

Feeling Oceanic: Racial Identity and Postbellum Drift

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In his “Iconology of Wrecked or Stranded Boats” (1993), David C. Miller argues that the appearance of shipwrecks in much mid- to late nineteenth-century American nautical landscape painting differs in kind from the traditional European subgenre: Here “we are engaged not with a sense of action or with the fate of human actors, but with a feeling of aftermath.”¹ In such paintings, produced by Claude Josef Vernet, Francis Augusta Silva, Fitz Hugh Lane, and several others in the immediate postbellum period, “[a]ny suspense or thought of futurity dissolves [and we] anticipate nothing more than the advent of darkness and a slow, indiscernible process of decay.”² Miller reads shipwreck iconology on the shores of Sacvan Bercovitch’s America in the context of millenarian concerns and the nation’s New World mission. Beginning with Silva’s aptly titled and dated *The Schooner “Progress” Wrecked at Coney Island, July 4, 1874*, Miller sees in the picture’s shattered hull “an end to millennial hopes and republican virtue” that signals contemporaneous political rhetoric, from a *New York Herald* editorial, that utilized the analogy of a “disorganized, demoralized condition of democracy, stranded and wrecked.”³

Rhetorically, one might conclude paintings like Silva’s extend the Hudson River School’s progressive panoramas (Asher B. Durand’s *Progress* is the obvious dialectical counterpart) toward a moment of national crisis. Where Miller finds a “tense opposition between two orders of awareness” in the luminist shipwreck scene—most significantly the tension between linear, progressive history and the circular time of eternal return—he also finds an aesthetic fissure that marks “the end of the American artist’s own prophetic quest.”⁴ In what follows, however, we challenge the notion that “feelings of aftermath” characteristic of this strain of luminist art speak the affective register proper to postbellum American culture more broadly. For while these meditative pictures may well contain the spatiotemporal contradictions Miller identifies,

they also establish the observer as a subject back on sturdy ground after stormy conflict. So whereas categorizations like Miller's privilege the weight of nationalistic projects run aground while maintaining the affective unity of a single imagined community, we propose a strain in American visual culture and literature that represents raced and gendered subjects as still "out at sea," navigating ungrounded traditions and identities that extend beyond the official borders of the United States.



Figure 1. J. M. W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying — Typhoon Coming On* (1840). Oil on canvas, 90.8 cm × 122.6 cm (35.7 in × 48.3 in). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

In what follows, we draw a historiographical line from J. M. W. Turner's *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On* (1840)—a representation of the Zong massacre—to Charles Chesnutt's novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). We invoke Turner's painting because, while not initially an American work of art, it crossed the Atlantic in the postbellum period and thereby floated in a hermeneutic sea of competing interpretations often overdetermined by racial politics and anxieties. Turner's optical opacities render Black bodies faceless and fragmentary while also pulling the ground out from under the nominal spectator, an effect that joins typical period representations of Black enslaved seamen and other sailors with a self-reflexive counterpressure that implicates viewers (and readers) in sense-making operations that dissolve as much as they congeal (see Figure 1).⁵ We offer a transatlantic reading

of the painting that foreshadows postbellum concerns about the raced subject—specified more thoroughly by a precise and sophisticated writer like Chesnutt—as it contends with identitarian drift.

In Chesnutt's narrative we find an unexpected intrusion of the oceanic (through a shipwreck nightmare) into the life of a Reconstruction-era woman who must come to grips with the specter of the sea's between-space as the fluctuating nonsite where racial identity and ideology is formed and potentially re-formed. Olivia Carteret's dreamscape coincides at the novel's climax with the 1898 Wilmington riot, a white supremacist takeover of the local government. Shipwrecked and floating on the open water with her son, she discovers her mixed-race half sister, Janet, on an approaching boat. As a major conceit of the dream's narrative, Olivia's understanding of the legal and social stability of her son's whiteness and the legitimacy of his inheritance is thrown into crisis as she is confronted with recognizing Janet as kin. We will examine this scene in more detail as we aim to show how postbellum writers and artists appealed to the oceanic as an affective medium or canvas upon which negotiations of raced and gendered identities play out. We appeal to the oceanic as a way of understanding the placelessness (in American art and culture) of those subjects caught between national and ethnic imaginaries, marooned in the offing beyond the tranquil vistas of the luminist thermidor.

Chains That Float

Whereas critics like Miller stay largely in the realm of allegory in their analysis, we follow Hester Blum in her emphatic scholarly revisionism: "The sea is not a metaphor."⁶ Or, at least, the sea is too large and contains too much to stay neatly in the realm of metaphor, and what is often most interesting about oceanic aesthetics is what Hester Blum calls the problem of "what is literal in the face of the sea's abyss of representation."⁷ It bears repeating her quotation of William Boelhower, an Americanist who was always more comfortable on the continent, which concisely rolls out the greatest hits of maritime abstraction: the ocean is "fundamentally a space of dispersion, conjunction, distribution, contingency, heterogeneity, and of intersecting and stratified lines and images—in short, a field of strategic possibilities in which the Oceanic order holds all together in a common but highly fluid space."⁸ Boelhower uses "space" the way institutionalists readily apply spatial metaphors to fundamentally conceptual entities or the way we call a blank canvas a "space" when what we really mean is that it is a plane or screen and not a bounded, measurable, concrete, material thing.

So what *is* literal in the face of the sea's abyss of representation? Take Turner, for example, whose success and acquired wealth at the beginning of the nineteenth century led him to seek diversified, international investments, one of which was in a Jamaican sugar plantation. His livelihood tied up in the Atlantic slavery trade, Turner was unaware of (or at least relatively untouched by) the 1781 massacre on the British

slaver Zong until he read Thomas Clarkson's *The History and Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1808). The English abolitionist Clarkson relates the gruesome story: because the Liverpool-based Gregson slavetrading company had taken out life insurance on their cargo (the enslaved Africans they carried across the Middle Passage), and because the ship was running low on supplies to keep many of them alive before docking in Jamaica, its crew killed and drowned one hundred thirty-three of their captives and attempted to cash in their claims. For Turner, who was committed to exhibit work for the 1840 opening of the World Anti-Slavery Convention, this story made for the perfect subject. The massacre was a hard, brutal fact to be subsequently shaped (even as it was already shaped rhetorically in second- and thirdhand discourse) through late-Romantic painterly techniques.

