

Half a century before Ralph Ellison buries the protagonist of *Invisible Man* beneath the streets of New York, a century before flames engulfing the Twin Towers illuminate a darkness inhabited by those who believe they must gouge out America's eyes to cure her blindness, Charles W. Chesnut's novel *The Marrow of Tradition* anticipates Ellison's use of the notion of invisibility—that peculiar, treacherous illusion of transparency that plagues people of color when they conspire with the fantasy that they are unseen unless uncolored others see them. Chesnut also predicts the same dire consequences of invisibility—cities burning, virulent racism fostered by people's blindness to one another—that Ellison dramatizes in his novel. Ellison's unnamed invisible man and Chesnut's Dr. Miller discover that seeking the precious visibility they desire in another's eyes may lead not to liberation but to destruction, disappearance, even death. Both characters commit the unforgiving mistake of allowing themselves to fall asleep within someone else's dream, the dream that blacks and whites coexist peacefully voluntarily, in a just, mutually beneficial arrangement. The wake-up call of riots, Ellison's staged in Harlem and Chesnut's set in Wellington, North Carolina, expose the dream's fragility. Nightmare interludes ravage each book's colored community, and many individuals who had crossed over and mistaken the dream for a viable reality vanish as the dream vanishes, unseen, unreal, during the riots—*Is dat you, Doctuh Miller?*—awakening later as ghosts of themselves. Others never awaken (Wellington's Mammy Jane and Jerry, Harlem's Todd Clifton), murdered by the dream in which they have been sleepwalking. Yet the illusion of a racialized Peaceable Kingdom persists. Ellison's novel ends in a welter of words, its protagonist chased underground, still attempting to convince himself that the dream just might be real after all. Chesnut's novel concludes with Dr. Miller's dream hospital burned down like the Towers, his young son murdered, a somnambulist, robotic Miller summoned to perform his duty as a physician and save the life of a boy whose father's vision of white supremacy provoked the riot that killed Miller's son.

In 1901, emboldened perhaps by critical praise in high places earned by his previous ventures into fiction writing, Chesnut, whose fair complexion, straight hair, Caucasian nose and lips provided what Franz Fanon would call a white mask to hide the black skin of African ancestry, was prepared to disengage from his liv-

THE MARROW OF TRADITION

Dr. Miller's dream hospital burns in a race riot

1901

FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN

*Evolution* (Boston, 1898). Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton (New York, 2007)*. Richard Langman, *Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey* (New York, 1990). Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York, 1998); *The House of Mirth* (New York, 1905).

creative legal stenography business and concentrate single-mindedly on a career as a professional man of letters. But only if sales of what he described as his "Afro-American" novel enabled him to support his family in the genteel, middle-class lifestyle to which they'd become accustomed in Cleveland, Ohio. Chesnut's gritty optimism, his belief that he could achieve commercial success in mainstream publishing and satisfy his personal standards while also challenging the reigning attitudes of a society that consigned "negroes"—white masks or not—to segregation, to second-class citizenship for a privileged few, crushing economic exploitation for the vast majority, may have been encouraged by the success of narrative strategies honed in his earlier work. *The Conjure Woman* (1899) had deployed multiple narrators engaged in covert competition for control of each story's meaning; narrators addressing (and in a sense inventing) different audiences; narrators who delivered their conflicting points of view in diverse varieties of English, from standard literary voice-over to "Negro dialect." Chesnut was quite aware of the contradictions inherent to his precarious project. Though he continued to critique the popular convention of Negro dialect, which had been fabricated primarily by non-Negroes to imitate, demean, and cage African American voices—"There is no such thing as Negro dialect: that what we call by that name is the attempt to express, with such a degree of phonetic correctness as to suggest the sound, English pronounced as an ignorant old southern Negro would be supposed to speak it"—he integrated basically untouched copies of that dialect into his texts.

Literature, like all mainstream cultural institutions in America at the dawn of the twentieth century, had developed distinctive means for reflecting and circulating the ideology of white supremacy that an exhausted nation had adopted at the conclusion of a long, bloody civil war to reunify itself and facilitate material prosperity. With neoclassical zeal and rigidity, American writing, high and low, manufactured conventions—character types, genres, language styles, predictable patterns of behavior, strict limitations of intellectual and moral capacity, and so on—for representing people of African descent and their relations with people of European descent, inventing and imposing through this process lasting racialized definitions of white and black in the American language. Any writer who broke the rules by questioning, resisting, or denying the reigning model of separate, human kinds arranged in a hierarchical order—white on top, black on the bottom—risked unintelligibility or exile. For the dominant majority of Americans, including those who purchased books, the threat of political, moral, and economic chaos lurked just beyond the bounds established by literature's arbitrary construction of the social order. The voice of Charles W. Chesnut, speaking as a man of color who considered himself the equal in every sense of his readers, would sound to most American ears like the fox demanding the keys to the henhouse.

