slavery had been abolished, African Americans, particularly in the rural South, were beginning to experience a kind of neo-slavery. When slavery was read through the lenses of nostalgia, neo-slavery was also justified as a kind of historical imperative, connecting the pre-Civil War era to the present. As a further sign of the importance of the Old Plantation, when President Cleveland visited the Midway, the only exhibition he visited was the Old Plantation, an action that counterbalanced his praise of Washington's speech at the fair.⁴⁴

The World's Columbian Exposition (and the subsequent American fairs of the next ten years) provide an index to the major subject positions available to African Americans at the turn of the century, positions inevitably implicated in the dilemmas faced by African American artists. These three positions are: invisibility, spectacle, and a third very complicated position which is a refusal of the previous two. In this third position, African Americans represented themselves either by refusing the option of spectacle and by choosing other modes of self-representation or by subverting spectacle from the inside. In other words, African American artists in this period worked inside the tension between being represented (having become the objects of representation) and attempting to represent themselves and the experience of their own people. These subject positions, however, were always mediated through previous social constructions of black folks; white audiences perceived the productions of African American artists through the cultural lenses provided to them by prior representations of blackness and African American behavior. As a result, the African American artists in this period could try to burrow inside of those presuppositions and uncritically try to perform in whiteface; they could try to subvert those presuppositions; they could try to confront them directly; or they could opt out of the American racial binary by trying to find a subject position outside of race.

The Problematics of Representative Men

In "The Trope of a New Negro" Henry Louis Gates Jr. observes that "Frederick Douglass . . . was widely advertised during his lifetime as 'The Representative Colored Man of the United States.'" Douglass, he argues, was most "representative" because he was most "presentable . . . and he was most presentable because of the presence he had established as a master of voice. . . . He spoke to recreate the face of the race, its public face."⁴⁵ Douglass's representativeness, however, was a result of a set of historical circumstances that were very

different for African Americans who came to their maturity in the fin de siècle. In other words, Douglass's presence, however occluded later in his life, was a result of the moral power of his anti-slavery, anti-racist message, but African Americans of the postwar generation wanted to achieve presence not only through the rhetoric of direct protest, but like the participants in Colored People's Day, they also wanted to achieve presence through the genres of Euro-American art. The careers of three African Americans—Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), Henry O. Tanner (1859-1937), and Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932)—show both the degree to which they were potentially hamstrung by the genres they chose to work in and hemmed in by the largely white audience to which their works were addressed.

From the beginning of their careers these artists were linked as representative race men. For instance, in a review of Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, William Dean Howells, America's preeminent literary critic, wrote: "With Mr. Booker T. Washington the first American orator of our time, fresh upon the time of Frederick Douglass; with Mr. Dunbar among the truest of our poets; with Mr. Tanner, a black American, among the only three Americans from whom the French government ever bought a picture, Mr. Chesnutt may well be willing to own his color."⁴⁶ Howells's genealogy here both reveals and conceals. He unproblematically links Douglass and Washington, and applauds the aspirations of these three writers. Sympathetic to African American artists, Howells was a "liberal," and he opined, famously in this review of Chesnutt's short stories that in literature "there is, happily, no color line,"⁴⁷ and he apparently believed that there was no color line in painting either. For Howells, then, these four men represented "a kind of psychological profile of the developing black consciousness in America," and he valued their artistic contributions insofar as they "contribute[d] to 'race reconciliation.'"⁴⁸ In Howells's view, that reconciliation, however, was all to be on the side of African Americans; their role was to forgive the past of enslavement and to acquiesce to the present of Jim Crow.

What Howells's review obscured, on the other hand, was the developing split in the African American community between W. E. B. Du Bois and Washington, and although their disagreement focused on the issue of industrial versus higher education, it spilled over, I believe, into the question of African Americans and art. Du Bois began to articulate some of the differences between his position and Washington's in his 1901 review of Washington's *Up From Slavery* which David Levering Lewis has characterized as the "opening salvo in the war between the Tuskegee Machine and the Talented Tenth."⁴⁹ In it, Du Bois also linked Dunbar, Chesnutt, and Tanner among a group of representative black men "who, without any single definite programme, and with complex aims, seek nevertheless that self-development and self-realization in all lines of human endeavor which they believe will eventually place the Negro beside the other races." Du Bois went on to observe that the artists in this group "respect the Hampton-Tuskegee idea to a degree, they believe it falls short of a complete programme. They believe . . . in the higher education of Fisk and Atlanta

Universities; they believe in self assertion and ambition. . . ."⁵⁰ Du Bois clearly saw that Washington's "Faustian bargain"⁵¹ with the South meant that he tacitly agreed not to demand the opportunity for higher education to African Americans,⁵² a denial that necessarily impinged on the aspirations of artists like Chesnutt and Tanner.

In another article, "Hopeful Signs for the Negro" (1902), Du Bois developed the idea of a representative group of men, and he argued that African Americans had begun to create the figure of the "Exceptional Man-the group leader,"⁵³ and he went on to write that figures like "Douglass, Crummell, Tanner and Washington, Dunbar and Chesnutt are distinguished and epoch-making figures, judged by any standard. The Negro race is no longer dumb, and whatever one's opinion may be of its average ability and destiny, clearly it has already produced men who fully measure up to the best standards of modern civilization."⁵⁴ In evoking the highest standards of modern (Euro-American) civilization, Du Bois was responding to the kind of accusation that can be traced at least as far back, in the American tradition, as Thomas Jefferson who in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* claimed that in "imagination" blacks were "dull, tasteless, and anomalous" and had failed to achieve the "best standards of modern civilization." Jefferson contended that he had never found "a black [who] had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; . . . [nor seen] even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture."⁵⁵ For Du Bois, representative figures like Dunbar, Chesnutt, and Tanner were carrying their ambitions into the realms of imaginative accomplishments, the very territory where most Americans thought African Americans were incapable of successful work. In addition, Du Bois saw that these African Americans were giving voice to the previously voiceless; in representing their own experiences, they were, Du Bois believed, competing with their white counterparts, a belief that Tanner himself held in 1893. In a report of the speech that he gave at the Congress on Africa at the World's Columbian Exposition, he is recorded as having said that the "actual achievement" of African American painters and sculptors "proves Negroes to possess ability and talent for successful competition with white artists."⁵⁶ In the most general terms, then, African Americans saw the success of artists like Dunbar, Chesnutt, and Tanner as exemplary of what African American artists could accomplish in high culture, but their success or failure could also be indicative of the wider racial climate in America and the ability of African Americans to move into areas of endeavor from which they had been previously excluded.⁵⁷

But in more specific terms, the representative qualities of these artists functioned as counters in the ideological struggle between Du Bois and Washington. Their success or failure in high art would signal whose version of the capabilities of African Americans would enter the national imaginary for most of the coming century. As David Levering Lewis has pointed out, Washington and Du Bois were "speaking for two dissimilar socioeconomic orders." While Washington spoke for the "early industrial past," Du Bois spoke to "the urban, industrial,

multiethnic North.”⁵⁸ After the Great War, however, Du Bois’s position on the representativeness of Tanner and Chesnutt underwent a fundamental shift. In an article he wrote some twenty years later, “The Social Origins of American Negro Art” (1925), Du Bois again linked Tanner and Chesnutt, but with a sense of persistent disappointment: “Our great painter, Henry O. Tanner, has in no sense contributed to American Negro art,” and Chesnutt, he said, had “done fine artistic work in the novel,” but he “could hardly be classed as contributing to any particular group expression.”⁵⁹ At the turn of the century, the very success of these artists in these genres of Euro-American art, regardless of their subject matter, was enough for Du Bois. Twenty years later, he concluded that they had been unable to help found an African American artistic tradition. By the 1920s Du Bois wanted more than simple representativeness; he believed that African American artists had to do more than compete successfully with white artists in culturally sanctioned artistic forms. He wanted black artists to use forms and materials unique to African American vernacular culture to help them discover an authentic African American art, something that was clearly not an artistic ambition for any of these three artists, all of whom expected to compete on a level playing field of Euro-American art. Judged from Du Bois’s later point of view, they inevitably fell short, their individual and limited successes demonstrating vividly their failure to found traditions of African American expression.

This shift in Du Bois’s expectations highlights the degree to which African American artists of Chesnutt and Tanner’s generation were *not* caught, as subsequent artists sometimes were, between the demands of European American and African American audiences because their audiences were largely white. And a fundamental characteristic of this audience was its gentility, and African American artists were committed to the “virtues of refinement” in more than “superficial” ways; their commitment was “essential to the portrayal of characters and situations.”⁶⁰ So one of the boundaries that defined them as artists was this necessary gentility, a gentility that had an uneasy relationship with their other ambition (in the cases of Tanner and Chesnutt) to confront the history of representation of African Americans, and to protest the ubiquitousness of American racism.⁶¹ This inherent split between white audience expectations and artistic integrity was a version of Du Bois’s double consciousness. Living in a “world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world,” African Americans have “a sense of always looking at one’s self though the eyes of others. . . .” The African American, Du Bois continued, “simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American . . . without having the doors of Opportunity close roughly in his face. This, then, is the end of his striving, to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture. . . .”⁶² Striving to be co-workers in the kingdom of culture with their fellow white Americans, Dunbar, Chesnutt, and Tanner were always aware of the tension between the expectations of their white audience and their own artistic ambitions. I will argue, in the rest of this essay, that the responses of these three artists to these tensions vividly illustrate the degree to which African

American artistic ambitions were circumscribed by their white audiences. Dunbar, for the most part, submerged his own sense of racial identity by working primarily in genres in which he imitated white writers. Chesnutt and Tanner, by contrast, were more confrontational; they wanted to take on the traditions of representation of race in America and fundamentally alter them. At the same time, all three artists wanted to have successful careers, so no matter what their strategies vis-à-vis their white audiences, all three struggled within the same set of constraints and were defined as artists by the same set of historical conditions. The African American community needed representative artists who could compete with their white peers, but they had to achieve national recognition as artists by selling their works to audiences which were largely made up of European Americans, who were, for the most part, passive participants in the American consensus about race and the place of African Americans at the turn of the century.

Paul Laurence Dunbar: Dialect Poetry and White Life Novels

Paul Laurence Dunbar was the first of these artists to achieve national recognition. Although he read a poem at the World's Columbian Exposition, Dunbar was catapulted into prominence by William Dean Howells's review of his first book to appear from a major publisher, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896). Howells's review was subsequently reprinted as the introduction to the book, and he wrote that it represented "the first instance of an American negro who had evinced innate distinction in literature."⁶³ The volume is a collection of poetry in two radically different styles: dialect poetry and what Howells terms "poems in literary English."⁶⁴ Although Howells granted that some of the latter are "very good," he reserved his highest praise for the dialect poetry, and it is worth examining his analysis of those poems in some detail in order to illuminate the trap in which Dunbar found himself as a writer, a trap illustrative of what Chesnutt and Tanner also faced in their respective genres.

After noting that Dunbar was "of pure African blood," Howells goes on to write that Dunbar felt "negro life aesthetically and express[ed] it lyrically. It seemed to me that this had come to its most modern consciousness in him, and that his brilliant and unique achievement was to have studied the American negro objectively, and to have represented him as he found him to be, with humor, with sympathy, and yet with what the reader must instinctively feel to be entire truthfulness."⁶⁵ Praising Dunbar's "objectivity" and "entire truthfulness," Howells, predictably, makes him into a kind of realist in poetry. Later in the review, though, Howells goes on to say that in his dialect poems Dunbar "reveals a finely ironical perception of the negro's limitations, with a tenderness for them which I think so very rare as to be almost quite new. . . . [I]t was this humorous quality which Mr. Dunbar had added to our literature, and it would be this which would most distinguish him, now and hereafter."⁶⁶ One would probably need to question Howells's assertion here that Dunbar added the "humorous

quality” to dialect poetry. Certainly dialect poetry in the hands of white writers had always emphasized what white Americans took to be the humorous qualities of African American stereotypes. What was new for Howells about Dunbar was his ethnicity (“pure African blood”) and his attempts to write both dialect poetry and poetry in “literary English.”