We should be clear now where we were not before: Turner's *Slave Ship* is not necessarily a direct representation of the Zong event. Almost every critic acknowledges that it is at least there in the (figurative) background. But Ian Warrell notes, referencing its belated exhibition, that the picture "seems more urgently intended to highlight the continued practice of dumping slaves at sea by foreign traders in their efforts to evade capture by British patrol boats," a tragic historical continuum that gives the painting's approaching storm an ambiguous temporal dimension.⁹ Is it approaching from the future or the past? In which direction does the angel of history really look? The question is complicated by the fact that it is a sunset scene, which means that the Americas sit (at least notionally) at the vanishing point, with England on the other side of the picture plane (the position of the viewer), and the storm collapsing upon the ship as if intervening to cut off smooth passage. What really intervenes between here and there, and what provides such horrific tactility to the scene and the aqueous canvas upon which history draws its calamities, is the carnal body.

The painting looks like it could be any other Turner picture were it not for the tiny hands reaching out from the waves and iron chattel chains spread out like driftwood. As John Ruskin, history's greatest champion of the painting, notes in 1843, these details modulate the Turneresque sunset imagery into a new key, the canvas shining with an

awful but glorious light, the intense and lurid splendor which burns like gold and bathes like blood ... [the ship's] thin mast written on the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight—and cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous seas.¹⁰

"Sepulchral waves," Ruskin writes, in a Burkean formulation of "the most sublime of subjects ... the power, majesty and deathfulness of the open, deep, illimitable sea."¹¹ Ruskin's defense of Turner's widely criticized painting thus stays firmly in the Romantic

register, with the underlying gothic truth (a truth of history, not nature only) the black hole at the center of his aestheticism. The bodies are cut by the ocean's undulating surface, and the terror is indeed faceless, always a seascape rather than a conventional historical tableau with identifiable actors: Slavery remains an abstract "site of black victimage."¹² The viewer finds herself in a hermeneutic predicament insofar as she lacks a stable conceptual position from which to view the scene. She looks from Europe to America but finds herself out at sea, positioned neither with those who are drowning nor with the slavers aboard the vessel.¹³

One cannot suppose a stable overview so common to Romantic magisterial prospects in nineteenth-century literature and painting. Turner places us neither above Tintern Abbey nor the meandering oxbow of the Connecticut River, and the gruesome collage of hands and limbs boils rather than suspends "the motion of our human blood," wakes rather than lays us "asleep / In body," activates a form of seeing more active than the Wordsworthian "eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony."¹⁴ Rather, Turner enforces a restlessness of vision as the result of what Lawrence Gowing calls "the indefinite transmission and dispersal of light by an infinite series of reflections from an endless variety of surfaces and materials, each contributing its own colour that mingles with every other, penetrating ultimately to every recess, reflected everywhere."¹⁵ Jonathan Crary takes Turner's stylistic impulse to be the key example of "the breakdown of the perceptual model of the camera obscura," the eighteenth century's favored technical analogy for human sight: "Seemingly out of nowhere, his painting of the late 1830s and 1840s signals the irrevocable loss of a fixed source of light, the dissolution of a cone of light rays, and the collapse of the distance separating an observer from the site of optical experience."¹⁶

On such an account, for all his magnificent shine, Turner follows Goethe's sober, early-century acceptance of opacity as a crucial and productive component of vision: Whereas discourses on visibility conventionally repressed and concealed whatever threatened the transparency of an optical system, Goethe reverses and instead poses the opacity of the observer as a necessary condition for the appearance of phenomena ("[p]erception occurs within the realm of what Goethe called *das Trübe*—the turbid, cloudy, or gloomy," and "[p]ure light and pure transparency are now beyond the limits of human visibility"¹⁷). Turner's *sfumato* breaks the chains that bind eighteenth-century geometrical optics, but the chains that bind limbs break through the hazy *sfumato*. Mark Twain criticized "the floating of iron cable-chains and other unfloatable things" in the painting, but the "lie" Twain isolates can be alternatively seen as its ultimate *truth*, the kernel of the real as an exception that destabilizes the romantic veneer.¹⁸ And to the extent that blackness marks the absence of color, the Black body is Romantic representation's margin, the ultimate limit of Turner's painterly style, and is thus pushed underwater, grasping towards transcendence only to take on the character of optical opacity, the flipside of the groundless *Abgrund* of bourgeois spectatorship.

The painting's transatlantic circulation went hand in hand with the decoupling of spectator and ground affected by Turner's composition and style; the former seemed to obey the laws of the latter. Perhaps it is no coincidence that, despite very few Turner originals appearing in America during the nineteenth century, the *Slave Ship* crossed the ocean in 1872, leaving Ruskin's hands to enter John Taylor Johnston's collection in New York. Immensely popular there, Turner's painting was also displayed at the Metropolitan Museum in 1873, 1874, and 1876. It achieved immediate notoriety in the United States thanks to the success of *Modern Painters I's* American edition (1847), but it took some time for its reception to acquire a particularly liberal valence amongst northerners in the postbellum period. One critic wrote, in a December 1876 issue of the *New York Times*: "It is for the great artist's vision of a slaver in peril at sea that the average art-pilgrim looks for. He finds only a miracle of light and color."¹⁹ As John McCoubrey notes, several writers who took the temperature of the Met-going "art pilgrims" during those years "ignored the victims of jettison or the painting's broader connection to abolition," in the above case "casually sanitiz[ing] its subject by referring to it simply as 'a slaver in peril.'"²⁰

In the autumn of 1876, Bostonian Alice Hooper purchased Turner's painting for ten thousand dollars, a sum exceeding any previous sale of a European painting in America. On display at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the *Slave Ship* met a more forcefully abolitionist community and an entirely different critical response:

Did ever 'golden sunlight' suggest such frightful antitheses of simple gladness and sunny peace? What is there to admire in this picture, I answer, Nothing! Turner's *Slave Ship* has a loftier mission than to be admired. It is an ideal painting before which one shudders. It is a picture of moans and tears and groans and shrieks. Look at it. Every tint and shade and line throbs with death and terror and blood. The very mists about the guilty ship are pale hands stretched heavenward in ghastly despair. The clouds blaze with the divine wrath of condemnation. The sea is a chaos of doom. Turner's 'Slave Ship' is the embodiment of a giant protest; it is a mighty voice, eloquent, crying out against human oppression. Oh you who echo that sneer from New York that Boston knows not what to do with Turner's 'Slave Ship'—go down to your Art Museum, sit at its feet, and it will preach to your souls a profounder sermon than the ears of your churches will hear.²¹

The pure shine of Turner's color dropped out of the mainstream critical picture in Boston. Thomas G. Appleton, the museum's director, asked patrons to focus on those "floating limbs, those long and wallowing waves, the sinister and dark hull of that

floating hell, the flaming swords of vengeance flashing through an accusing heaven,” claiming further that Turner’s representation was meant to denaturalize the event of the massacre and larger slavery trade rather than integrate it into the natural world.²²

McCoubrey argues that critical–abolitionist readings of the painting went hand in hand with the “diminished stature” of Ruskin as an aesthetic authority in America.²³ During its Boston years, critics turned primarily to political history rather than art history for interpretive answers. Even as Turner’s late-century fame sent the work’s reputation skyward, its American circulation progressed according to an increasing criticalization that grappled with the painting’s place within a larger tendency in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visual art that, as Geoff Quilley argues, “strip[ped] the identities of those significant groups, communities and classes of people, who (per)formed the material, economic circulation of labour and goods that embodied the development of circum-Atlantic capitalism: slaves, sailors, dock workers and other sections of the labouring classes.”²⁴ Quilley’s use of *identity* here refers to a sense of subjective depth and agency. Whether considered as a fully intentional effect on artists’ parts or via a more critical–symptomatic reading, one question came to the fore at the end of the Reconstruction period: Why are Blacks and sailors (and especially Black sailors) stripped of their “identities” throughout the long century’s maritime visual culture?

Quilley is hardly the only scholar to turn to Olaudah Equiano for answers, specifically the latter’s book, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789). Much like other contemporary and nineteenth-century slavery narratives, Equiano’s tells the story of his own struggle and escape to freedom. But this linear narrative is overlaid with an oscillatory structure, the story of an in-between bicultural identity that allows for the Black sailor to avoid “becoming either totally co-opted by or totally alienated from the Western socio-cultural order.”²⁵ Quilley further overlays these structures upon the world that give Equiano’s world its geographical sense, so that Equiano’s biracial identity “renders his autobiography a truly circum-Atlantic production and leaves his sense of home, belonging, and what is his own as free-floating.”²⁶ Rhetorically, Quilley’s use of *float*—in the twentieth century a term commonly used by structuralists to refer to the empty, moveable elements in a linguistic or social system—connects the oceanic to the subjective, the cartographic to the social. Quilley’s ultimate point about sailors and the enslaved is that they share floating identities tied to an elision (in narrative) of property or ownership: “as a sailor labouring at sea, he has, almost by definition, no territory that is ‘proper’ to him. In short, he is not attributed a nation through narration.”²⁷

Equiano’s narrative, and the book’s frontispiece portrait, reads as a substitution of one form of sovereignty for another. Vincent Carretta calls the portrait “the first and last illustration of the trope of the ‘talking book’ that the author uses to emphasize the significance of literacy and acculturation in his autobiography,” his literacy emphasized by the Bible in his right hand, opened to Acts, his selfhood devoted to God

prior to any nation or state.²⁸ The Black sailor's lack of property, here, means life rather than death, an opening to the kingdom of God according to "proper" New Testament values. The other side of the coin can be seen in the famous etching *Stowage of the British Slave Ship Brookes under the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788* (reproduced by Clarkson), an abolitionist print and (from an art historical perspective) an antiportrait/antiseascape. The drawing turns Black bodies into cargo, flipping the trend of the Black sailor's anonymity in the period's maritime paintings into uniform homunculi, little diagrammatic men such as one would find in the legend of a chart or key. Indeed, to call each uniform, diagrammed body one unit of material cargo would be to oversimplify. We quote at length from Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic* to give a sense of why this is:

The system ... was fairly simple: on reaching the slave markets of the Caribbean or the Americas, a vessel would assign its cargo to a local factor or sales agent. These were often, but not always, business partners of the ship's British owners. ... [A] factor would then sell the slaves (by auction, parcel, scramble, or other means) and then, after deducing his commission, "remit" the proceeds of the sale in the form of an interest-bearing bill of exchange. This bill amounted to a promise, or "guarantee," to pay the full amount, with the agreed-upon interest, at the end of a specific period, typically from one to three years. ... The Caribbean or American factor had thus not so much sold the slaves on behalf of the Liverpool "owners" as borrowed an amount equivalent to the sales proceeds from the Liverpool merchants and agreed to repay that amount with interest. ... They were not just selling slaves on the far side of the Atlantic, they were lending money across the Atlantic. And, as significantly, they were lending money they did not yet possess or only possessed in the form of slaves. The slaves were treated not only as a type of commodity but as a type of interest-bearing money. They functioned in this system simultaneously as commodities for sale and as the reserve deposits of a loosely organized, decentered, but vast trans-Atlantic banking system.²⁹

"Decentered" subjects, as celebrated as they have been in the twentieth century, can be made to serve many masters. They may be material cargo and speculative monetary units at the same time. Baucom's story about the slavery trade as a "vast trans-Atlantic banking system" turns the Brookes diagram into a financial prospectus, each homunculus an "interest-bearing" asset whose first-person experience of the Middle Passage is wished away as, at most, a threat to the efficient completion of the final monetary exchange where all accounts will be settled.

William James, were he to read Equiano, would likely say that the renewed ground of his subjectivity in God has “cash value,” his belief and his writing epistemic counterinvestments made against the backdrop of the trans-Atlantic banking system in which all solid national identities melt into the air. As Marx well knew, such melting is as dangerous as it is potentially liberatory. Even back on firm(er) ground, what Baucom calls the “specters of the Atlantic” haunt American art, literature, and culture well beyond the supposed resolution of the sectional crisis that threatened to tear the nation apart.³⁰ The Reconstruction Era, precisely because it was a period rife with competing narratives about a unified postwar America—an extended historical moment pregnant with subtle differences among proposed national symbolics and imaginaries, including various attempts to reinscribe essential racial differences through more “liberal” means after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment—was not solely aftermath but a continuous negotiation in which national ideals were wrestled out of transnational systems. It is not only the twenty-first century critic who, by redrawing our literary and art historical maps, punctures the identitarian boundaries established by past political and cultural regimes. This was already happening all along. And so Chesnutt takes us back to the shipwreck scene with which we started, but with a difference.

The Marrow of Observation

Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*, our postbellum literary example, follows dual narratives: a fictionalization of the Wilmington Riot of 1898 and a family melodrama. The first follows *Morning Chronicle* owner Major Carteret and his two co-conspirators General Belmont and Captain McBane as they try to manufacture a white supremacist uprising in Wellington. Through newspaper editorials and national organizing to build up fear of the Black vote, these three men prime the town of Wellington for a white supremacist riot. The family drama follows Sam Merrell’s two daughters. Olivia Carteret, recognized in town as Sam Merrell’s only child, comes to recognize her disenfranchised half sister. Janet Miller, the daughter of Sam Merrell and Julia Brown, a woman formerly enslaved by Merrell himself, grows up in poverty and marries Dr. Miller, Black surgeon and founder of Wellington’s Black hospital.

Response to the novel at the time of its publication was mixed. The most discussed review came from William Dean Howells, a major gatekeeper of American realism. Howells was a champion of Chesnutt, but gave *Marrow* a lukewarm review in which he stated, “[t]he book is, in fact, bitter, bitter. There is no reason in history why it shouldn’t be so, if wrong is to be repaid with hate, and yet it would be better if it was not so bitter.”³¹ Ultimately, Howells’s complaint was that Chesnutt’s novel was “less simple throughout, and therefore less excellent,” and while he cannot blame Chesnutt for taking a position on the Wilmington uprising, he nevertheless states that “[Chesnutt] is too clearly of a judgement that is made up.” Yet, he even goes as far as stating that “it cannot be said that either his aesthetics or ethics are false.”³² What is

curious in this review, and which late-twentieth century critics have picked up on, is that Howells condemns Chesnutt for making up his mind, but he cannot point to any aesthetic or ethical failures in Chesnutt's work. This, to use the phrase from a number of critical works of *Marrow*, is the "dilemma" of Chesnutt's novel.³³

These dilemmas are not the only elements within *The Marrow of Tradition* that have sparked debate. Perhaps the biggest debate, or at least the longest running, centers on the novel's genre. Numerous critics have evaluated Chesnutt's novel on its adherence to realism and found it lacking. Others, such as Joyce Pettis, have argued that we have to understand it as a historical novel or as a mixed-form novel including elements of the epic tradition.³⁴ More recent criticism on the novel has made the argument that Chesnutt's move to narrate the clashing ideological systems of white supremacy and democratic republicanism necessitated certain dilemmas, and that these contradictions are in fact the richest element of the novel. Most recently, John Sampson claims that indeed "*Marrow* is the realist novel *par excellence*" precisely because of these contradictions.³⁵ Critics have also debated over which character is the protagonist or hero(ine). And even when critics agree that the novel fails to be realist because it is overly polemical, they still have trouble locating Chesnutt's position within this polemic.

We do not intend to settle all, if any, of these debates, but like Joyce Pettis we understand Chesnutt's novel as one primarily interested in working through history and argue that Chesnutt's commitment to confronting history as a constantly negotiated present has caused much of the disagreement surrounding his novel. Pettis argues that Chesnutt's novel highlights how "[t]he past is thus an indicator of, indeed a key to, the turmoil of the present. Predictably, history offers an explanation for the destructive practices of the present, but the present contains the source of regenerative power for the future."³⁶ In what follows we argue that by paying attention to the maritime elements within novel, it becomes clear how Chesnutt engages history to critique Southern institutions and inspire his readership to action. By attending to the oceanic elements of the novel we can see how Chesnutt participates in what we have already established was an alternative strain of American culture that sees US institutions as potentially still out at sea. This focus will also shed light on the affordances of the ocean as an arena for American cultural imagination.

Before attending to how the oceanic is mobilized by Chesnutt, it serves first to demonstrate the novel's saturation with maritime presence and culture. First and foremost, both the actual town of Wilmington and the fictional town of Wellington are port towns. In a scene when Major Carteret and Lee Ellis are strolling about town upon streets paved with oyster shells, Ellis looks down the river to the ocean and considers how "[t]wenty years before, Wellington had been the world's greatest shipping port for naval stores. But as the turpentine industry had moved southward, leaving a trail of devastated forests in its rear, the city had fallen to a poor fifth or sixth place in this trade, relying now almost entirely upon cotton for its export business."³⁷ The prominence of the maritime industry is a constant presence in the novel as some of

the key characters work on the docks, such as Josh Green, the character who ends up leading the Black resistance to the white supremacist coup d'état. Indeed, when we are first introduced to Josh he is having his broken arm mended by Dr. Miller after fighting a white sailor. Additionally, we can assume that a large majority of the white mob that participated in the uprising are sailors, not just because the port is one of the main employers in town, but also because a drunken sailor yells out in support of Major Carteret's speech to a crowd of disgruntled whites. Finally, we are even told that Mr. Delamere's mansion was the site where "the famous pirate Blackbeard had held high carnival, and was reputed to have buried much treasure, vague traditions of which still lingered among the negroes and poor-whites of the country roundabout"(350).

It is not merely the presence of the industry or the lore of buried treasure that makes maritime labor important to the novel. Chesnutt demonstrates, much like Equiano, the importance of the maritime industry to the enslaved Southern population. Dr. Miller's grandfather was able to buy his own freedom by working as a stevedore, a profession that Miller's father took to as well. Similarly, when the three white supremacists are making a list of which prominent Black leaders to run out of town, they consider the port collector, but decide "[w]e'd better not touch him. It would bring the government down upon us, which we want to avoid" (350). The maritime industry is not only prominent throughout the novel but is a site of relative protection against white supremacist violence. While it is the source of the port collector's protection and Dr. Miller's grandfather's road to freedom, Josh Green reminds us of the limits to this protection, as it is also the space where Josh is in constant danger of bodily harm.

By establishing the coastal setting of his novel, Chesnutt is able to recast key elements of the Wilmington uprising through oceanic intrusions. However, it is important to understand how Chesnutt's rendering of the oceanic as a space for the American cultural imaginary differs from David Miller's account. Whereas Miller sees the strain in luminist art of the mid- to late-nineteenth century as concerned with nationalist projects run aground or the aftermath of a stormy conflict, Chesnutt offers an alternative function of the sea as cultural imaginary, one which casts the ocean as a space of constant negotiation and renegotiation. As characters within the novel defer to the settled and solidified Southern legal, political, and economic institutions, Chesnutt's novel utilizes oceanic intrusions to upset the settled nature of the postreconstruction South in this salty port town.

Much of the novel is concerned with this tension between seeing history as something that is consistently negotiated and as something fixed. Like the bones of Silva's schooner, characters in the novel view, for the most part, the legal and political apparatus of Southern society as ossified and static. In the novel, two of Wellington's white doctors serve as key examples of how less antagonistic white characters justify their detachment from events in town. Inspired by Dr. Miller's commitment to remaining in the hostile South, Dr. Burns says that the future of the Black race "is a serial story which we are all reading, and which grows in vital interest with each

successive installment.” While Dr. Burns acknowledges that it is not only “your problem, but ours,” he effectively characterizes the majority of white citizens as observers of the narrative of Black success and failure, rather than as active participants (246). Similarly, when called to help defend the innocent Sandy Campbell from a lynch mob, Dr. Price tells Dr. Miller, “[T]his is no affair of mine, or yours. I have too much respect for myself and my profession to interfere in such a matter,” and reassures Dr. Miller that he “shall take no part in whatever may be done,—but it is not my affair nor yours” (349). Like Dr. Burns, Dr. Price assumes that participation means active intervention, and he has therefore played no role in Sandy Campbell’s precarious position. Echoing David Miller’s argument about nineteenth-century shipwreck representations, these characters attempt to demonstrate to Dr. Miller that their postbellum experience is one of aftermath, that they are not observing “a sense of action or the fate of human actors” but the fallout of the Civil War.

White characters in Chesnutt’s novel are not sentimental in their considerations of the aftermath of the Civil War, but neither are they willing to admit that Southern institutions are in a constant state of negotiation. For instance, one of the major results of the Wilmington white supremacist coup d’état was the transformation from majority Black to majority white town. This contradiction is at the heart of Chesnutt’s novel. Southern whites in the novel simultaneously believe that legal and political institutions have reached a point of aftermath and ossification *and* they participate within legal and extralegal actions in order to sustain white supremacist rule in Wellington.

At the end of the novel, Chesnutt exposes the hypocrisy of this stance in his characterization of the white supremacist takeover of Wellington’s government as not an exception to the normal feelings of aftermath, but a continuation of business as usual. At one point during the riot, Dr. Miller is stopped by a man he recognizes as the clerk of the dry goods store: “[T]his man, who had for several years emptied Miller’s pockets in the course of more or less legitimate trade, now went through them, aided by another man, more rapidly than ever before.”³⁸ Rather than seeing this white supremacist riot as a perversion of the capitalist marketplace, Chesnutt instead demonstrates the crisis is merely a more rapid form of alienation. Dr. Burns and Dr. Price have been participating all along, as their legitimate actions, like the history of the owner of the dry goods store, are only accelerated during this crisis. More than any other, Olivia Carteret characterizes this paradox through her failed attempts to keep society at a distance and to ignore her participation within legal and political institutions. Indeed, her entire presence in the novel could be described as a series of failed attempts to sustain her belief that the society of Wellington functions objectively and separately from her actions.

Carolyn Porter’s study of nineteenth-century American literature is useful for understanding Olivia Carteret’s ultimate failure to understand society as an objective, ossified reality. As if anticipating Crary’s discussion of Turner and the “collapse of the distance separating an observer from the site of optical experience,”³⁹ Porter

examines the position of detached contemplation in nineteenth-century American literature to argue that the observer never wholly escapes participation in the scene observed. In order to limn this role that Porter calls the participant-observer, she engages Lukács's formulation of reification. Building on Marx's famous point that laborers experience alienation when they observe their activity objectified in the exchange of commodities, Lukács extends this experience as characteristic of capitalist society as a whole. Thus, not only is the laborer positioned to contemplate their alienated activity, but so too does "the bureaucrat, the technologist, the scientist" take up a "contemplative stance not only toward an objective external world, but toward the objectified constructs of their own mind, which he takes to be incorporated in the external world."⁴⁰ Porter is ultimately interested in how, in moments of crisis, this alienated individual recognizes that their own activity constructs the external world they are ostensibly contemplating from a detached position. While the external world seems to function by a series of external laws, it ultimately operates irrationally as it is made up of obscured "sensuous human activity."⁴¹

"The scandal," as Porter puts it, "of recognizing history as "sensuous human activity" causes the very role of the reified observer to break down. In such cases, "the contemplative stance of the detached observer, by virtue of the extreme to which it is taken, is undermined from within. The observer becomes a participant."⁴² Porter then lays out two pathways: either this "scandal" of seeing history must be recontained, or "reified consciousness" must confront its own dissolution. In order to face this dissolution, Chesnut moves the novel already saturated with maritime culture deeper into the ocean.

In a moment that foreshadows her shipwreck nightmare, Olivia, on being told for the first time that her inheritance from her father might have been contested, begins to question the solidity of the Southern legal system. We are told "as a stone dropped into a pool of water sets in motion a series of concentric circles which disturb the whole mass in varying degree, so Mrs. Ochiltree's enigmatical remark had started in her niece's mind a disturbing train of thought."⁴³ In a quite different conceptualization from the sturdy and detached ground of a contemplative observer, the movement of a ripple expands from a nodal point forwards and backwards. Just as a ripple expands into the space around a point of contact, Olivia, rather than seeing her family's past and her son's future as a detached and objective reality, begins to see the way she, like the point of contact in a pool of water, impacts the surrounding mass. This insight from Mrs. Ochiltree disturbs both Olivia's understanding of past events, such as her family's racial identity and father's relationship with Julia Brown, as well as future events, such as her son's inheritance. Since ripples function temporally as well as spatially, over the course of her next few days this disturbance will extend further into Olivia's past, culminating in her shipwreck nightmare.

Right before Olivia Carteret's nightmare, she learns definitively that her father legally married Julia Brown and intended to divide his inheritance between herself and

Janet Miller. What throws Olivia into crisis is not her father's relationship with Julia Brown, but its legality and, by extension, the crime Olivia committed by burning the will. As Tess Chakkalakal points out, Chesnutt was interested in the role of state-sanctioned marriage throughout his career, and much of his short fiction depicts emancipated Black men and women coming to terms with the legal illegitimacy of their marriages when they were enslaved. Chesnutt was highly skeptical of the legal transformations during Reconstruction, and rather than celebrating the institutionalization of marriages under slavery, Chesnutt exposes how the institutionalization of these marriages ties those who became emancipated to the past's quasilegal slavery relations. Chakkalakal tells us, "to cement relations that were formed in bondage would reconstruct, as it were, that which required dismantling."⁴⁴ In Chesnutt's fiction, then, "[marriage] promises freedom, but the promise can only be kept by making an unequivocal break with the past. Few make it."⁴⁵ Nancy Bentley adds to this conversation by pointing out that Olivia cannot see beyond the legal apparatus of marriage: "Like Bibles, marriage contracts can be counted as seals or patents, material objects with a concentrated cultural meaning through which individuals can cathect a highly personal, highly affective identification with the law."⁴⁶ When Chesnutt turns to the ocean during Olivia's nightmare, he transforms a domestic crisis that causes Olivia to question the legal frameworks of marriage into a national crisis of Reconstruction *tout court*.

This nightmare serves as the strongest example in Chesnutt's novel of a rejection of the detached contemplative stance in favor of an oceanic conceptualization, much like Porter's concept of the participant-observer. On the eve of the Wellington riot, Olivia is thrown into crisis as she learns of the shifting terrain of the Southern legal institution and determines, definitively, that Janet is her half sister and has a legal right to her father's inheritance. Deciding not to act upon this knowledge, yet contemplating Janet's legal rights and status as a mixed-race Black woman, her own son's future inheritance as a Carteret, and her father's role in creating this inherited family dynamic, Olivia falls into a troubled sleep. In her nightmare she is sailing on open water with her son, who appears to her as a "fairy prince" (403). In light of the knowledge Olivia has gained in her waking life, this rendering of her son as a "prince" foregrounds his wealth and family inheritance, while his characterization as a "fairy" accentuates his suprahuman qualities, characteristics which join in the associations Olivia and her husband make with their family's inherited whiteness. When a storm suddenly breaks, Olivia finds herself shipwrecked and floating "as though sustained by some unseen force" with her son (404). She reaches out to grab an approaching boat, but as she does so, she recognizes the rower as her half sister, Janet. Immediately upon recognizing her sister, Olivia's strength fails, and she finds that while she is "floating in the water, as though it were her native element, she could no longer support the child" (404). The intrusion of the oceanic scene in Olivia's nightmare demonstrates that her son's survival rests on the need to recognize Janet

as kin, which simultaneously demands she let go of her belief in the legal protection of her family's racial and financial stability as an ossified, nonnegotiable reality.⁴⁷

This oceanic nightmare forces Olivia to confront not just her role in the theft of familial wealth from Janet Miller, but also the historical process of Black disenfranchisement during Reconstruction. In reflecting on the failures of Reconstruction, W. E. B. Du Bois reminds us that "a movement, which began primarily and sincerely to abolish slavery and insure the Negroes' rights, became coupled with a struggle of capitalism to retain control of the government as against Northern labor and Southern and Western agriculture."⁴⁸ Eventually, as Black laborers fought for their rights not just as citizens but as workers, "Northern capital compromised, and Southern capital accepted race hate and black disfranchisement as a permanent program of exploitation."⁴⁹ As he states in his famous closing paragraph, "the attempt to make black men American citizens was in a certain sense all a failure, but a splendid failure."⁵⁰ We can see then that the crises of Reconstruction, such as the reorganization of capitalist relations and the demand for full Black citizenship, were both the backdrop of Olivia Carteret's life and the substance of her family drama over inheritance, marriage, and citizenship.

Additionally, by moving to the ocean as the space where Olivia Carteret is forced to confront the construction of race and the disenfranchisement of Black Southerners, Chesnut evokes the memory of the Middle Passage as well. As the ripple extends outward, Olivia moves beyond her family's role within Southern institutions and sees more and more of American history as "sensuous human activity."⁵¹ By realizing her son's position of relative wealth is subtended by a refutation of Black equality, Olivia comprehends her role in Southern society and the history from which it emerges. Her very understanding of history is out at sea.

While Olivia Carteret would be seen in Chakkalakal's and Bentley's formulations as someone who cannot break with past legal forms, we contend that she does confront the past in a specific way. If we think of the past not in terms of inherited institutions but in broader terms of "sensuous human activity," as Porter does, we see that while Olivia doesn't directly break with past institutional forms, her nightmare forces upon her a significant reckoning with slavery and racial identity. While Olivia might recognize this intellectually in the moments after her nightmare, it takes the near death of her child to drive her to admit this realization to Janet. In Olivia's only conversation with her sister, Janet, in the novel's final scene, Olivia begs her to tell her husband, Dr. Miller, to perform an emergency operation on Olivia's child. We see that for all her obsession over the legality of Janet's claims on her father's inheritance, Janet could not care less. Janet holds very little if any regard for the legal standing of her mother's marriage to Sam Merrell, nor does she by the end of their conversation desire the inheritance: "I throw you back your father's name. Your father's wealth, your sisterly recognition. I want none of them,— they are bought too dear!" (447). Despite spending her life wishing, not for her inheritance or father's name, but for Olivia's recognition of their patrilineal link, she now rejects the latter. It was not legal

or economic recognition Janet was invested in, but Olivia's recognition that their histories come from the same sensuous human activity. It is the tragedy of the narrative that the cost of this recognition is the life of Janet's son.

From this analysis of Olivia's nightmare, we recall our discussion of Turner's painting. Like the historical continuum in Turner that calls to mind the *Zong* event as well as contemporaneous foreign traders and which establishes an ambiguous temporal dimension, Olivia's nightmare also establishes a historical continuum. She is simultaneously looking to the future to her son's inheritance and to the past to the Middle Passage. She is forced to reckon with multiple points on time's arrow (or loop): the Middle Passage and the history of the commodification of enslaved Africans, her family's participation within slavery and the wealth it generated for her son's inheritance, her family's role in Janet's disenfranchisement, and her role in perpetuating this disenfranchisement.

But the key difference between Turner and Chesnutt is that rather than submerging Black bodies as Turner does, Chesnutt floats Janet Miller above the submerged white figures. The Black figure here is given an identity beyond the chains, but in order for Olivia to recognize this identity she must let go of her son's "fairy-like" status as the inheritor of an assumed racial superiority. Just as the chains can be seen as the ultimate truth in Turner, Janet's position as the mixed-race child of a slavemaster and enslaved woman is held up as the ultimate truth of postbellum society.

Drifts and Inlets

In the novel, the white supremacist takeover begins while Olivia Carteret is still unsettled from her own sepulchral waves. The memory of Olivia's dream vies for her attention like "a dim foreboding of misfortune" just before Chesnutt transitions into his chapter "The Storm Breaks." It opens atmospherically: "The Wellington riot began at three o'clock in the afternoon, a day as fair as was ever selected for a deed of darkness. The sky was clear, except for a few light clouds that floated, white and feathery, high in air, like distant islands in a sapphire sea. A salt-laden breeze from the ocean a few miles away lent a crisp sparkle to the air."⁵² Chesnutt's tempest could have easily been both a metaphoric struggle over political recognition and equality and a literal storm blown inland from the Atlantic. But our barometer spins here, marking a categorical confusion between land and water. Where is the limit of the oceanic? What is the status of a nightmare's oceanic inflow in a single novel against the backdrop of the Atlantic's vastness? Dreams are waking life's inlets, and so is art. Michelle Burnham writes that transatlantic studies' "apparently aquatic focus on the Atlantic remains in many ways undermined by a residual terrestrialism. Despite Atlanticism's shift from the nation to the ocean, the paradigm is nonetheless sustained by a land-based imaginary in which the ocean figures predominantly as a liquid road that connects solid pieces of land to each other."⁵³ That is one way of reading the sentence, "[d]reams are waking life's inlets, and so is art," but only if you take it to be valuing waking life

over dreams. It could just as easily suggest the opposite. Land–water, meet duck–rabbit.

One downside of the academy’s preference for post- prefixes is that we tend to develop with it a preference for aftermath over all other possible temporal modes. This also tends to mean a hasty desire for the morning after to just come already. The seascapes examined by David Miller with which we began expressed such a desire, but Chesnutt’s novel dwells in im/possibility. Being out at sea racially (as Chesnutt himself perhaps was) might lead one to find a harbor where one can, if only as a way of transferring sprawling cartographical and sociocultural deadlocks into smaller, more manageable forms. In the detail, whether writerly or painterly, entire worlds can resonate. The subject’s non-place is not just u-topos but a (non)site open to endless negotiation. There is more beautiful postbellum driftwood out there to collect.

Notes

¹ David C. Miller, “The Iconology of Wrecked or Stranded Boats in Mid to Late Nineteenth-Century American Culture,” in *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, ed. David C. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 188.

² Miller, “Iconology,” 188.

³ Miller, “Iconology,” 189–90.

⁴ Miller, “Iconology,” 204, 208.

⁵ *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*, J. M. W. Turner (1840), oil on canvas, 90.8 x 122.6 cm (35 3/4 x 48 1/4 in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

⁶ Hester Blum, “The Prospect of Oceanic Studies,” *PMLA* 15, no. 3 (2010): 670.

⁷ Blum, “The Prospect,” 670.

⁸ William Boelhower, “The Rise of the New Atlantic Studies Matrix,” *American Literary History* 20, no. 1 (2008): 92–93. Qtd. in Blum, “The Prospect,” 670.

⁹ Ian Warrell, “The Abysmal Sea: Turner’s Later Seascapes c. 1835–46,” in *J. M. W. Turner*, ed. Ian Warrell (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 188.

¹⁰ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters, Volume I*, in *The Works of John Ruskin, Volume III*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903), 572.

¹¹ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 573.

¹² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 49.

¹³ We give one significant counterreading. Desmond Manderson, claiming that Turner’s title ensures that we are seeing the very moment when the captives were thrown

overboard (and that, contra an aspect of our reading below, the problem of the floating chains is dissolved once one accepts that they are rendered at the very moment they hit the water), argues that the position of the drowning bodies ensures that the slaver in question is not the visible vessel but one unseen, upon which the viewer stands by perspectival analogy: “The reason we cannot see the slave ship is because we are looking at the painting from its position. Its point of view is the picture’s point of view is the viewer’s point of view. *The Slave Ship* is us” (“Bodies in the Water: On Reading Images More Sensibly,” *Law & Literature* 27, no. 2 [2015]: 288).

¹⁴ William Wordsworth, “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” in *Wordsworth’s Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 67.

¹⁵ Lawrence Gowing, *Turner: Imagination and Reality* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 21.

¹⁶ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 138.

¹⁷ Crary, *Techniques*, 71.

¹⁸ Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad*, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 153. A scholar of a psychoanalytic bent would note the relation between Turner’s floating chains and Jacques Lacan’s example, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, of the floating sardine can that appeared to look back at him. For Lacan, the gaze is found in an object that looks back, a visual instantiation of what he calls *objet a* (the stain in the field that sticks out, that is inconsistent, that stands in for the viewer’s desire).

¹⁹ Qtd. in Desmond McCoubrey, “Turner’s *Slave Ship*: Abolition, Ruskin, and Reception,” *Word & Image* 14, no. 4 (1998): 349.

²⁰ McCoubrey, “Turner’s *Slave Ship*,” 349.

²¹ Qtd. in McCoubrey, “Turner’s *Slave Ship*,” 351.

²² Thomas G. Appleton, *Boston Museum of Fine Arts: Companion to the Collection* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1877), 49.

²³ McCoubrey, “Turner’s *Slave Ship*,” 352.

²⁴ Geoff Quilley, “Of Sailors and Slaves: Portraiture, Property, and the Trials of Circum-Atlantic Subjectivities, ca. 1750–1830,” 172.

²⁵ Williams L. Andrews, “The First Fifty Years of the Slave Narrative, 1760–1810,” in *The Art of the Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory*, eds. John Sekor and Darwin T. Turner (Macomb: Western Illinois University Press), 22.

²⁶ Quilley, "Of Sailors and Slaves," 189.

²⁷ Quilley, "Of Sailors and Slaves," 189.

²⁸ Vincent Carretta, *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 290.

²⁹ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 61.

³⁰ As Quilley writes in his commentary on Baucom's book, "Baucom's evocative and powerful theorization of a philosophy of history formed around the 'specters of the Atlantic,' in which the concept of the 'inordinately long twentieth century' is necessarily founded on the parallel concept of the 'black' or 'circum-Atlantic,' enables a deeper understanding of why the histories of slavery and the eighteenth-century maritime world, and in particular the Brooks slaver ship icon, have assumed such a vigorous and urgent priority as subjects for contemporary artists, such as Fred Wilson, Allan Sekula, Lubaina Himid, Yinka Shonibare, Keith Piper, or Hank Willis Thomas, making interventions into received cultural histories" ("Art History and Double Consciousness: Visual Culture and Eighteenth-Century Maritime Britain," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 48, no. 1 [2014]: 33). We imagine a future study on these artists might extend our reading of Chesnut to bring the centuries into even closer intellectual contact.

³¹ W. D. Howells, "A Psychological Counter-Current in Recent Fiction," *The North American Review* 173 (1901): 882.

³² Howells, "Psychological Counter-Current," 883.

³³ For instance, in "The Dilemma in Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition*," John M. Reilly argues that Chesnut's themes of racial integration clash with his comprehensive accounts of white Southern corruption (*Phylon* 32, no. 1 [2014]: 21–35); in "The Moral Dilemma in Charles W. Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition*," P. Jay Delmar argues that Chesnut offers no appropriate response to racial enmity (*American Literary Realism* 14, no. 2 [1981]: 269–72); and Charles Hackenberry argues in "Meanings and Models: The Uses of Characterization in Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* and 'Mandy Oxendine'" that "[t]he black man in *The Marrow of Tradition* is trapped. If he keeps the old ways ... he is not protected by the white master he serves ... [while] the strong-willed, assertive blacks ... are killed outright for their very opposition" (*American Literary Realism* [1984]: 197).

³⁴ See Gregory E. Rutledge's essay "All Green with Epic Potential: Chesnut Goes to the *Marrow of Tradition* to Re-Construct America's Epic Body," in *Charles Chesnut Reappraised*, ed. David Garrett Izzo and Maria Orban (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2009), 131–58.

³⁵ John Sampson, “‘A Catalogue of Wrong and Outrage’: Undermining White Supremacist Discourse and Spatial Practice in Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*,” *American Literary Realism* 50, no. 3 (2018): 190.

³⁶ Joyce Pettis, “The Literary Imagination and the Historic Event: Chesnutt’s Use of History in *The Marrow of Tradition*,” *South Atlantic Review* 55, no. 4 (1990): 38.

³⁷ Charles Chesnutt, *The Portable Charles W. Chesnutt* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 311–12.

³⁸ Chesnutt, *Portable*, 418.

³⁹ Crary, *Techniques*, 138.

⁴⁰ Carolyn Porter, *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams and Faulkner* (Irvington, NY: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 25.

⁴¹ Porter, *Seeing and Being*, 25.

⁴² Porter, *Seeing and Being*, 54.

⁴³ Chesnutt, *Portable*, 305.

⁴⁴ Tess Chakkalakal, *Novel Bondage: Slavery, Marriage, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 85

⁴⁵ Chakkalakal, *Novel Bondage*, 104.

⁴⁶ Nancy Bentley, “The Strange Career of Love and Slavery: Chesnutt, Engels, Masoch,” *American Literary History* 17 (2005): 469.

⁴⁷ Chesnutt, *Portable*, 403–04.

⁴⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in American 1860–1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 214.

⁴⁹ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 627.

⁵⁰ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 708.

⁵¹ Porter, *Seeing and Being*, 25.

⁵² Chesnutt, *Portable*, 407–08.

⁵³ Michelle Burnham, “Oceanic Turns and American Literary History in a Global Context,” in *Turns of Event: Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies in Motion*, ed. Hester Blum (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 154.

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