To compose *Marrow*, Chesnut creates a narrative voice testing the limits of not being heard, not being seen, a voice approaching the ideal of racelessness, not exactly by claiming to be white, the only voice his audience would understand as not tainted by race, but by aspiring to perfect what James Joyce describes as the

penultimate third mode of narrative: the dramatic—"the personality of the artist finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself so to speak . . . within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible." Managing the difficulties of this disappearing act carries Chesnut beyond issues of technique and aestheticics to the question of survival.

If invisibility is a kind of death, are stories generated by invisible men still-born? Chesnut and Ellison in fiction, and Chesnut's contemporary W. E. B. Du Bois in his essay "Of the Passing of the First-Born," record the anguish, anxiety, and helplessness of losing children, of being denied the joy linking fathers to sons. These three highly successful (colored, mixed, black) men share the frustrating experience of watching their literary productions become invisible, that is, not seen by the dominant majority of Americans as evidence challenging the rule of Negro inferiority, but sighted as exceptions proving the rule. Their writing was treated not as an enduring legacy that could fertilize successive generations both like and unlike them, but as isolated monuments confirming their creator's difference.

The problem with pretending you are invisible, particularly if you perform the illusion convincingly, is that the wrong someone may believe you, the worst-case scenario occurring when that someone is you. Incarcerated within a racialized context, practicing the art of self-concealment, Chesnut, like Dr. Miller, flirts with actual extinction unless he maintains—a sense of self-awareness that transcends recognition by others. Much worse than not being seen by others is becoming invisible to oneself. In one case the self suffers from being ignored, in the other case the self is extinguished as surely as madness, drugs, unconsciousness close down the self. Slavery could work you to death or make you wish you were dead or precipitate a thousand daily deaths of shame, rage, helplessness, humiliation, could even enforce what Orlando Patterson defines as "social death," but being a slave didn't necessarily kill you, nor render you literally invisible.

An individual is truly invisible only if the individual ceases seeing herself or himself. So long as a person is able to see himself, the person understands that invisibility's locus, like that of social death or hell, is other people. Other people may pretend not to see you, but that denial doesn't end your existence and cause you to disappear. Ironically, the pain of Ellison's invisible man and Chesnut's Dr. Miller, their hyperawareness of themselves as not being seen, and all the contortions other people go through in order to pretend not to see them are proof positive of visibility. A total disappearance of Afro-American people won't require a campaign of genocide: it could occur if we forget how to imagine and sustain ourselves as more than a race (black) defined by the gaze of others (white).

The obvious intent of *Marrow* is to register and condemn the injustice of racial segregation, a monumentally complex task during an epoch when apartheid was the visible law and custom of the land, even though the nation blindly celebrated itself as a democracy. Chesnut's weapon of choice seems to be friendly persuasion: identifying with his general readers, complimenting them by giving them credit for a moral conscience, to which he appeals. Speaking as invisible narrator, he seeks rapport by constructing a point of view compounded of values

held in common with his readers, a shared perspective, safe, distanced, expansive, plenty of wiggle room. Here we stand, my friends, we good people who deplore bad things happening around us, bad things good conscience obliges us sooner or later to ameliorate, though we bear no personal responsibility for them.

Readers willing and able to follow where the deeper structures of the novel lead will discover the book's scarier, abiding significance. *Marrow* renders visible the consequences, as alive and dangerous now as a hundred years ago, of internalizing a racialized self-identity. No matter how bright his prospects, Dr. Miller is trapped in a perilous netherworld, the looming shadow of race never more than a step behind, ready to pounce and plunge him into darkness. Despite the metaphors I'm employing to describe Miller's predicament, neither I nor Chesnut equates black with doom, white with hope. Any person (author, character, colored or not, you, me) who exists in a society like Miller's and submits to its racialized premises—whether the premises grant a degree of visibility or not—risks complicity in his or her own erasure. When he brutally punishes Dr. Miller at the novel's conclusion, Chesnut is also repudiating himself, the author, for naively seeking liberation through invisibility. Shedding the role of the neutral, invisible narrator, Chesnut merges with Miller. Like Shakespeare in the history plays, Chesnut hitches his stage with bodies (including his own in the ghostly guise of Miller). The carnage of postwar Wellington speaks for itself, speaks for the novel, speaks volumes about the beliefs of the author whose mediating presence we thought we were supposed to forget.