Among those non-dialect poems in *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, however, one finds a poem, “We Wear The Mask,” that Houston Baker has characterized as “a landmark of black expressiveness.”⁶⁷

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!⁶⁸

Baker argues that “Dunbar’s speaker plays the masking game without an awareness of its status as a game,” and he calls Dunbar “the example par excellence of a tragic hemming in of Afro-American artistic aspiration.”⁶⁹ Part of the reason Dunbar was so circumscribed by the genre of dialect poetry was that he could not, like Booker T. Washington in Baker’s analysis or Chesnutt in the stories of *The Conjure Woman*, find a way to master the form of the minstrel mask. All Dunbar could do was lament the necessity of masking because he had been unable to find a way, either in his dialect poetry or in his plantation fiction, to subvert the mask and turn it to his own ends. In a sense, then, Dunbar was mastered by the mask. Although he could change some of the nuances of the genres that he employed, he found himself subsumed into the spectacle of the minstrel mask of dialect poetry and plantation fiction.

As Baker notes, it is easy to denigrate Dunbar and make light of his dilemma, but I want to emphasize here that his dilemma is also a generic one. Given the tradition of comic stereotypes in minstrel shows, coon songs, and dialect poetry, Dunbar could only change the emphasis of the stereotypes; he couldn’t find a way to undermine the stereotypes from within. Further light is

thrown on Dunbar's dilemma by James Weldon Johnson. In his autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), Johnson wrote of reading Whitman for the first time and discovering the limitations of dialect poetry. Johnson argued that a dialect poet "was dominated by his audience, and his audience was a section of the white American reading public; when he wrote he was expressing what often bore little relation, sometimes no relation at all, to actual Negro life; that he was really expressing only certain conceptions about Negro life that his audience was willing to accept and enjoy."⁷⁰ Because of the expectations of that audience, the dialect poet had very little room to maneuver. Johnson saw that even Dunbar had been unable to break out of the stereotypical depictions of the genre, "representations made of the Negro on the minstrel stage." Johnson said that Dunbar had been able to refine the form, to add "a deeper tenderness, a higher polish, a more delicate finish; but also I saw that . . . practically all of his work in dialect fitted into the traditional mold."⁷¹ Elsewhere, Johnson recorded Dunbar's *crie de coeur*, "'I've got to write dialect poetry; it's the only way I can get them to listen to me."⁷²

As a way of dramatizing Dunbar's dilemma, I'd like to reproduce the final stanzas of one of his dialect poems, "The Deserted Plantation." After lamenting the dramatic alteration of the plantation itself, the speaker goes on to ask:

Whah's de da'kies, dem dat used to be a-dancin'
 Ev'ry night befo' de ole cabin do'?
 Whah's de chillun, dem dat used to be a-prancin'
 Er a-rollin' in de san' er on de flo'?

Whah's ole Uncle Mordercai an' Uncle Aaron?
 Whah's Aunt Doshy, Sam, an' Kit, an' all de res'?
 Whah's ole Tom de da'ky fiddlah, how's he fairin'?
 Whah's de gals dat used to sing an' dance de bes'?

Gone! not one o' dem is lef' to tell the story;
 Dey have lef' de deah ole place to fall away.
 Couldn't one o' dem dat seed it in its glory
 Stay to watch it in de hour of decay?

Dey have lef' de ole plantation to de swallers,
 But it hol's in me a lover till de las';
 Fu' I fin' hyeah in de memory dat follers
 All dat loved me an' dat I loved in the pas'.

So I'll stay an' watch de deah ole place an' tend it'
 Ez I used to in de happy days gone by,
 'Twell de othah Mastah thinks it's time to end it,
 An calls me to my qua'ters in the sky.⁷³

One could argue here, as Joanne Braxton does in her introduction to *The Collected Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, that the poem has been purged of toxic elements found in the dialect poetry of white writers. There is no “malevolence” and the slaves “are not bent under the driver’s lash or bowing and scraping to the master”; rather, they are “self-identified” and “enjoy each other’s company.”⁷⁴ Braxton goes on to distinguish a difference in reading strategies of European American and African American audiences when confronted with a poem like “The Deserted Plantation”: whites, she claims, positioned “outside the circle of black culture” read “with a degree of conscious indifference”; African Americans, on the other hand, relish “the means by which their ancestors retained their humanity and their psychic wholeness.”⁷⁵ The problem with Braxton’s analysis is that it simplifies Dunbar’s relation to his contemporary white audience which would not have reacted with “conscious indifference.” Rather, a poem like this would have been inevitably read by whites as support for plantation mythology.⁷⁶ White readers would have found confirmation of their racial assumptions in “The Deserted Plantation”: here was a dialect poem, written by the only nationally prominent African American poet, which lamented “de happy days gone by.” Even if Dunbar intended that phrase to point to an irony—that sense of community was shattered by emancipation—white readers would still have received this poem as yet another piece of evidence to support the contention, on the political level, that Reconstruction had been a mistake and as evidence to support the progressive fin de siècle disenfranchisement of African Americans. In other words, there is a difference between recovering a tradition of African American writing and the cultural work that dialect poetry did among white people in its time. Critics like Braxton and John Keeling in his essay, “Dunbar’s Mask of Dialect,” are trying to position Dunbar within a subversive tradition of African American writing;⁷⁷ however, my focus in this essay is on the cultural work accomplished by this writing and on the reception of that work by a largely white audience.

In this period the work of African American artists was always already co-opted. Either they chose to work in genres which were imitations of imitations, as Dunbar did in his dialect poetry and plantation stories, or when they chose to try to alter the tradition of representation they had inherited, their works were turned, by the very racism they were critiquing, into support *for* racial ideology. This insidious process has been elucidated by Slavoj Žižek when he wrote that “ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor.”⁷⁸ Racial ideology, as David Theo Goldberg has argued, is both so protean and so “natural” that escaping it is nearly impossible. Indeed, Goldberg points out, for the nineteenth century, as Disraeli famously opined, “‘all is race.’ The basic human condition—and so economic, political, scientific, and cultural positions—was taken naturally to be racially determined.”⁷⁹ If race is a totalizing system, then inevitably literature (and painting) itself is, as a cultural construct, also racialized. So that in adapting the form of dialect poetry (and plantation fiction), Dunbar was inevi-

tably buying into a racialized discourse, one that permeated the genres he chose to work in and which determined the reception of his work.

If Dunbar wore the mask in writing his dialect poetry and plantation fiction—if he was a tragic African American artist like the performers Williams and Walker—a African American man in black face—he also found a way to take on another mask in his three white life novels, that is the genre of fiction in which African American writers have represented primarily the experiences of white characters. Dunbar's first white life novel, *The Uncalled* was serialized in *Lippencott's Monthly Magazine* in May 1898, and was published as a book later that year. This novel was followed by *The Love of Landry* (1900), and *The Fanatics* (1901). The first two of these white life novels contain only incidental African American characters, while the final novel is more complicated. A historical novel set in Ohio during the Civil War, it contains one major African American character, and it chronicles the changing feelings of white folks toward African Americans during the war. *The Uncalled*, although it contains not a single African American character, is Dunbar's most trenchant critique of whiteness, and it is his purest attempt to write as if he were unraced.⁸⁰ There are no overt suggestions of an African American consciousness in *The Uncalled*. Dunbar is employing a genre that depicts the narrow-mindedness of small town life, and it follows a main character who is so repressed that "he had learned to hide himself from himself, his thoughts from the mind that produced them."⁸¹ The main character is brought up in a repressive religious environment, and he becomes, against his inclination, a minister. The novel records his eventual revolt against the strictures that had been imposed on him, and he leaves the ministry and moves to a large city. Roger Rosenblatt has written that *The Uncalled* ". . . takes a steady and critical look at a white community, and despite its gentleness, in many ways it is the first successful protest novel in black fiction."⁸² In the Midwestern town where most of *The Uncalled* takes place, "Dunbar is portraying his perception of the white world. He is depicting a people, who, while pretending to adhere to principles of decency and to maintain an egalitarian world, efficiently and systematically stifle the freedom and honesty of an individual different from themselves. . . ."⁸³ Clearly, Dunbar is writing in the genre of local color, but, not governed by a nostalgia for a way of life that is in the process of vanishing, his perspective is more critical than most who write about small town life in this period.

One review, in particular, of *The Uncalled*, is revealing. The reception of the novel by this reviewer helps contextualize the position of an African American who attempted to write white life fictions in this period.⁸⁴ "The Bookman for December 1898 objected to the characters in *The Uncalled*. Claiming that Dunbar should 'write about Negroes,' the reviewer lamented that 'the charming tender sympathy of *Folks from Dixie* is missing' and asserted that Dunbar was 'an outsider' who viewed his action 'as a stage manager.'"⁸⁵ At the turn of the century, neither critics nor publishers nor white audiences were willing to listen to the

voice of an African American who had stepped outside what they assumed to be his “proper” role—to represent his own folks’ experience and to be a race spokesman. When an African American wrote, however, exclusively about white folks, he was transgressing and attempting to represent, in the views of most white Americans, a complex reality that he or she was debarred by race from understanding.

The second white life novel, *The Love of Landry* is more representative of Dunbar’s attempt to escape the racialized reception of his fiction. The novel, set in Colorado, consists of a typical love triangle: a rich young woman, after refusing her British suitor, goes West for reasons of health and falls in love with a mysterious Westerner, Landry, who saves her life and who turns out to be a refugee from an old Eastern family. The British suitor follows her to Colorado where he bonds with Landry, and after a minimum of implausible impediments, Landry and the Eastern young woman announce their intention to get married. However, Dunbar could not resist a moment where an African American consciousness surfaces. During the heroine’s railroad journey to the West, she and her father encounter a African American porter who comes into their compartment to see if they need anything, and after he leaves the father reflects on African American experience: ““that man gets more out of life than I do. He has a greater capacity for enjoyment. . . . You think it humiliates him to take a tip? . . . He courteously fleeces us, and then laughs about it, no doubt.””⁸⁶ Later in the trip, the heroine asks the porter to call her father in such a way that the porter thinks something is wrong (when actually she is excited at her first sight of prairie dog towns). When she and her father laugh over this misunderstanding, the porter “went back to his place, in disgust, no doubt with the thought in his mind that here was another instance of white people trampling on, and making a fool of, the black man.”⁸⁷ Dunbar tries, in the most tentative way in this romantic white life novel, to suggest the possibility that African Americans view their interactions with white Americans quite differently than do white Americans.

Despite this tiny opening into African American consciousness in *The Love of Landry*, Dunbar was hemmed in no matter which way he turned: when he wrote dialect poetry or plantation tales he was constrained by his choice to work in genres employed by white writers, genres in which African American characters and experience were imitations of imitations. And these imitations were social constructions of black experience which had little to do with the felt experience of African Americans. When he shifted the mask and tried to write outside of the genres that were considered acceptable for an African American writer, he was rebuked for crossing the color line, for his attempt to pass as unracial. In order to make a living as an artist, Dunbar let his consciousness of his white audience determine the shape of his career, and in trying to write what they would find acceptable, he was ultimately too literary. Unable to represent the African American life he knew, he chose to represent what he knew only

through literature—the life of rural African Americans seen through the lenses of white writers.⁸⁸

**Henry O. Tanner:
Painter as Representative Race Man or
"The Advent of the Nigger"**

For an African American artist who aspired to work in the Euro-American tradition of painting in the fin de siècle, the question of education was absolutely crucial. As Tanner himself wrote in 1913 looking back to his early struggles: "With whom should I study? No man or boy to whom this country is a land of equal chances' can realize what heartaches this question caused me."⁸⁹ There had been only a handful of African American artists before Tanner, and while "American painting . . . came of age in the 19th century, African American art was still in its infancy."⁹⁰ Part of the reason for the paucity of African American artists had to do, obviously, with the restriction of the opportunity to study. Tanner, quite exceptionally, was accepted in 1880 as a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts under its director, Thomas Eakins. Although Tanner himself wrote little about his time there, one of his fellow students, Joseph Pennell, in his 1925 autobiography, *The Adventures Of An Illustrator*, recorded a telling incident involving Tanner, an incident one could call, using a brutal phrase from Pennell himself, "the advent of The Nigger":

[H]e was young, an octoroon, very well dressed, far better than most of us. His wool, if he had any, was cropped so short you could not see it, and he had a nice mustache. . . . He was quiet and modest, and he "painted too" it seemed "among his other accomplishments." We were interested at first, but he soon passed almost unnoticed. . . . Little by little, however, we were conscious of a change. I can hardly explain, but he seemed to want things; we seemed in the way, and the feeling grew. One night we were walking down Broad Street, he with us, when from a crowd of people of his color who were walking up the street came the greeting: "Hullo, George Washington, howse yer gettin' on wid yer white fren's?" Then he began to assert himself and to cut a long story short, one night his easel was carried out into the middle of Broad Street, and, though not painfully crucified, he was firmly tied to it and left there. And this is my only experience of my colored brothers in a white school, but it was enough. Curiously, there never has been a great Negro or a great Jew artist in the history of the world.⁹¹

I read this incident as symptomatic not only of the difficulties an African American artist faced on a personal level, but also as symptomatic of the kind of critical and financial reception such an artist was likely to receive from an almost exclusively white public in this period. In addition, the passage from Pennell is also very revealing about the liminal state that Tanner (and Chesnutt) inhabited by reason of their ancestry: both were from racially mixed backgrounds. In the incident related by Pennell, it is painfully clear that Tanner is at home in neither world, and the anonymous African American voice from the street is a double reminder—of how whites inevitably view him given the racism of the culture as “nigger” and how other African Americans view him as a potential racial turncoat, isolated from their concerns, educated and middle class as he is.

As the incident related by Pennell makes clear, the reception of self-identified African American artists of this generation by a white critical establishment was always going to be determined by racial ideology. For instance, in 1914, an art critic sent a draft of an article to Tanner about his work, and the critic claimed that Tanner’s “work is in its essence oriental, it is subjective, almost mystical.” This writer went on to articulate a theory of the racial use of color: “The cold end of the spectrum, the violets, blues and cold greens, belong naturally to the Anglo-Saxon and correspond with a certain hardness of disposition and outlook. But the more warm-blooded peoples, beginning with the Latins, are more at home in the warmer tonalities.”⁹² The point of ideology, as we know, is to naturalize the cultural, and here we see racial categories being naturalized. Tanner’s response to this letter, though, points to the liminality of his state:

You say “in his personal life, Mr. T. has had many things to contend with. Ill-health, poverty, race prejudice, always strong against a Negro.” Now am I a Negro? Does not the 3/4 of English blood in my veins, which when it flowed in “pure” Anglo-Saxon veins and which has done in the past effective and distinguished work in the U.S.—does this not count for anything? Does the 1/4 or 1/8 of “pure” Negro blood in my veins count for all? I believe it, the Negro blood counts and counts to my advantage—though it has caused me at times a life of great humiliation and sorrow—unlimited “kicks” and “cuffs”—but that it is the source of all my talents (if I have any) I do not believe, any more than I believe it all comes from my English ancestors.⁹³

Given the dominance of racial discourses in America at the time, a mixed racial heritage presented African Americans who were in the public sphere with a difficult problem of self interpretation, and Tanner’s response to this dilemma, when compared to Frederick Douglass’s articulation of the problem, is instructive. Douglass, in his 1892 *Life And Times* wrote that he had learned that his

mother, quite exceptionally for a slave woman, had been able to read: "In view of this fact, I am happy to attribute any love of letters I may have, not to my presumed Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected and uncultivated mother—a woman who belonged to a race whose mental endowments are still disparaged and despised."⁹⁴ Douglass, aware that his success as speaker and writer was often ascribed to his white "blood," takes the step of attributing love of letters to his African American mother, an obvious gesture of black pride, while Tanner refused to make an either/or choice, seeing his "talents" as the result of neither one race nor the other, a hybrid position that rejected the binary nature of American racism, and this rejection moved him, like Dunbar in his white life novels, toward an unracialized subject position. In contrast to Tanner's refusal to choose, and his attribution of his success to both streams of "blood," his classmate, Joseph Pennell had he been aware of the subsequent career of Tanner, would no doubt have reinscribed the American racial binary and would have ascribed his success solely to his "white" blood.

This 1914 letter to Tanner illustrates how the racial climate of America at the turn of the century (and well into this century) forced artists like Dunbar, Chesnutt, and Tanner inescapably inside the box of racial ideology. Even when they achieved some prominence as artists, their presence was narrativized, in the startling words of Pennell, as "the advent of The Nigger." One of the ways, of course, to short-circuit American racism of the kind that would crucify an artist to his easel, was expatriation,⁹⁵ and Tanner went to France to study in 1891. At the end of this first stay, he was producing work like the 1893 *Edge of the Forest*, (see figure 3) a landscape painted in Brittany.

Although the catalogue that accompanied the traveling Tanner exhibition in 1991-1992 stresses the "originality" of this painting, claiming that his "informality and freedom of brushwork . . . move him closer to Impressionism,"⁹⁶ it is to my eye quite indistinguishable from the work of many European artists of the end of the century. When Tanner returned to the United States in 1893 and gave his address at the Columbian Exposition, he began to turn his attention away from somewhat predictable European landscape and genre paintings to African American genre subjects. As he wrote at the time in the third person:

Since his return from Europe he has painted mostly Negro subjects, he feels drawn to such subjects on account of the newness of the field and because of a desire to represent the serious, and pathetic side of life among them, and it is his thought that other things being equal, he who has most sympathy with his subject will obtain the best results. To his mind many of the artists who have represented Negro life have only seen the comic, the ludicrous side of it, and have lacked sympathy with and appreciation for the warm big heart that dwells within such a rough exterior.⁹⁷



Figure 3: Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Edge of the Forest* (1893). *Courtesy of N.N. Serper, Rosenfeld Fine Arts, New York.*

Obviously, Tanner believed that his position as an insider empowered him to represent African American life in a way that had never been seen before. In countering stereotypes of African American experience, he was claiming the right of racial self-representation. But this new work could also be an effort to extend what had been done already by artists like Thomas Hovenden and Eakins to represent African American experience with dignity and sympathy. Tanner's ambition was to wrest the power of representation away from whites, and he saw that he was empowered to represent African American life from the inside. As an insider he believed that he had an imaginative access to and a sympathy with his subjects that even the most well-intentioned and knowledgeable white artists of the period lacked.

Tanner, though, in his desire to represent African American life realistically from the inside, inevitably confronted how the ideology of racism was encoded in the market for works of art. In other words, potential white buyers, brought up on a steady diet of stereotypical and comic representations of African Americans, had no interpretive scheme that would allow them to make sense of Tanner's African American genre paintings, or rather, more radically, the paintings, through their non-stereotypical representation of African American life, called into question the massive and all-pervasive ideology of American racism. In order to make sense of Tanner's African American genre paintings, a

white viewer would have needed to subvert in himself or herself the "naturalness" of racial ideology that made African American men in this period either childlike comic Sambos or vicious, bestial, animal-like rapists of white women. In other words, a white viewer would need to be able to respond to paintings like these outside of spectacle; he or she would have needed to deracialize his or her response to works of art.

Despite the deeply entrenched racism of the period, Tanner did reasonably well during his sojourn in the United States. He "sold three major paintings and widely exhibited a fourth that later sold."⁹⁸ Soon, however (in 1894-1895), he left America for permanent residence in France, and part of the reason for his departure might be because there was such a small African American middle class that he was forced to rely on the generosity of white philanthropists like Robert C. Ogden,⁹⁹ who bought *The Banjo Lesson* (see figure 4) and presented it to the Hampton Institute.

Before going to the Hampton Institute, however, this painting had a revealing history. Evidence exists to suggest that it was exhibited at the 1894 Paris Salon,¹⁰⁰ and it certainly was exhibited at the 1896 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. At the Paris Salon his painting was hung among those of his European artistic peers, while in Atlanta it was to be found in a segregated space, in the Negro Building, part of the Virginia Exhibit.¹⁰¹ Not only was his work segregated in America, but Tanner also saw the failure of an effort among African Americans in Philadelphia to buy his painting for the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts and to reproduce the image in "levytype and selling copies to blacks all over the United States."¹⁰²

In *The Banjo Lesson*, Tanner took the spectacle of banjo playing which was identified in the popular imagination with the plantation and he inverted it. He employed an image that was used to denigrate African Americans and to point nostalgically to the "good old days" of slavery, and found in it a source of dignity and power. As Albert Boime has argued, Tanner was subverting popular culture images of African Americans as banjo playing "coons," and he is substituting instead the "subject of black education,"¹⁰³ in this scene of intimacy between grandfather and grandson. What Boime doesn't comment on, however, is the absence, in both of Tanner's great paintings of this period, *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*, of the generation of the fathers, the absence of men of his own generation. It is almost as if to represent a young, potent male were to invoke the African American rapist, an image that racial radicals were busily promulgating in this period.¹⁰⁴ In this painting, then, one can see Tanner's double consciousness at work: the popular culture image of the banjo was inverted; African American education, in a scene of tender intimacy, was powerfully evoked, but the artist omitted the generation of the fathers. In order to render this image acceptable to a white audience, Tanner chose to omit rather than confront.

When Tanner returned to France, he gave up African American genre painting, and his art took a completely new direction. Perhaps on his visit to America



Figure 4: Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Banjo Lesson* (1893), oil on canvas. Courtesy of Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia.

he had taken the measure of the limits of the American art market, as this sentence from the *Daily Evening Telegraph* of September 1894 suggests: "Like other painters of ability, he can do better, financially speaking, in Paris than he can in Philadelphia."¹⁰⁵ Perhaps Tanner felt the art market in France would be more receptive because there he would not always inevitably be identified exclusively as a Negro. After his American sojourn, he "saw the importance of being considered on a non-racial basis—as a person, as an artist, as an American—as a central theme in his work. Continuing the production of black genre scenes would have seriously impeded his progress toward that end."¹⁰⁶ In other words, the only way that Tanner could escape the racialization of the art market was through an expatriation to France, where he would be outside of the American racial binary, a place where he could unracialize himself, and be neither African American nor white, but simply an unracialized artist.

Chesnutt himself was always sensitive to the importance of being considered by critics on a non-racial basis, and he revealed his sensitivity to the exclusionary quality of the racism embedded in the American market for painting when he wrote about Tanner in a 1913 essay, "Race Ideals and Examples." In this essay, Chesnutt devoted a paragraph to Tanner; he advised his reader to go to the Luxembourg Museum where he or she would see "in the gallery of foreign modern painters, cheek by jowl with Whistler, Sargent, and the other great contemporary painters of lands other than France . . . a striking painting by Henry Ossawa Tanner."¹⁰⁷ Although Chesnutt doesn't name this painting, it probably was Tanner's *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, which had been purchased by the French government in 1897.¹⁰⁸ Clearly Chesnutt was aware that Tanner's status as an artist was due to his expatriation, and that in France, "there is little prejudice against color, even among Americans sojourning there."¹⁰⁹

Tanner's choice to leave America for permanent residence in France and his simultaneous shift away from African American genre scenes signaled his recognition that in America of a hundred years ago indeed "all was race"—that for an artist, the discourse of race imposed a set of constraints that Tanner was unwilling to live with. As he said in a letter written in 1914, racism "has driven me out of the country."¹¹⁰ When he returned to France, however, he gave up African American genre painting and began to paint almost exclusively religious subjects, such as *The Resurrection of Lazarus*. Boime has argued that "white American patrons" encouraged his turn to religious painting because they "were uncomfortable with his earlier genre pictures and more at home with imaginary and exotic people of color. In this form, they could also praise the contribution of his 'African' heritage to the expressiveness of his religious paintings."¹¹¹ In other words, his religious paintings could be subsumed and misread under a discourse of orientalism, but an orientalism that defused the interpretive challenge of his African American genre paintings.

In 1901, after Tanner moved to France, Booker T. Washington also misread Tanner's work and used Tanner's representativeness and reputation as

ammunition in his battle with Du Bois. Washington argued that Tanner was yet another example to support his contention that “there is something in human nature which always makes an individual recognize and reward merit, no matter under what color of skin that merit is found.”¹¹² Against the evidence of Tanner’s American experience, Washington wants to argue that Tanner’s “race” is irrelevant: “Few people ever stopped, I found, when looking at his pictures, to inquire whether Mr. Tanner was a Negro painter. . . . They simply knew that he was able to produce something the world wanted—a great painting—and the matter of his colour did not enter into their minds.”¹¹³ For his own ideological ends, Washington chose, tactically, to see no difference between an African American painter in France and an African American bricklayer in North Carolina. Both would be esteemed by the white community because they were “able to produce something the world wanted.” Of course, Washington saw Tanner’s paintings in Paris, where, indeed, as Chesnutt observed, the “matter of color” was largely irrelevant. Strategically ignoring that Tanner’s artistic success was furthered by his access to higher education,¹¹⁴ Washington also chose to gloss over that Tanner’s success as an artist would have been impossible in turn-of-the-century America. He employed Tanner’s experiences as an artist to support a position which that experience contests. Washington assumed that artistic accomplishments would trump racism, but the careers of Tanner and Chesnutt call Washington’s public optimism into question.¹¹⁵

In the end, it could probably be argued that Tanner’s work in religious painting was a recoding of another aspect of his heritage—his father, Benjamin Tanner, was a bishop in the AME church. As a family friend, W. S. Scarborough, wrote in 1902: “It has long been the wish of his father’s heart that his son should paint biblical subjects—turn his genius into religious channels and thus make his art serve religion. . . .”¹¹⁶ Not only was his choice to paint religious scenes a return to an aspect of his heritage, but also, as Jennifer Harper has written, this choice defused the issue of race, “allowing his painting to be judged with few biases. Yet he could still serve the black cause by depicting inspiring subjects, which were accessible to a broader audience.” Harper’s argument, then, is close to Booker T. Washington’s: Tanner became a kind of representative race man, and his paintings evidence that, for a white audience, “the matter of his colour did not enter into their minds.”¹¹⁷ The point not to be missed here is that he could only assume this representative position as an artist by becoming an expatriate and by relinquishing his ambition to represent African American life. In America he would have been trapped by racism; in France, Tanner stepped out of the economy of racial spectacle and out of a racialized art market.

In spite of Tanner’s admitted successes, there has been a persistent sense of regret in the criticism of his work and career at opportunities missed, the sense of regret heard in what Du Bois wrote in 1925. For most of this century, writers have lamented what failed to happen in his career, as if his work seemed unrepresentative. For instance, as early as 1902, W.S. Scarborough wrote that when

"The Banjo Lesson" appeared many of the friends of the race sincerely hoped that a portrayer of Negro life by a Negro artist had risen indeed. They hoped, too, that the treatment of race subjects by him would serve to counterbalance so much that has made the race only a laughing-stock subject for those artists who see nothing in it but the most extravagantly absurd and grotesque. But this was not to be.¹¹⁸

Booker T. Washington as well was disappointed in Tanner's failure to continue to represent African American experience, and this disappointment, this sense of opportunities lost can be heard in two recent articles on Tanner. Both were published in 1991, and the concluding sentences echo each other. Daniel Garrett wrote that "America was denied the opportunity to see a new and truthful side of African-American life in her art"¹¹⁹ by his turn to religious subjects. Naurcie Frank Woods concludes her essay by saying that America "was not yet ready to accept African Americans as equals and thus forced one of its greatest artists to remain abroad. By so doing, America was denied the opportunity to see a new and truthful side of African-American life in her art."¹²⁰ A hundred years after he began his career, Henry O. Tanner has not escaped the burden of being a representative man. "America," not Tanner, is at fault for his failure to be fully representative, but the presupposition is still that it was incumbent on him to "depict a new and truthful side of African-American life." Unlike his white counterparts, Tanner is still being critiqued on the basis of what he produced as well as what he chose not to produce as an artist. He has yet to escape a racial system that established the grounds of the evaluation of his accomplishment. And while the art market has changed, the burden of being a failed representative of the race has not.

Charles W. Chesnutt: Fiction Writer as Representative Race Man or a Generation Too Soon

This sense of regret also pervades the reception of the work of Tanner's age mate, Charles W. Chesnutt, who after publishing a short life of Frederick Douglass, two volumes of short stories, and three novels within the space of six years, fell largely silent as a writer of fiction for the last 25 years of his life. One can also hear this sense of regret in one of Chesnutt's last public statements, his acceptance of the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP in 1928: "My books were written, from one point of view, a generation too soon. There was no such demand then as there is now for books by and about colored people. And I was writing against the trend of public opinion on the race question at that particular time. And I had to sell my books chiefly to white readers. There were few colored book buyers."¹²¹ Chesnutt, toward the end of his life, realized, as did Tanner, how racial ideology was encoded in the market for art. But in writing "against

the trend of public opinion on the race question,” he was taking off the mask and asking his potential audience, as neither Dunbar nor Tanner ever fully did, to call into question the massive and pervasive ideology of American racism. Both Chesnutt and Tanner, though, felt that it was incumbent on an African American artist to try to alter fundamentally the tradition of representation of black people. And while Tanner never went beyond trying to subvert stereotypes from within, Chesnutt was in the end more confrontational. He moved very quickly from a period in which he tried to work within the presuppositions of spectacle and manipulate the mask, to a period where he directly confronted his white readers with unfamiliar representations of black and *white* experience.

In the beginning of his career, Chesnutt, like Tanner thought that the tradition of representation of African Americans by whites could be altered by an artist working from a minority perspective. For instance, as a young man in his journal, Chesnutt reacted to the publication and success of Albion Tourgée’s Reconstruction novel, *A Fool’s Errand*, published in 1879:

if Judge Tourgee [*sic*], with his necessarily limited intercourse with colored people, and with his limited stay in the South, can write such interesting descriptions, such vivid pictures of Southern life and character as to make himself rich and famous, why could not a colored man, who has lived among colored people all his life; who is familiar with their habits, their ruling passions, their prejudices; their whole moral and social condition; their public and private ambitions; their religious tendencies and habits. . . . [W]hy could not such a man, if he possessed the same ability, write a far better book about the South than Judge Tourgee and Mrs. Stowe has written?¹²²

Here, Chesnutt saw himself as empowered by his marginality, positioned to enter an already fully developed tradition of white writers representing the South and African American experience, and he believed that he had more direct access to the life of the South than either Stowe or Tourgée. More importantly, like Tanner in his African American genre paintings, Chesnutt felt empowered as an artist by having more sympathy for African American life than his white peers. In addition, because he was liminally positioned (like Tanner he was white enough in appearance to pass), Chesnutt also assumed that he was empowered to represent *white* experience, something he does increasingly throughout his career (his last published novel, *The Colonel’s Dream*, for instance, while still a race problem novel, contains no major African American characters).

As I have argued elsewhere,¹²³ Chesnutt saw Stowe and Tourgée as artistic avatars: both were highly popular yet had what Chesnutt thought of as a profound impact on the civic debate about race in America. Like them, he wanted to be popular and earn his living as a writer, and he always had the kind of designs on his white audience that Stowe and Tourgée had and that Dunbar

mostly eschewed. Clearly, a figure who achieved aims like these during this period was Mark Twain who combined popularity with "seriousness," using dialect, local color, bad-boy fiction (and even the genre of a proto-detective story in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*).¹²⁴ The example of Twain's popularity and his use of popular forms was of little help to Chesnutt, however, who was clearly not attracted to the kind of popular forms Twain employed. Chesnutt, in his first works, particularly in *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and in *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), used the kind of popular genres identified with African American experience as mediated through genres employed by white writers—the plantation tale and the tragic mulatta narrative—but he attempted to turn them against his audience. In the stories of *The Conjure Woman*, he was successfully wearing the mask; he managed, unlike Dunbar, to find a way to subvert the genre and to modify it so that it functioned as a critique of its use in the hands of white writers.¹²⁵ He was exploiting narratological innovations, in those stories, that transform the genre to art of a very high order.¹²⁶ More ambivalent about his white audience in his subsequent novels and more conflicted about the possibility of being popular while writing race fiction, he clearly distinguished between those novels which had a serious purpose, like *The Marrow of Tradition*, and his entertainments, his three white life novels which still remain unpublished. Like Dunbar, Chesnutt was clearly imitating the form of the popular romance in his white life novels, and in them he was trying solely for commercial successes, and at least two of them were judged as commercially viable in their time.¹²⁷

Chesnutt, like Dunbar and Tanner, realized that, if he was going to make a living as a writer, his audience was necessarily going to be a white one, but unlike Dunbar and Tanner, Chesnutt had more explicitly articulated designs on that white audience. Again, in his journal, Chesnutt wrote that "I shall write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose. . . . The object of my writing would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of whites."¹²⁸ This "elevation" is more, I contend, than a kind of benevolent uplift of progressive education, but an elevation accomplished by working, in his first few texts, from within the genres available to him to try to undermine the tradition of representation he has inherited. It is important to note that Chesnutt, along with Dunbar, was the only African American writer of fiction in this period to have access to a national audience through his publication in prestigious journals like *Atlantic* and the publication of two of his three novels with the prominent publisher, Houghton Mifflin. Because Chesnutt was acutely aware of the expectations of his white audience, he faced a much more complicated set of representational problems than his peers, Sutton Griggs, Francis Harper, and Pauline Hopkins, all of whom wrote for the African American audience which was too small to support a writer of fiction. Secondly, Chesnutt clearly saw himself as a lone pioneer in the writing of fiction: neither in his letters nor in his essay or speeches did he refer to any of his African American peers who wrote fiction (he only referred in his late speeches to writers of the early Harlem

Renaissance). In his speech accepting the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP he claimed that he “was the first man in the United States” who shared the blood of the Africans “to write serious fiction about the Negro.”¹²⁹ This claim suggests the degree to which he conceived of himself as artistically separate from all his fiction-writing peers.

Chesnutt confronted, then, a problem of reception similar to Tanner’s—how to earn a living as an artist in a racialized culture while at the same time trying to subvert the presuppositions that a white audience brought to the work of African American artists and to their representations of black experience. As I argued earlier, this awareness of the split between white audience expectations and artistic integrity is a version of Du Bois’s double consciousness. Always aware of the tension between the expectations of his white audience and his own subversive counter-stereotypical artistic ambitions, Chesnutt needed to navigate a terrain where every move had to be calculated for its effect on the white audience he was addressing; every move had to be tested for its integrity, for its ability to subtly resist and to redirect the expectations of that audience. But the dilemma for an African American writer in this period was more complex than for a painter because unlike African American painting, which was then in its “infancy,” the male African American tradition of narration had been well established by the antebellum slave narrative. Coming to maturity in the postbellum period, Chesnutt “had to negotiate a far different cultural landscape” from that of his predecessors like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, who “needed to establish themselves primarily as truth-tellers.”¹³⁰ Realizing that interest in slave narratives had long passed¹³¹ Chesnutt, like Tanner, adopted (and adapted) the traditions of representation created by white writers about African American experience. In his book of short stories, *The Conjure Woman*, and in his first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*, his genres were the dialect tale and the tragic mulatto narrative. In his last two works, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), and *The Colonel’s Dream* (1905), he invented what I call a post-Howellsian critical realism, a strategy of representation that alienated him from his potential audience. Unlike Tanner who chose to step outside of race in his religious paintings, Chesnutt, almost as if he were following the advice of Frederick Douglass to “agitate, agitate, agitate,” decided to confront directly his white audience. He gave up strategies of subversion from within, and wrote about the American race problem with a set of realistic assumptions and from the position of a sympathetic insider.

In the plantation stories that constitute *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt, as I suggested above, wore the mask and adapted a form of genre founded by writers such as Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, and practiced by a host of imitators. These writers created a mythical, romanticized antebellum past in which kind and concerned masters took good care of contented slaves, and these freedmen then told the stories of their masters after the war, expressing a proper nostalgia for slavery. As an old freedman says in Thomas Nelson Page’s “Marse

Chan" in what is a *locus classicus* of the celebration of slavery by those who had been oppressed by it:

"Dem wuz good ole times, marster—bes' Sam ever see! Dey wuz in fac'! Niggers didn' hed nothin' 't all to do. Niggers didn' hed nothin' 't all to do-je' hed to 'ten' to de feedin' an' clean' de hosses, an' doin' what de master tell 'em to do; an' when dey wuz sick, dey had things sont 'em out de house, an' de same doctor came to see 'em whar 'ten' to de white folks when dey was po'ly. Dyar warn' no trouble nor nothin'."¹³²

The cultural authority of an African American speaker is lent to this depiction of the antebellum South as a paradise of racial relations. White Americans did believe that the plantation school represented slavery accurately. And the cultural work those tales did in the 1880s and 1890s was to justify the political and economic repression of African Americans, who were believed to have degenerated under the stresses of the freedom they were thought to be constitutionally incapable of appreciating or employing.

When Chesnutt published his plantation tales, he used them as a way of subverting the presuppositions of the genre.¹³³ He used the old African American teller of dialect tales as a way of undermining the ideology of the "rational" Northern man, who in his turn re-narrates the stories. Chesnutt clearly establishes an alliance between an old African American man, Uncle Julius McAdoo, and the narrator's wife, a sometimes sickly (neurasthenic?) woman. Not only does the wife see the point of Julius's doubly intentioned stories, something her husband signally fails to do, but Julius also acts as a conjurer through his tales and heals her settled depression. Here Chesnutt took the pre-existing genre of dialect tale, in which the African American interlocutor performs as part of racial spectacle and which was used simply to confirm stereotypes of simple, child-like African Americans, and make it into a complicated, highly sophisticated interchange, in which, as Craig Werner has written, "an elaborate mask, or set of masks, [is] designed to infiltrate Euro-American discourse and, in the long run, subvert the binary oppositions on which racial privilege depends."¹³⁴ The plantation tale always included a white narrator, and in the hands of white writers, the white narrator simply reported the "truth" of the tale that has been told to him by his African American interlocutor. In Chesnutt's hands, however, the white narrator was constantly undermined by Julius's instrumental victories, and more importantly by Chesnutt's repeated demonstrations of the white narrator's inability to interpret Julius's stories. Chesnutt made the white narrator out to be well-intentioned but a bit thick, a monologic interpreter of stories which are wildly multivalent.

This set of interchanges between Julius and the white narrator acted to disrupt the spectacle of racial ideology, and that disruption, in a more literal way

was manifested in the color line stories of *The Wife of His Youth* and in his first published novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*. In both of these works, Chesnutt focused on characters of racially mixed ancestry, and how they presented, as did Twain's two exchanged babies in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, interpretive challenges to racial ideology (evoking the fear in whites of what would happen when people of mixed ancestry infiltrate and "pass"), and also how they were physical representations of the history of American slavery, the physical consequences of the rape by white men of African American women. In *The House Behind the Cedars*, though Chesnutt also was writing in the tradition of sentimental protest, of the kind inaugurated by Stowe. Working on his white readers to get them to admit through their sympathy with the main character, Rena, Chesnutt wanted them to see that she was no different from any woman of any race, and thus to allow, however momentarily, for the breakdown of racial hierarchies. In the spectacle of her death, Chesnutt wanted the reader to admit the possibility of a breach in the color line.

In his last two published novels, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt moved in another direction, outside of the culturally sanctioned traditions of representation he had inherited. *The Marrow of Tradition* is a historical novel based on a recent event: the 1898 coup d'état/pogrom in Wilmington, North Carolina. He wrote to Booker T. Washington, for instance, that the novel "is a comprehensive study of racial conditions in the South,"¹³⁵ and in its scope the novel is clearly intended to be read as realism, but not realism from a "scientific" or objective point of view, but advocacy realism, which, in Chesnutt's words from the same letter to Booker T. Washington, represented "our side of the Negro question."¹³⁶

In response to stereotypical representations of black and white Southerners, Chesnutt was trying to depict the range of experiences and personalities in the two communities—on one hand, former soldiers in the Confederate army, old aristocrats, a representative of a postwar generation of aristocrats, the son of an overseer—and, on the other, in the African American community, more radically, he represented the old retainers, both male and female; several representatives of a post-Civil War generation; and most importantly, Josh Green, a potential revolutionary; and Dr. Miller, the most skilled and highly educated physician in Wellington, a representative of Du Bois's talented tenth. In its realistic comprehensiveness, *The Marrow of Tradition* seemed close to Howells's assumptions about realism in fiction. As Richard Brodhead has written, for Howells, fiction "informs its audience—both in the sense of bringing it information about the world, and in the sense of effecting the shape of its understanding of the world. . . . [Realism] does not abuse fiction's power of reality-making. It rightly informs its audience's sense of human reality; it does not ensnare real minds and hearts in fictive delusions."¹³⁷ However, realism, in its late-nineteenth-century incarnation also did not push the envelope in terms of representations of racial and ethnic "others." The depiction of those others, primarily in regionalist and

local color writing, was intended as a confirmation of racial and ethnic common sense, as a confirmation of what the audience already believed it knew. Confronting his audience with unwelcome truths in *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt was potentially alienating them in two ways: his representation of African American counter-violence in the character of Josh Green would have been deeply disturbing, as would have been his representation of white characters.

Chesnutt's performance in *The Marrow of Tradition* in its realism from a minority point-of-view could be seen as a critique of his earliest work, which, as James Weldon Johnson said of dialect poetry, could be seen as an imitation of an imitation—playing changes on the traditions of representation he had inherited from his white predecessors. To the degree to which white writers were creating African American characters based on their social constructions of African Americans (for example, as Stowe did in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), the African American writer was forced into the convolutions of masking and of subverting stereotypes by trying to undermine the stereotypes from within. In the Howellsian realism of *The Marrow of Tradition*, though, Chesnutt was attempting to bring his white audience "information about the world" that he knew from the inside, and he was also attempting to affect "the shape of its understanding" of that world. In Chesnutt's own words in a letter to Howells, he was simply trying to "depict life as I have known it."¹³⁸ By representing a successful, highly educated African American doctor, Chesnutt was pointing to the significant educational achievements of African Americans (much as African Americans attempted to do on Colored People's Day); he was trying to shape the understanding of his white audience to include figures from Du Bois's talented tenth. But in that portion of the novel devoted to white characters, he was also attempting to shape his audience's understanding of the effects of racism on white folks. His diagnosis of the heart of darkness of white racism was trenchant: in the course of the novel two wills are illegally overturned; a robbery murder by the scion of the aristocracy is concealed;¹³⁹ a democratic election is overturned by violence (an action worthy, the narrator seems to intimate, of a Central American banana republic of the period); African American professionals driven out of town; and innocent African Americans (like the old faithful family servants and Dr. Miller's young son) become casualties of stray bullets or depraved indifference. He was attempting to demonstrate that racism had corroded not only the public morality but also the private morality of Southern white folks.

Chesnutt's decision to dispense with the mask and to confront his white readers with a form of advocacy realism meant the beginning of the end of his career. His first three books had been well received, but when he took on the Euro-American form of realism, and turned to a depiction of the political and social difficulties facing African Americans in the contemporary South, he not only lost his audience but also alienated Howells, the most powerful critic in America at the time. Howells's reaction to *The Marrow* helps to define the limi-

tations of Chesnutt's white audience, its inability to accept criticism from African Americans. In a laudatory review of Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*, Howells concluded that there was "no bitterness" in Washington, and he went on to speculate that

the problem of the colored race may be more complex than we have thought it. What if upon some large scale they should be subtler than we have supposed? What if their amiability should veil a sense of *our* absurdities, and there should be in our polite inferiors the potentiality of something like contempt for us? The notion is awful; but we may be sure they will be too kind, too wise, ever to do more than let us guess at the truth, if it is the truth.¹⁴⁰

Howells nearly articulated a theory of masking here, but he backpedaled from that formulation as quickly as he could. He found the notion "awful" because it would have opened up a kind of social abyss, the potential judgment of those whom Howells conceived as "polite inferiors." In his mixed review of *The Marrow of Tradition*, Howells apparently thought he was confronting an African American writer who was breaking the compact which African Americans agreed to be "too kind, too wise" ever to drop the mask. He wrote that Chesnutt "stands up for his own people with a courage which has more justice than mercy in it. The book is, in fact, bitter, bitter. There is no reason in history why it should not be so, if wrong is to be repaid with hate, and yet it would be better if it was not so bitter."¹⁴¹ Howells, the realist, advised the African American writer to turn the other cheek, and implicitly asked him not to hate, but to show mercy to white folks. Clearly, Howells was defining for himself and for his audience a boundary for realism in dealing with issues of race, the kind of boundary he refused to draw when it came to the works of white realists. Furthermore, after reading *The Marrow of Tradition*, Howells wrote in a letter: "'How such a Negro must hate us. And then think of the Filipinos and the Cubans and the Puerto Ricans who we have added to our happy family. But I am talking treason.'"¹⁴² We see here Howells's quite accurate conclusions about race in America: yes, African Americans wore a mask, and yes, their oppression was linked to America's imperial mission, but Howells's mind precludes contemplation of these ideas as apparently too painful to bear because they were treasonous to the national compact (and remember here that Howells was a critic *sympathetic* to the African American writers of his time). Thus, Howells's painful evasion of what he sees in Chesnutt is symptomatic of the reaction of Americans at large to Chesnutt's last two books, texts that insist on the necessity of realistic memory in an era of national amnesia.

At least Howells's response to the novel is somewhat measured; the Southern reviews tended to be vitriolic. In a remarkable historical coincidence, the

Chesnutt papers preserve a review from Wilmington's *The Messenger*, the newspaper that had much to do with fomenting the 1898 coup d'état/pogrom. The review quotes extensively from another in the *Presbyterian Standard* which asserts that "'the story itself is a tissue of falsehood from end to end. There was material enough in that now historic revolution for a good story on the basis of fact. But the negro's side could not be adequately presented except upon a basis of fiction. . . . [T]he south it seems, has a new kind of liar to deal with, the negro littateur.'" The reviewer of *The Messenger* writes that this is "the second book in a year that seeks to misrepresent, and pervert the real causes that lead to the most remarkable local 'Revolution' that ever occurred perhaps."¹⁴³ So for those on the ground, for the whites of Wilmington, Chesnutt was simply a liar, and his ambitious effort to write a historical fiction was nothing more than fiction pure and simple—an account that bore no relation to the actual events.

Chesnutt continued to try to keep his audience from forgetting in the final novel published in his lifetime, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905). As with *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt had high artistic ambitions in writing this novel. He said that the novel was "encyclopedic" and he aspired to "follow even afar off the Russian novelists of the past generation, who made so clear the condition of the debased peasantry in their own land. . . ."¹⁴⁴ The novel is set in the South with a cast of mostly white characters. Colonel French, after selling his business at a profit, returns to his hometown, and becomes involved to help improve the life there. He tries to establish a cotton mill, and to help found libraries and schools, but his efforts shipwreck on his own unacknowledged racism and the racism of the town's white inhabitants. The form of the novel, however, is eccentric; it is almost as if Chesnutt had set out to defy his readers' expectations: the North/South marriage does not come off, the old African American retainer figure is a bad storyteller, and a subplot of missing money (revised from a short story that was unpublished in 1905) also confounds a reader's expectations when it is discovered that the money never existed. Chesnutt, in the final novel published in his lifetime, was so ambivalent about his white audience that while he was still trying to change them, he was doing so in a form that was designed to baffle and frustrate.

Predictably, the reviews were negative, and if he had any illusions left about his ability to elevate his white audience through fiction, all he had to do was to read the Southern reviews of *The Colonel's Dream*. For instance, the anonymous reviewer of the Richmond, Virginia, *Leader* began by characterizing Chesnutt as "a man whose blood and rearing have made him alien in knowledge and sympathy to the people he would educate." For this reviewer, Chesnutt had clearly "overstep[ped]" himself, illegitimately gone beyond a traditional subser-vient role, and Chesnutt was advised, as Dunbar was, "to make his stories the simple tales his heart moves him to write."¹⁴⁵ The *Banner* of Nashville wrote that the novel is "grossly libelous as to Southern conditions in general," and it stated that the "negro problem would likely be no problem, if it were possible to stop

its discussion, and it is greatly aggravated by being made material for novels."¹⁴⁶ The most astonishing passage is from the Knoxville *Sentinel*:

[I]f things are as they are painted by this as well as by many other writers, the south is indeed a dark and benighted region, and we need missionaries. But if the writer, who is evidently one of the best educated and intelligent of his race, would cast aside some of the prejudice which now blinds his eyes and think of some of the benefits his race has received from these southern people, he might write from a different standpoint. It is easy enough to magnify small things until they obscure the great things, ad [*sic*] if the writer of this book would think for a moment of the millions of educated and civilized Africans in this country and compare them with the savages they sprang from, he might see a little of the benefit his race has received from the whites.¹⁴⁷

One can hardly imagine a response more clearly designed to illustrate the failure of a realistic novel to function as an agent of social change. In response to his representation of conditions in the South, Chesnutt was told that he failed to be properly grateful for the benefits of the middle passage and enslavement of his African ancestors. As in the Columbian Exposition, though, there is a double move here: Africans are the baseline of barbarity against which the "progress" of Chesnutt as representative man is measured; at the same time, the taint of that ancestry is inescapable. Clearly, in the eyes of this reviewer, Chesnutt as "one of the best educated and most intelligent of his race" was representative of the inevitable failure of the project of education of African Americans. Since the novel, in the eyes of Southerners, was libelous, bearing no relation to the conditions on the ground, then Chesnutt illustrated the folly of educating African Americans, the folly of their attempt to imitate the forms of Euro-American art. This review, then, illustrates the way in which an African American artist was hemmed in during this period: what he intended as realism is taken by the reviewer as a fictional libel, and while Chesnutt protests the effects of prejudice, he was accused of prejudice in his turn. Instead of being seen as evidence of his race's progress, Chesnutt and his novel were read, astonishingly, as evidence of the failure of racial progress.

These reviewers perceive Chesnutt's novel as a provocation that broke part of the compact upon which the New South ideology rested—that the press was "to create a friendly atmosphere by playing down social conflict and radical movements."¹⁴⁸ If, as Chesnutt wrote in a 1904 letter, he classified himself as a member of the "more radical school" on the issue of "the rights of the Negro in the South,"¹⁴⁹ then that very radicalism contradicted fundamentally his desire to have a popular success with his "race problem" narratives. In another letter he wrote that "I think you understand how difficult it is to write race problem books

so that white people will read them,—and it is white people they are primarily aimed at. . . . If I could propose a remedy for existing evils that would cure them over night, I would be a great man.”¹⁵⁰ By the time of the failure of *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt realized the futility of utopian hopes like these in the racial climate of fin de siècle America, and he published almost nothing for the last twenty-five years of his life. He could no longer accept the kind of artistic compromises necessary when wearing the mask; he was no longer willing to write imitations of imitations. However, when he refused the mask and stepped outside of spectacle, his work was marginalized. His fictional silence between 1905 and 1920 had everything to do with his recognition of the trap in which he was caught as an artist, and rather than being dismissed as he was for writing *The Colonel's Dream*, he put his efforts, in the years immediately following that novel, into direct social action, both locally and nationally as a member of the NAACP.¹⁵¹

Conclusion: Representative Men a Hundred Years Later

While the youngest of these artists, Paul Laurence Dunbar, died first in 1906, Charles Waddell Chesnutt and Henry Ossawa Tanner lived long lives, and died within a few years of each other, Chesnutt in 1932 and Tanner in 1937. Clearly, by the 1930s they were perceived as artists stranded by the high tides of modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. The vogue for plantation fiction and dialect poetry had long passed, and Dunbar's reputation was in eclipse. Chesnutt had failed to publish any major fiction since 1905, and in Paris of the twenties and thirties, Tanner's artistic values must have been seen as anachronistic, an example of the very assumptions about art that modernism had successfully contested. Although in the 1930s Tanner and Chesnutt's artistic assumptions harkened back to the turn of the century, we can now see them as members of that first "lost generation" identified by Larzer Ziff, "the generation of the nineties . . . cut off before its time because it had started before its time."¹⁵² Ziff lists a number of writers whose careers, for a variety reasons, were truncated at the turn of the century, writers such as Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin, Frank Norris, and Harold Frederick. What is startling, from the perspective of almost thirty years later, is the complete absence of African Americans from this list. Certainly, Chesnutt and Dunbar, for a very different set of historical and political reasons, should be included among Ziff's generation of the nineties, a time when the United States, like Cronus, seemed to swallow its artistic children whole. But if Dunbar, Chesnutt, and Tanner can usefully be seen as members of this first lost generation of the 1890s, their dilemmas as artists are fundamentally different from those of their white counterparts. These African American artists all realized that they could not represent African American life without acknowledging white stereotypes, and they were left with a choice of acceding to those stereotypes or of contesting them. Chesnutt chose, in the last two novels published in his lifetime, relative confrontation, and although he wrote two more

novels, they remained unpublished until recently. In contrast, Tanner chose a subject matter that was not racially marked, and he became exclusively a painter of religious subjects.

Until very recently Chesnutt and Tanner were seen as failed representative race men. However, with Eric Sundquist's claim that "Chesnutt is among the major American fiction writers of the nineteenth century"¹⁵³ and with the major retrospective of Tanner's work in 1991-1992, an exhibition that traveled to Philadelphia, Detroit, Atlanta, and San Francisco, we are positioned to see their art and their dilemmas as artists in new ways. They illustrate the range of choices available to minority artists in a period where they had to sell their works to a white audience which was largely indifferent to African American experience outside of the genre of plantation tale, or actively hostile to the presence of African Americans on the cultural scene. Dunbar chose a version of invisibility: he took on the mask of whiteness, and the genres of plantation fiction and dialect poetry stifled him as an artist. In wearing the mask of whiteness in his white life novels, in contrast, he transgressed the color line, and those works were marginalized. Chesnutt, occupying a middle position, chose to subvert his audience's expectations in *The Conjure Woman*, and he then turned to confrontation, from an explicitly African American perspective, with *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream*. Tanner, on the other side, after his relatively few racialized works, takes on an unracialized subject matter, and goes on to have a successful career.

Perhaps another way to frame the dilemma these three artists faced is to look at the debate between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism about the issue of subversion, of whether discourses (and power relations) can actually be altered, something that all these artists attempted at some point in their careers. New Historicism is the more pessimistic, and seems to say that all resistance, all attempts at subversion are eventually co-opted. One could argue that this happened in the cases of Colored People's Day, the Negro Buildings, Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, Dunbar's white life novels, and Tanner's African American genre paintings. The efforts at resistance and subversion through self-representation were co-opted and misread in terms of the master narrative of nineteenth-century American racism. On the other hand, Cultural Materialists argue that "there are sufficient cracks and contradictions . . . to allow for some oppositional intervention."¹⁵⁴ However, it is difficult to see any successful "oppositional intervention" in the careers of these artists, that is any interventions that fundamentally altered the racial discourses of their time. In other words, all three, at some points in their careers, wanted to affect the racialized discourse of late-nineteenth-century America; all three wanted to exert leverage on America's racial imaginary. In that ambition, they failed. However, our recovery of their accomplishments makes for a retrospective reinsertion of subversion back into their time. In other words, their dilemmas, reinscribed into the narrative of their time, help us complete the task of subversive self-representation that they began.

Part of the dilemma that they experienced as artists was, as I have argued, the burden of self-representation. To the degree to which they were identified (and identified themselves) as "representative," they carried an additional obligation, one not borne by their white peers.¹⁵⁵ Since their artistic decisions, their successes and failures, were read by both black and white critics as symptoms of greater issues (of whether African Americans could compete with white artists; of whether they could counter stereotypical representations by representing with truthfulness and dignity African American life), their representative qualities could also be seen as an obstacle to their artistic development. (For instance, Dunbar couldn't write a novel set in the bars and music halls of New York City without a moralizing narrator who insured that his audience knew that he disapproved of what he was depicting.) They produced their art with the incubus of a white audience on their shoulders and with the knowledge of how they were representatives of the "best" of their race.

Thus, to the degree that critics have experienced disappointment at the careers of these artists, we are caught up in a version of the same historical dynamic. The disappointment comes from a sense that these artists should have somehow been able to transcend their times and move beyond the genres they inherited. We would quixotically (and ahistorically) like them to be unraced; we still believe that these artists should have been able to transcend the history that made the obligation for them to be representative African Americans rather than representative artists. One hundred years after their major contributions we are still enmeshed in the American racial imaginary. Charles W. Chesnutt, in one of his most trenchant disagreements with William Dean Howells, observed that Howells "has remarked several times that there is no color line in literature. On that point I take issue with him. I am pretty fairly convinced that the color line runs everywhere so far as the United States is concerned. . . ."¹⁵⁶ Living in the era of the color line, Dunbar, Chesnutt, and Tanner found that they could neither change racial discourse nor could they change the tradition of depiction of African Americans. Despite their artistic ambitions, they are examples of how minority artists a hundred years ago were circumscribed by their audience, and how despite that circumscription, they crafted a range of strategies that allowed them to create counterimages (in the case of Tanner and Chesnutt) of African Americans, and all three (despite truncations of their careers) did become successful representatives. However limited their successes, their very presence on the artistic scene helped to change, if not the discourse, the cultural climate. After the time of Dunbar, Chesnutt, and Tanner the African American artist was established as an unavoidable presence on the American scene.

Notes

1. The first draft of this essay was written with the support of a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar for College Teachers, "Slavery, Reconstruction, and the US Civil Imagination" directed by Donald Pease. A much shorter version was given at the American Studies Association conference in Nashville in 1994. For an essay that was a long time in gestation, a number of thanks are in order: First, I would like to thank the two anonymous readers for

American Studies whose responses have helped to improve this essay in too numerous to list. Secondly, I would like to thank David Katzman, one of the co-editors of *American Studies*, whose feedback at a crucial stage helped make this essay much more solid and coherent. At Penn State Harrisburg, I would like to thank my colleague, Sam Winch, for his help in reproducing "Darkies Day at the Fair." Finally, I would like to thank Howard Sachs, Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies, for a subvention to support the cost of reproducing Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson*.

2. Dunbar, Tanner, Chesnutt attended the fair. Dunbar was employed at the fair, where Frederick Douglass acted a mentor. Chesnutt attend with his wife in the summer of 1893, while Tanner attended in an official capacity: he exhibited a painting and spoke at the Congress on Africa, but the text of his talk has not been recovered.

3. R.W. Gilder, "The White City," *The Century*, 46 (May 1893): 22.

4. Charles W. Chesnutt, *Essays & Speeches*, ed. Joseph McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz III, and Jesse S. Crisler (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 187.

5. Albion Tourgée, "Brief for Homer A. Plessy," in *The Thin Disguise: Turning Point in Negro History; Plessy v. Ferguson: A Documentary Presentation (1864-1896)*, ed. Otto H. Olsen (New York: Humanities Press for American Institute for Marxist Studies, 1967), 98.

6. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "The Reason Why The Colored-American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition," *Selected Works*, ed. Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 49-50.

7. Anna R. Paddon and Sally Turner, "African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition," *Illinois Historical Journal* 88 (Spring 1995): 21-2.

8. Elliot Rudwick and August Meier, "Black Man in the 'White City': Negroes and the Columbian Exposition, 1893," *Phylon* 26 (Winter 1965): 357.

9. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 231.

10. Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition and American Culture* (Chicago: N. Hall, 1982), 131.

11. Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 231.

12. Edward R. McDowell, "The World's Fair Cosmopolis," *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, 36 (Oct. 1893): 415.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Wells-Barnett, "The Reason Why," 58. Christopher Reed has recently come close to calling Douglass a racist because of this statement. ". . . Douglass' condemnation of Dahomey simply demonstrated that he had succumbed to the same racist notions of Afrophobia that white American held" (Christopher Robert Reed. "*All the World Is Here!*" *The Black Presence at White City* [Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000], 5). Douglass's primary concern was with how white folks interpreted the presence of these Africans at the fair and with the connection made in their minds between Africans and those in the diaspora. At this locus of the celebration of the accomplishments of Euro-American civilization, no one was positioned to make the argument of cultural relativism or to try to understand Africans from their own points-of-view.

15. *The Dream City: World's Fair Art Series* 3 (November 23, 1893), n.p.

16. William S. Mc Feely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Norton, 1991), 368.

17. Gail Bederman, "Civilization, The Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells's Anti-Lynching Campaign (1892-1894)," in *Gender And American History Since 1890*, ed. Barbara Melosh (New York: Routledge, 1993), 213.

18. *Ibid.*, 32.

19. Frederick Perry Noble, "The Chicago Congress on Africa," *Our Day* 12 (Oct. 1883): 280.

20. *Ibid.*, 282.

21. Reed, "*All the World is Here!*" 179.

22. *Ibid.*, 180.

23. Laurence Levine has argued that the White City was to be construed as a kind of "Cital-del of Art" in which had been assembled the "greatest collection of painting, murals, and frescoes, and sculpture ever assembled in the United States." One "antithesis" of the White City was the Midway which for the "layman," *Frank Leslie's Weekly* wrote, "'not interested in the arts and sciences . . . will remain the great attraction of the fair.'" Here we see the beginnings of the split between high and low culture which will become solidified a few years later. Laurence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 210.

24. Reed, "*All the World is Here!*" 47.

25. *Ibid.*, 179.

26. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 370.

27. It is important to note the predominance of classical music selections. What was missing from Colored People's Day was vernacular African American music, the absence of which is relatively easy to account for. That music was not genteel; it had the taint of its folk origins. However, one could argue that music was an artistic venue that was exempt from the cultural

pressures I am describing in this essay. Houston Baker has argued, for instance, that the Fisk Jubilee Singers, "carried the actual sound of Afro-American spiritual strivings—the articulate cries of slaves to the world," and that they carried their sound to "enraptured audiences both at home and abroad," Houston Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 66. If the Fisk Jubilee Singers were accorded a certain degree of acceptability by white audiences, and if their songs were not received in terms of racial ideology, then there would seem to be at least one venue in which African American artistic aspirations were not baffled at the turn of the century. From the point of view of the musicologist, Samuel A. Floyd, however, the example of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, is more complicated than Baker allows. Floyd argues that in the hands of the Fisk Jubilee Singers "the powerful Negro spiritual had been transformed into a fine imitation of itself" and that their versions of spirituals had taken "on the trappings and characteristics of European choral singing." Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 61, 64. Although the dynamic is slightly different here—spirituals are, after all, an African American vernacular form—it is still the case that African American experience was mediated in this period through white cultural expectations, and in the process the spiritual lost some of its force, originality, and power. Even if that is conceded, though, one still might want to argue that the success of the Fisk Jubilee Singers signaled a cultural shift—that the presence of African American performers on American stages meant, as James H. Dorman has argued about the coon song craze of 1890-1910, that African American performers were able to earn a living and that ultimately, with the rise of ragtime, elements of African American culture were able to earn a degree of acceptance, for "the popularity of coon songs cleared the way" for ragtime's "acceptance and ultimately its popularity." James Dorman, "Shaping the Popular Image of Blacks: The 'Coon Song' Phenomenon of the Gilded Age," *American Quarterly* 40 (Dec. 1988), 467. Until ragtime, though, the new visibility of African American performers meant their co-optation and the baffling of their artistic ambitions—and perhaps the best example is the performers Bert Williams and George Walker—African American men who performed coon songs in black face, "blacks playing whites playing blacks" (Dorman, 454). In other words, as long as African American artists conformed to received stereotypes, they were free to try to subvert those stereotypes from within as much as they wanted to. Having conceded the grounds of representation, these artists were free to signify subversion to their own communities, while their performances were received by white audiences as simple confirmations of racial ideology.

28. Paddon and Tuner, "African Americans and the . . . Exposition," 32. It is recorded that Dunbar read a poem entitled, "The Colored Americans," on Colored People's Day. Since there is no poem of that name in his oeuvre Virginia Cunningham speculates that he read "Colored Soldiers," a poem in which the speaker sings a "stirring song . . . a song heroic./Of those noble sons of Ham . . ." Toward the end of the poem, Dunbar shifts the poem away from history to the present:

They were comrades then and brothers,
Are they more or less to-day?
They were good to stop a bullet
And to front the fearful fray.
They were citizens and soldiers,
When rebellion raised its head;
And the traits that made them worthy,—
Ah! those virtues are not dead.

If Dunbar read this poem, clearly it was a challenge to whatever white listeners were present and a brave political intervention in a period when African Americans were being progressively deprived of their political rights. Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1965), 77, 79.

29. McFeeley, *Frederick Douglass*, 370.

30. Reed, "All the World is Here!" 133.

31. Robert Secor, "Puck," *American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals*, ed. David E. E. Sloane. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 219.

32. Frederick Burr Opper, "Darkies' Day at the Fair," *Revisiting the White City: American Art at the 1893 World's Fair* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art: National Portrait Gallery; dist. by University Press of New England, 1993), 54.

33. Virginia Cunningham, *Paul Laurence Dunbar and His Song* (1947; reprint, New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1969), 103. McFeeley in his biography of Frederick Douglass records this incident, relying on Cunningham's biography. I have been unable to find another contemporary account of the incident.

34. Reed, "All the World is Here!" 194.

35. Wells-Barnett, "The Reason Why," 54-55.

36. Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 55.

37. *Ibid.*, 87. Although the Chicago Fair didn't have anything as fully developed as the Old Plantation, there are precursors to its development. "In the Hall of Agriculture, old former slaves sold miniature cotton bales as souvenirs, and in the Louisiana Building, an antebellum creole kitchen showcased 'snowily turbaned and aproned colored cooks and waiters . . . superintended by young ladies of Caucasian blood. . .'" The figure of Aunt Jemima was also introduced at the fair. Paddon and Turner, "African Americans and the . . . Exposition," 29.

38. Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake The Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 273.

39. I. Garland Penn, "The Awakening of a Race," *The Cotton States and International Exposition and South, Illustrated* (Atlanta: The Illustrator Company, 1896): 60.

40. W.Y. Atkinson, "The Atlanta Exposition," *North American Review* CLXI (Oct. 1895): 392.

41. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 85.

42. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 87.

43. Penn, "The Awakening of a Race," 91.

44. Cleveland wrote about Washington's speech that "I think that the Exposition would be fully justified if it did not do more than furnish the opportunity for its delivery," Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 160.

45. Henry Louis Gates, "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 129.

46. William Dean Howells, "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories," *Atlantic Monthly* 85 (May 1900): 701.

47. *Ibid.*

48. William L. Andrews, "William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt: Criticism and Race Fiction in the Age of Booker T. Washington," *American Literature* 48 (Nov. 1976): 333.

49. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: H. Holt, 1993), 178.

50. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Evolution of Negro Leadership," *Booker T. Washington Papers: 1901-1902*, vol. 6, ed. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 178.

51. *Ibid.*, 259.

52. See the fascinating discussion in Lewis, *Du Bois*, of the activities of the Southern Education Board and the General Education Board in the South at the turn of the century (Chapter 11).

53. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Hopeful Signs for the Negro," *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals, Edited by Others: 1891-1909*, vol. 1, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1982), 149.

54. *Ibid.*, 151.

55. Thomas Jefferson, *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 266.

56. Noble, "The Chicago Congress on Africa," 285.

57. The failure, though, of any of these artists could also be read as symptomatic. In other words, these artists labored under the burden of their knowledge of their representative status. Their failures as artists in this period would always be read as a failure for the race, rather than being, as I will argue, with both Chesnutt and Tanner, seen as evidence of their integrity and, in a sense, their idealism.

58. Lewis, *Du Bois*, 502.

59. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Social Origins of American Negro Art," *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals, Edited by Others: 1910-1934*, vol. 2, ed. by Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1982), 269.

60. Dickson Bruce, *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 8. For instance, if one compares Stephen Crane's narrator in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) with the narrator of Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) the commitment to gentility becomes very clear. Crane's narrator stands off from the scenes of New York low life he describes, while Dunbar's narrator is overly censorious, constantly reminding the reader of the degree to which he disapproves of the life of the demimonde.

61. Bruce, *Black American Writing*, 10. The only one of Chesnutt's characters who goes beyond the bounds of gentility is Josh Green in *The Marrow of Tradition*, the potential African American revolutionary who tries to defend his community and who dies avenging the death of his mother.

62. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 102.

63. William Dean Howells, "Introduction to Lyrics of Lowly Life," in *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1935), viii.

64. *Ibid.*, x.

65. *Ibid.*, viii-ix.

66. *Ibid.*, ix-x.
67. Baker, *Modernism*, 39.
68. Dunbar, *The Complete Poems*, 112-113.
69. Baker, *Modernism*, 39.
70. James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: The Viking Press, 1933), 159.
71. *Ibid.*
72. James Weldon Johnson, "Preface to the First Edition," *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931), 35-36.
73. Dunbar, *The Complete Poems*, 107-108.
74. Joanne M. Braxton, "Introduction: The Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar," *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Charlottesville, Virg.: University Press of Virginia, 1993), xxvii.
75. *Ibid.*, xxviii.
76. The cultural authority of an African American speaker gives this nostalgic depiction of the antebellum South a kind of cultural authority impossible in a white speaker. As hard as it is to believe today, white Americans apparently did believe that representations like these in plantation school stories and dialect poetry (mostly written by white writers) represented slavery accurately. While "[t]he image of the loyal slave may be one of the most hackneyed clichés in American history, . . . no understanding of the place of race in Civil War memory is possible without confronting its ubiquitous uses in turn-of-the-century culture." David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 284.
77. Keeling argues that "we may see Dunbar's dialect poems as affecting the overwrought comedy and pathos of the Plantation Tradition as a way to undermine their stereotypical effectiveness," John Keeling, "Paul Dunbar and the Mask of Dialect," *Southern Literary Journal* 25 (Spring 1993): 34.
78. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 49.
79. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 6.
80. To be "unraced" is to step outside of the American racial binary, to get out from under the burden of being representative. Of course, the default position is whiteness, the unmarked racial marker. So one could say that Dunbar, by writing in this genre was writing as if he had no race, that is he was writing as if he were white, in whiteface. Of course, his race is already well known, as he could not, as Chesnut did when his stories were being published in magazines, write under the protective coloration of the audience's assumption that he was white.
81. Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Uncalled* (1898; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 79.
82. Roger Rosenblatt, *Black Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 131.
83. *Ibid.*, 136.
84. There was, of course, no racial symmetry in this period. White writers considered themselves untrammelled by any racial constraints. No one had any problem with a white writer, such as Joel Chandler Harris or Thomas Nelson Page, or the plethora of their white imitators, writing in the voice of an African American man. Nor did critics have any problem with the Midwestern Dunbar representing the experiences of rural Southern black folk in his own plantation tales because those performances were seen as simple and uncomplicated.
85. Kenny J. Williams, "The Masking of the Novelist," *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Jay Martin (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975), 174.
86. Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Love of Landry*. (1900; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 37-38.
87. *Ibid.*, 46-47.
88. Dunbar's final novel, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) presents a more complicated case which I cannot discuss at length here. The novel moves from the rural South to New York City, and in the portions set in New York, Dunbar moves into new imaginative territory, the underworld of bars and cabarets. In its depiction of a family ruined by urban experience, *The Sport of the Gods* is exploring the terrain that Stephen Crane had broken into in *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893). However, Dunbar's highly moralizing narrator makes clear that the reader knows of his disapproval of this environment. Dunbar is still in thrall to notions of gentility that Crane and Dreiser had recently rejected.
89. Quoted in Jennifer J. Harper, "The Early Religious Paintings of Henry Ossawa Tanner: A Study of the Influences of Church, Family, and Era," *American Art* 6 (Fall 1992): 75.
90. Maurice Frank Woods, "Lending Color to Canvas: Henry O. Tanner's African-American Themes," *American Visions* 61 (Feb. 1991): 14.
91. Joseph Pennell, *The Adventures of An Illustrator* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1925), 53-54.

92. Albert Boime, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's Subversion of Genre," *The Art Bulletin* 75 (Sept. 1993): 417-18.

93. *Ibid.*, 418.

94. Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 484.

95. In 1887, Chesnutt seriously entertained the idea of emigration, a possibility bankrolled by a white man, one Judge Williamson, who was willing to advance Chesnutt the money to move to London. Chesnutt decided to stay because, his daughter wrote, he was an "idealist" who "felt that success in his own country against terrific odds would be worth more than success in a foreign country" (Helen Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Pioneer of the Color Line* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952], 41).

96. Dewey F. Mosby and Darrell Sewell, *Henry Ossawa Tanner* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1991), 106.

97. Boime, "Tanner's Subversion," 419.

98. Mosby and Sewell, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 124.

99. Ogden was a member of the Southern Education Board (Lewis, *Du Bois*, 266), and one of a group of northern paternalists who endorsed, with their money, Washington's view of the relations of African Americans and whites in the South. From his point of view, *The Banjo Lesson* could be read as the kind of reality endorsed by Washington, the simple, uneducated, unthreatening black folks, an image that leaves out the problematic generation represented by Tanner and Chesnutt themselves.

100. Mosby and Sewell, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 122.

101. *The Cotton States and International Exposition and South, Illustrated*, 62. Here we see enacted the split between high and low culture, and Tanner's painting could only be exhibited on the low side, in a building dedicated to the industrial arts.

102. Dewey F. Mosby, *Across Continents and Cultures: The Art and Life of Henry Ossawa Tanner* (Kansas City: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1995), 33. In an article on Tanner published in the Washington *Colored American*, Booker T. Washington chides his audience for not giving "him that practical and substantial support which it might have done," Booker T. Washington, "To the Editor of the Washington *Colored American*," *Booker T. Washington Papers: 1899-1900*, vol. 5, ed. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 143

103. Boime, "Tanner's Subversion," 423.

104. Chesnutt faces much the same problem and uses much the same strategy in his 1899 volume of stories *The Conjure Woman*, where the African American storyteller and conjurer, Uncle Julius, is elderly as well. In "Mars Jeem's Nightmare," Julius introduces his grandson to his employers, but, as in Tanner's two paintings, the father is completely absent.

105. Mosby and Sewell, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 124.

106. Harper, "Early Religious Paintings," 76.

107. Chesnutt, *Essays and Speeches*, 338.

108. Mosby and Sewell, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 139.

109. Chesnutt, *Essays and Speeches*, 338.

110. Marcia M. Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 143.

111. Boime, "Tanner's Subversion," 438.

112. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 108.

113. *Ibid.*, 198.

114. Washington never argued that African Americans should be denied higher education; he argued that such education should be postponed for the present. For instance in his book *The Future of the American Negro* (1899; reprint, in *Booker T. Washington Papers, 1899-1900*, vol. 5), Washington gave several examples of "mistaken sort[s] of education." He used the example of young man in a poverty stricken cabin in the South who was "studying French grammar" (315), an example which he changes to the study of Latin and Greek in his autobiography, *Up from Slavery*. In *The Future of the American Negro*, he went on to list one "of the saddest sights" he had ever seen: "the placing of a three hundred dollar rosewood piano in a country school in the South that was located in the midst of the 'Black Belt.' Am I arguing against the teaching of instrumental music to the Negroes in that community? Not at all; only I should have deferred those music lessons about twenty-five years" (315). Given the state of economic underdevelopment of most rural African Americans in the South in this period, Washington advocated spending the three hundred dollars in ways that would have been of more direct economic use to the community. However, he was also telling the young man or young woman who wanted to play piano that it was necessary to defer his or her artistic ambitions. Furthermore, his deriding of the pretensions to higher education would have had, I believe, a tendency to confirm in his white audience their stereotype that African Americans were incapable of high intellectual achievements.

115. In the light of recent reassessments of the career of Booker T. Washington, I realize that my claims in this paragraph are rather harsh. Clearly, as critics have argued, Washington was more subtle than he has been given credit for: while mastering (in Houston Baker's terms) the

form of the minstrel mask in a performance like the Atlanta Compromise Speech, he also privately supported anti-racist initiatives that would have lost him credibility with whites had they become known publicly. These complexities, however, do not, I believe, undermine my contention above that Washington's public performances, especially in *Up From Slavery* and in his many speeches, made it more difficult for African American artists to have successful careers, because these performances confirmed pre-existing stereotypes in his white audience. Of course, Washington was encouraged by the representative success of African American artists like Tanner, but to the degree to which Washington ridiculed the pretensions of African Americans to higher education, he limited the ability of African American artists to compete successfully with their white peers.

116. Quoted in Harper, "Early Religious Paintings," 72.
117. Harper, "Early Religious Paintings," 84.
118. Mosby and Sewell, *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 146.
119. Daniel Garrett, "Behind a Veil," *Art & Antiques* 8 (Feb. 1991): 96.
120. Woods, "Lending Color to Canvas," 20.
121. Charles W. Chesnutt, "Remarks of Charles W. Chesnutt, of Cleveland, in Accepting the Spingarn Medal at Los Angeles," *Essays & Speeches*, 514.
122. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Richard Brodhead (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 125.
123. Matthew Wilson, "Who Has The Right to Say? Charles W. Chesnutt, Whiteness and the Public Sphere," *College Literature* 26 (Spring 1999): 18-35.
124. Chesnutt betrayed almost no awareness of Twain as a writer. Although there are almost no references to Twain in Chesnutt's correspondence or in his essays and lectures, Chesnutt was clearly revising the plot of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in his two novels of the 1920s, *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* and *The Quarry*.
125. One could argue that Chesnutt was wearing the mask of whiteness when he first published the conjure stories in magazines. His race wasn't revealed until William Dean Howells outed him in his review of *The Conjure Woman*. Chesnutt's first readers simply assumed that he was another white writer employing the genre of plantation fiction.
126. See Charles Duncan, *The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1998).
127. Chesnutt's unpublished white life novels are: *A Business Career*, *The Rainbow Chasers*, and *Evelyn's Husband*. *A Business Career* was rejected by Houghton Mifflin in March 1898 (*To Be An Author: Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr and Robert C. Leitz, III (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 104 n1), and while *The Rainbow Chasers* had apparently been accepted by Houghton Mifflin, the publisher decided to take *The House Behind the Cedars* in its place (Helen Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, 146). The third of his white novels, *Evelyn's Husband*, must have been written after *The Marrow of Tradition*; William L. Andrews notes that it was rejected by McClure Phillips in 1903 (Andrews, *Literary Career*, 131). Each of these novels has a romance at its center, but each fuses another genre with the romance: *A Business Career* has a working girl as its main character; *The Rainbow Chasers* is a comic mystery, while *Evelyn's Husband* is a society romance that mutates into an adventure novel.
128. *Ibid.*, 139.
129. Chesnutt, *Essays & Speeches*, 514.
130. Charles Duncan, *The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt*, (Athens, Ohio, 1998), 6.
131. Theodore Parker argued in "The American Scholar" (1849) that the slave narrative was the only genre that had been invented on our soil, and it's interesting that only in recent years have African American writers, such as Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson, returned to an exploration of the slave experience. Theodore Parker, *The Works of Theodore Parker*, vol. 8, ed. George Willis Cooke (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1911), 37.
132. Thomas Nelson Page, *The Works of Thomas Nelson Page*, vol. 1 (1887; reprint, Ridgewood, N.J.: Gregg Press, 1968), 13.
133. As early as 1889, in a humorous sketch published in *Puck*, Chesnutt had begun his career of subversion. "A Roman Antique" is a sly satire of plantation school stories, with a two thousand year old African American man reminiscing about being a slave of Julius Caesar's (and saving Caesar during the war in Gaul). Chesnutt parodied the plantation school in the last words of the old African American man: "'Ah but dem wuz good ole times!'" Charles Chesnutt, *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Sylvia Lyons Render (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981), 76, a direct allusion to Thomas Nelson Page's "Marse Chan" published in 1887.
134. Craig Werner, "The Framing of Charles W. Chesnutt," *Southern Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Jefferson Humphries (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 351.
135. Chesnutt, *To Be An Author*, 160-161.
136. Chesnutt, *To Be An Author*, 161.
137. Richard H. Brodhead, "Hawthorne Among the Realists," *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 38.

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138. Chesnutt, *Letters*, 146.

139. Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* also has, as the lynchpin of the plot, a robbery by a young Southern aristocrat; of course, an African American man is blamed. It is as if Chesnutt and Dunbar were consciously reversing the trope of degeneracy: in place of the degeneracy of the former slaves or the degeneracy of mulattos in the racial imagination, they substitute the degeneracy of the generation of "new aristocrats," those born since the Civil War.

140. William Dean Howells, "An Exemplary Citizen," *Booker T. Washington Papers, 1901-1902*, vol. 6, ed. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 195-196.

141. William Dean Howells, "A Psychological Counter-Current in Recent Fiction," *North American Review* 173 (Dec. 1901): 882.

142. William Dean Howells to Henry B. Fuller, 10 Nov. 1901, in *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells*, ed. Mildred Howells (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Foran & Company, Inc., 1928), 149.

143. "The 'Wellington' Revolution," Rev. of *The Marrow of Tradition*, by Charles W. Chesnutt, Wilmington, N.C. *Standard* 7 Jan. 1902, The Charles W. Chesnutt Papers, Special Collections, Fisk University Library.

144. Chesnutt, *Letters*, 213.

145. Review of *The Colonel's Dream*, by Charles W. Chesnutt, Richmond, Virg. *Leader* 30 September 1905, Chesnutt Papers, Special Collections, Fisk University Library

146. Review of *The Colonel's Dream*, by Charles W. Chesnutt, Nashville, Tenn., *Banner* 29 October 1905, Chesnutt Papers, Special Collections, Fisk University Library.

147. Review of *The Colonel's Dream*, by Charles W. Chesnutt, Knoxville *Sentinel*, 28 October 1905, Chesnutt Papers, Special Collections, Fisk University Library.

148. Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Knopf, 1970), 73.

149. Chesnutt, *To Be An Author*, 208.

150. *Ibid.*, 156.

151. When Chesnutt started writing again in the 1920s, he had become as embittered as Howells alleged he was at the time of *The Marrow of Tradition*. The first novel he wrote after his fifteen year silence, *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* is the bitterest of all his fictions; he had apparently given up his belief in the power of fiction to effect social change, and he was in despair about the racial situation in the United States after World War I. The second novel, *The Quarry*, is relatively optimistic, a change in his stance that was a result of the Harlem Renaissance and the seeming greater acceptance of African American writers in the late-1920s.

152. Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 348.

153. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 12.

154. John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 10.

155. A slight qualification is necessary here: immigrant writers such as Abraham Cahan and Sui Sin Far carried the same burden of being representative, but they didn't have the burden of a history of enslavement. Although they weren't quite white in this period, neither were they black. They inhabited a liminal space between the two races.

156. Chesnutt, *Letters* 171.