Dead men (and women) tell no tales. Or maybe they tell the truest tales. If we learn to listen. Women in *Marrow*, particularly Miller's wife, Janet, testify through journals, diaries, caches of documents they preserve and leave behind, traces of paternity they pass on in their children's colors and bodies, the violence marking their own dead bodies (Mammy Jane, Polly Ochiltree). This compendium of material evidence creates counternarratives that contest the master narrative of the plantation. The twentieth-century jazz musician Sun Ra offers a fanciful but not irrelevant etymology riffing on the word "Negro" as a descendant of *nyro* (black) then enjambling *dead* and *black* and *storyteller* and *magic* into the word "necromancer," a storyteller—a tune novelist Ishmael Reed also plays in his inimitable fashion.

Even before a race riot transforms Wellington into a murderous version of Bakhtin's carnival where daytime rules of society are not simply burlesqued by reversal but suffer a nocturnal sea change as the wearing of masks (black and white) unmasks the chaos underlying all human communities, *Marrow* is full of ghostly doubles and doubling, troubled spirits crisscrossing between the known and unknown. "Ef dat's me gwine 'long in front,' mused Sandy . . . 'den who is dis behin' here? Dere ain' but one er me, an' my ha'nt would n' leave my body 'tel I wuz dead. Ef dat's me in front, den I mus' be my own ha'nt; an' whichever one of us is de ha'nt, de yuther must be dead an' don' know it.'" Chesnut's Southern town abounds in missing persons, mistaken identities, purloined identities, secret identities, forged identities, suppressed documents and genealogies, mimicking, masquerades, impostors, presence and absence fused

inextricably in a confusing traffic of bodies that's also hazardous to everybody's health because all identities are unstable. Any body at any moment, especially a colored body, can find itself abruptly in the wrong place at the wrong time, depending on who sees it and what person chooses to name what they think they see—friend or foe, black or white, live or ghost, criminal or citizen.

Surprisingly, to designate an entire group of people—in the case of Wellington, "black people"—as invisible does not permanently clear space nor create a deficit of appearances but crowds space with a surfeit of appearances. No social system or institution yet devised by human beings has been able to impose a discipline that totally controls individual behavior. Though a social order may stipulate certain classes (colonized natives, slaves, convicts, women, untouchables) as beneath notice, literally below the threshold of visibility, not there unless acknowledged by a privileged class, these *invisibles* will keep turning up, usually in unwelcome, unexpected, inconvenient, incriminating, compromising, threatening circumstances. The world suddenly becomes uncomfortable, too full, overturning by multiple claimants for each available slot or status. The inadequacy of a single way of seeing, of one-way seeing based on arbitrary separation of seen and seen (black and white), is revealed as a liability, can't account for a sudden surplus of humanity. A veil lifts or is lowered. Things fall apart.

Inventing ways of seeing oneself, despite or because of overwhelming evidence that one is not seen or seen only in a distorting fashion by others, remains no less an urgent project for Americans of color today than it was for Chesnut. Given our relative invisibility until yesterday on the standard map of American literary history, the project of visibility extends to the art we produce. Neither mainstream assertions of color-blindness nor university programs in black studies have cleared enough space in the public imagination for a discussion of art free from the contradictions of American race consciousness. We still face the impasse from which Frantz Fanon recoiled when he read Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to *Black Orpheus* (1948), an anthology of francophone writing by people of color from Africa and the Caribbean. Fanon realized that Sartre was prepared to recognize and praise this collection of "black" writing if and only if the notion of black subjectivity and the art it produced were considered as a virtual reality; a useful but minor, temporary, transparent term or stage in a dialectical process. Sartre's qualified endorsement profoundly troubled Fanon because it left "black" subjectivity marginal, blank, dependent on some undefined, larger human project to reify or erase it, thereby dooming, Fanon feared, the subject's experience of blackness to wither away or to fall asleep within some other's dreamy theorizing.

*How can I sing King Alpha's song in a strange land*

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JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN