The Total Train System: Technology and Progressivism in Late Nineteenth and
Early Twentieth-Century American Literature

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Abstract

This dissertation traces two connected stories through the literary imagination of four American authors: William Dean Howells, Charles W. Chesnutt, Henry Adams, and James Weldon Johnson. Firstly, this dissertation examines the ideological role the expansion and ossification of the railway played in the development of American progressivism in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. I argue that the logic of the railway provided American writers with a new vocabulary through which to describe the abstract development of American history. Whereas in the eighteenth century, historical progress was conceived of as a course of human events, with the advent of the railway system, many began to imagine historical movement as a result of scientific certainties managed and developed by humans who conceived of themselves as not directly in control of those movements. By the twentieth century, the railway became what Henry Adams called an "Empire of Coal," a material system of exchanges that spanned to globe and whose logic determined the moving limit of possibility for all civilization. Secondly, my dissertation tells the story of racial division in American during this period. Although the railway was often conceived of as a radically democratic space where the American people could interact as equals, this period also saw the development of state-sanctioned segregation laws against black citizens of the country. As the railway and its logic of historical development ossified in the minds of those who benefitted from it, many black authors were perceptive critics of not only the politics of the railway but the underlying assumptions about how societies functioned that seemed to guarantee the dominant ideology's concept of history. Taking my theoretical starting point in the works of Jacques Lacan and Karl Marx, I argue that in this period, the logic of the railway created a shift in the dominant assumptions of the nature of social differences. Whereas in the eighteenth century, racial difference had been conceived of as a historical constant, with the railway, racial difference became spatialized along the path of the railway.

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Introduction:

They *Must Be* Soldiers

Le Progrès calme et fort, et toujours innocent,
Ne sait pas ce que c'est que de verser le sang.
Il règne, conquérant désarmé; quoi qu'on fasse,
De la hache et du glaive il détourne sa face,
Car le doigt éternel écrit dans le ciel bleu
Que la terre est à l'homme et que l'homme est à Dieu;
Car la force invincible est la force impalpable.
      Victor Hugo, "*Le Progrès calme et fort, et toujours innocent*" (1853)

Young Man –
Young Man –
You're never lonesome in Babylon.
You can always join a crowd in Babylon.
Young Man –
Young Man –
You can never be alone in Babylon.
      James Weldon Johnson, "A Prodigal Son" (1927)

Towards the end of the American Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman

found himself in a difficult position but for unexpected reasons, as later he would recall

in his *Memoirs*. After his famous burning of Atlanta and subsequent march to the sea in

1864, the purpose of his army changed from "hard war," as Sherman put it, on the

Southern army and civilian population to a more regulatory role. As the infrastructure of

the Southern government and army broke down and a Northern victory looked more and

more likely, Sherman's army increasingly took up the responsibility of peacekeeping in

Southern communities in addition to militarily defeating what was left of their army. In

1865, three months before Robert E. Lee's surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia to

Ulysses S. Grant at the Appomattox Courthouse, Sherman's army was visited by

Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, while camped at Savannah,

Georgia. Stanton, according to Sherman, "seemed very curious about matters and things in general" but particularly spoke to Sherman "a great deal about the negroes, the former slaves" (Sherman 723-4). Sherman continued that the "negro question was beginning to loom up among the political eventualities of the day and many foresaw that not only would the slaves secure their freedom, but that they would also have votes," a possibility that Stanton was already hoping would work to the advantage of the current administration (Sherman 725). Though Sherman himself "did not dream" of such an eventuality, it became clear to him through his talk with Stanton that "the former slaves would be suddenly, without preparation, manufactured into voters" (Sherman 725). The two men, then, took it upon themselves to draft and implement wartime policies toward the legally ambiguous "former slaves" that would "manufacture" them into voters as well as support the effort to finally defeat the Southern armies.

Perhaps most significantly, Sherman described in his *Memoirs* the chaos of Savannah and the contending forces influencing the mobile population of escaped or liberated slaves. Upon arriving in Savannah, he and his army "were beset by ravenous State agents from Hilton Head[, an island just off the coast of Georgia], who enticed and carried away our [black] servants, and the corps of [black] pioneers which we had organized, and which had done such excellent service" (Sherman 729). Sherman at one point found "at least a hundred poor negroes shut up in a house and pen, waiting for the night, to be conveyed stealthily to Hilton Head. They appealed to [Sherman's aide-de-camp, Colonel Audenried,] for protection, alleging that they had been told that they *must be* soldiers, that 'Massa Lincoln' wanted them, etc." (Sherman 729; emphasis in original).

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In response to this complex and uncertain situation, Sherman and Stanton drafted the much-disputed Special Field Order No. 15 which "reserved and set apart" confiscated rebel land for certain black families who were "free, and must be dealt with as such" (Sherman 730). The process of "manufacturing" voters as it presented itself to Sherman would, to a large extent, be a matter of creating "protection" as an alternative to either being pressed into service or stealthy flight for former slaves within the precarious political space of a nation at war with itself. Stanton's and Sherman's initial answer was to immediately imbricate former slaves in new property relations in order to make them visible to and productive for the state as full (which is to say propertied) citizens. In this way, they could make freed slaves to a degree protected from exploitation by the nation's laws. Although the order was quickly undermined and ultimately denied by the policies of the federal government, Sherman's actions acknowledged that the reconciliation between newly freed slaves and a predominantly white supremacist American tradition would to some extent need to occur within the dialectic between race and property relations as they were developing.

The general problem of reconciliation after the war was dialectic in the sense that it was a mutating idea that evaded clear definition because it was based on a tradition of meaning and yet radically new at the same time. Rather than simply incorporating an intransigent South into a Northern, free-labor economy, it quickly became clear that both the North and the South would both have to change in some way to move forward as a whole. This radical ideological shift was at least partially recognized by many writers after the war in the proliferation of various "questions" that an implicitly white,

propertied, masculine, and Christian American *imago* of society assumed itself to have to deal with in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The "Woman Question," the "Negro Question," the "Jewish Question," and the "Labor Question," were all common phrases in American popular magazines throughout the last decades of the century. Each of these phrases betrayed the paucity of traditional concepts to describe new ideological articulations brought about by an expanding nation and a developing economy that could no longer hide its internal contradictions in the same ways. Despite the seemingly detached and abstract phrasings of these "questions," the stakes of their answers were very real and responses to them often turned to violence in the streets after the war. If the war had, in fact, brought about a "new birth of freedom" in which "that government of the people, by the people, and for the people" did not "perish from the earth," it had by no means settled the question of what that "people" would be or how they would imagine themselves after the most violent conflict the world had seen to that point (Lincoln 417).

  For a brief moment after the war, an exhausted nation had the opportunity to reimagine itself as it wished it could be. For W.E.B. DuBois, this imagined future took the form of a potential "dawn of freedom" in which all people might be considered equal citizens before the law (*The Souls of Black Folk* 15). As DuBois also pointed out, however, quoting one of Abraham Lincoln's secretaries of war, Simon Cameron, the first gestures of the federal government to integrate freed slaves into American society figured them explicitly as a "military resource" (*Souls* 16). The question of what status the federal government would choose to give freed slaves was part of a larger issue of the uncertain political ramifications of officially considering Southerners who fought for the

Confederates as citizens of another, belligerent country whose property, including "liberated" slaves, could legally be confiscated during wartime. At the same time, there were pragmatic reasons for confiscating the land and property of rebellious Southerners and federal policy on the issue changed rapidly during the War depending on the particular circumstance. As the military began to understand the freed slaves as a "resource," people who had been considered "'contrabands' were welcomed as military laborers. This complicated rather than solved the problem, for now the scattering fugitives became a steady stream, which flowed faster as the armies marched" (*Souls* 16). Already in the last days of the war, collections of bodies formed into a mass along both geographic and political lines. The "path" of escape for the former slaves organized itself around their potential for labor in military camps and coalesced along military supply lines. The movement from Confederate "contraband" to universally accessible "resource" happened almost accidentally, as a result of immediate political exigency. Before the former slaves could be integrated into the military, however, they first had to be organized as a definable mass, made visible to governmental institutions as a population. Movement itself, made somewhat less strict under the confusion of battle, had to be redefined in order to control populations through institutions and their statistical apparatuses.

The "steady stream" of people would become after the war not an exigency, but a principle for the definition, analysis, and control of the nation as a whole by both the state and private institutions. In turn, the primary means by which those streams of people who had been made visible to the state as populations would be guided was the material

system of railways and its abstract metrics which were developed during Reconstruction and into the twentieth century. As Charles Francis Adams, Jr. put it, the American railway system was "thoroughly characteristic of the American people" in that it "grew up untrammeled by any theory as to how it ought to grow; and developed with mushroom rapidity, without reference to government or political systems" (*Railroads: Their Origins and Problems* 116). From its initial phase of construction in the 1830s, the railway system would grow at a steady but comparatively slow rate into the 1860s. With the help of the logistical requirements of the Civil War and then a rapid post-war economic expansion, however, its rate of expansion rose sharply. It would eventually span the continent with the completion of the trans-continental Union Pacific Railway in 1869, and reached a point of relative saturation by 1876. The development of the railway, according to Adams, was, at the same time, "founded on a theoretical error . . . that in all matters of trade, competition, if allowed perfectly free play, could be relied upon to protect the community from abuses" (*Railroads* 117). Armed with this faith, Americans "built roads everywhere, apparently in perfect confidence the country would develop as to support all the roads that could be built" (*Railroads* 118). As a result, "railroads sprang up as if by magic" (*Railroads* 118). The railway was more than simply a tool, created to achieve particular, pragmatic ends. Its shape and procedures were formed by capitalist "axioms" that preceded the reality they were supposedly in service of and surpassed those assumptions in scope "as if by magic" to produce effects beyond any single intention (*Railroads* 116). By the 1870s, the railway was "a thing *sui generis* – a vast and intricate formative influence, as well as a material power" (*Railroads* 81). The system of tracks

and train cars became more than the sum of its parts. Rather, over and above even Wolfgang Schivelbusch's concept of the "ensemble" of heterogeneous technologies that made up the railway system, it became an overdetermined total train system (Schivelbusch 31). It was a collection of interconnected regimes of technological control over nature, social practices for the regulation of the circulation of people and consumer goods, and ideological assumptions about how societies naturally develop and understand their own historical movements. The railway became overdetermined in that it was the product of a culture that saw itself as guided by trans-historical laws whose principles produced the railway. At the same time, the railway itself proved the existence of those trans-historical laws and itself anthropomorphically represented society's trans-historical principles of development. As an anthropomorphic tautology that was both the product and guarantor of American development, the railway became an essentially literary question, the features of the two halves of the comparison becoming increasingly interchangeable over time.

This project, then, first hopes to begin to trace in American literature the ideological development of a shifting relationship between the political space of the United States and the technologies that made that that political space possible from its origins as a totalizing system in the Reconstruction period into the twentieth century. More specifically, the ideology of linear social progress as divine *fiat* was increasingly grounded not in strictly theological terms but in the secularized discourse of scientific and technological certainties. The literature of the day, in its various efforts towards a "realist" or "naturalist" aesthetic, made claims to representing this social development in

its empirical reality that American literature previously had not. In literature, then, we see authors deal more explicitly with ideology as a material institution that grounds an abstract certainty. Because it was not entirely bound to reality, literature could more specifically articulate the ideological assumptions that precede any statement about reality. I call space "political" in this context because one of the most important effects of the railway system and the new speeds of circulation it created was to telescope space, warping the traditional ideas of distance and therefore political articulation between previously separate spheres of power within the nation. Because the railway was a technology, space and time could be instrumentalized for diverse human ends. Space and time were therefore revealed by the total train system to be more than simply *a priori* categories of perception. To the degree that they could be warped from a human perspective, the new limits of space-time became mobile, practical boundaries that could be put to work through technologies that exceeded the capabilities of human bodies. Because semi-autonomous from human action, the railway system could also operate semi-automatically, the principles of the system then becoming the limits for human movement and social articulation. Over time, the particular mode of instrumentalization of space and time offered by the total train system shifted from an uncertain, emergent phenomenon through the 1860s and 70s to a fully dominant ideological formation from the 1880s into the twentieth century.

Secondly, my project hopes to show the mutual reinforcement between the ideology developed by the total train system and a changing American racial discourse within which some thinkers were actively critiquing progressive ideology as it developed.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, black thinkers and writers were often the most perceptive and articulate critics of these developments even as they were occurring. As the railway system developed, both as a product of the rapidly expanding and solidifying space of the nation and its apparent guarantor, the period of its expansion also saw the political victories won for former slaves in the first few years after the war quickly eliminated. Ultimately, this process led to the institution of state-sanctioned segregation and organized violence against black citizens to replace the former state-sanctioned slavery. As Frederick Douglass described it in 1881, American racism still "fill[ed] the air" after the official end of Reconstruction in the South (Douglass 568). Although black Americans had "ceased to be the slave of an individual" by the 1880s, they had "in some sense become the slave of society" (Douglass 568). The "love of power and domination" to which Douglass attributed this new form of oppression had become not necessarily the function of a "money motive" at work for any one, malevolent individual (although that certainly continued in many forms) but a function of the particular mode of capitalist exchange that coalesced after the war, a mode that I argue was given its historically contingent shape in this period by the railway (Douglass 573). To trace the development of these abstract forces and their multiple interactions, I will examine the art and thought of four post-war American authors: William Dean Howells, Charles W. Chesnutt, Henry Adams, and James Weldon Johnson. Each of these authors sought to depict a moment in the technological reshaping of the political and literal space of the country. By following these thinkers in more or less chronological order, we can see the ossification of the logic of the railway as an ideology of historical movement. Additionally, we see how the

railway created a new, more technologically mobile sense of historical order compared to an antebellum racism that had been shattered in the war.

The "love of power and domination" that Douglass identified as the source of racial and economic oppression after Reconstruction is a difficult concept in that it suggests two, seemingly opposite readings: the love that power distributes to those who are subject to it and the love of subjects for that power to which they are subjected. "Love," in this context, should not be thought of as romantic love but a libidinal investment in a concept of law in which principles of exchange between its aspects are partially determined in advance. This libidinal relationship, in fact, breaks into three aspects: the abstract and absent law that distributes love unequally in history, the individuals who experience their subjection to that law as the ones who are loved and made present in history through that love, and the only implicitly present unloved who are separated out from the loved by the absent law. The split within history by trans-historical principles of domination, given the unique history of state-sanctioned slavery in the United States, tended within the discourse of late nineteenth century American politics to be racialized and polarized into a simple "black and white" binary, despite the dialectic's plasticity.

My decision to attempt to trace the development of the total train system by way of two of the three traditional abstractions of identity formation (race, class, and gender), should not be construed as meaning that race and class are more important in some way than any other conceivable permutation of the three terms. Each permutation brings with it its own historical frame that emphasizes different aspects of the essential split between

the loved and unloved of American politics. As the discourse around lynching in the

United States makes painfully clear, for example, any statement about one of the three

terms always implicitly or explicitly involves the other two. A common justification for

white mobs' lynching of black men was a rhetorical plea for the safety of white women's

sexual purity. This rhetorical plea, however, was, in turn, simply a diversion from the

economic and political motives those terror tactics actually supported. The relationship

between class and race, however, was often the most obvious conjunction in the events

surrounding the expansion of the railway and its ideological ossification. The battle

around the Granger Laws in the American South and West that sought to curtail the

political power of the railway companies in the 1860s and 70s, the Supreme Court

decision in the 1890s that legalized segregation, and the continuing silence surrounding

the common practice of lynching throughout the late nineteenth century and into the

twentieth all explicitly tied practical technologies of movement to abstract racial

assumptions in the American imagination. To begin to return to the material history of

the perpetuation of American systems of oppression could just as easily begin there as

anywhere else, with the knowledge that to imagine such a history as having a single

origin is one of the first errors that should be acknowledged.

The collapse of state-sanctioned slavery, in fact, revealed the abstract law of

"power and domination" to operate as a tautology whose arbitrary character was not an

accident or a failure of its concept, but the primary mechanism by which it functioned

and perpetuated itself. Prior to the war, the power of Southern slave-holders perpetuated

itself as a biological determinism that was evidence of divine right that, in turn,

determined biological difference. As Thomas Jefferson put it (importantly in his Query

on the laws of the state rather than on its population in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*),

the social order in the United States could be justified by a difference, "fixed in nature"

(Jefferson 138). Slaves' "own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their

preference of them," hierarchically mirrored "the preference of the Oranootan for the

black women over those of his own species" (Jefferson 138). After the war, this

biological determinism remained in many ways rhetorically dominant – in a Social

Darwinist discourse, for example. At the same time, a new form of power emerged to

compensate for the failure of divine right to explain an American society that had just

almost torn itself apart over the question. Power, rather than being "fixed in nature," had

to some extent become mobile through the systems of capitalist exchange, justifying

itself through its own growth. As James Weldon Johnson put it in 1935, the "course of

fate cannot be steered,/ By all the gods that man has made" ("Fragment" 70). There

would be no way to begin American history again after the war in an effort to efface the

history of the "Ten thousand thousand blacks" who, through state-sanctioned slavery had

become "a wedge/ Forged in the furnaces of hell,/ And sharpened to a cruel edge/ By

wrong and by injustice fell,/ And driven by hatred as a sledge" ("Fragment" 70). It "*is

impossible to choose one's beginnings*" when attempting to understand this history of the

United States (*For Marx* 64; emphasis in original). Black Americans after the war had

"contradicted the degrading qualities which slavery formerly ascribed" to them, and yet

slavery's "shadow still lingers," functioning as an "atmosphere," an assumed set of trans-

historical principles of development, rather than a more direct property relation (Douglass 573).

Although it is impossible to choose one's beginnings, there is a great deal of plasticity to the terms by which particular writers represent those beginnings in retrospect as certainties to come. History's guaranteed course could be rhetorically revised to account for new technologies as new mediating terms of domination, as both history's product and guarantor. As technologies based on scientific certainties became new means of capitalist circulation, they did nothing to change the essential split between the loved and unloved in American politics. They did, however, change the terms of distribution and possibilities of exchange between its three aspects. These shifting terms, moving into the twentieth century, would largely be rhetorically justified by way of the assumed benefits of technological advancement. The loved and unloved were split in their symbolic relationship to that history and yet shared "one and the same human self-alienation" ("Alienation and Social Class" 133). The loved experienced that alienated subjectivity as a property relationship between them and their own history that legitimized their form of alienation "as a sign *of its own power*" in that it possessed "the *appearance* of a human existence" ("Alienation" 133; emphasis in original). The myriad disruptions to everyday life ushered in by the railway, for those that experienced that history as for their own good, were reincorporated into a sense of linear progress as proof of its certainty. The unloved, however, felt "destroyed in this alienation seeing in it its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence" ("Alienation" 133). Race and class, as abstractions that describe two aspects of a fundamental ideological split between

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the loved and unloved, became mobile borders within the space of the nation with the advent of the railway. These two aspects of the same division that could alternatively be activated to justify oppression as based in eternal, now scientific, law. This initial split between the loved and the unloved functioned as the place reserved for the "Name-of-the-Father in the promotion of the law" of American historical succession (*Écrits* 482) [1]. For those "that violate/ The eternal laws," according to Johnson, forgiveness "is an idle dream" because "God is not love, God is law" ("Fragment" 70-1).

To relate technology to the abstract, political space of the United States as its borders were in motion is, at the same time, to question the terms of history itself or the law which grounds our certainties about the movement of history in its linking of cause to effect. With the advent of the railway, technology increasingly took on the role of the mediating copula in historical movement. In the final pages of his *Personal Memoirs*, published in 1885, former president of the United States and general of the Armies of the Potomac Ulysses S. Grant gave his predictions for the future of a country that had survived the war and a turbulent period of Reconstruction. Grant wrote that prior to the Civil War,

> the great mass of the people were satisfied to remain near the scenes of their birth. In fact an immense majority of the whole people did not feel secure against coming to want should they move among entire strangers. So much was the country divided into small communities that localized idioms had grown up, so that you could almost tell what section a person was from by hearing him speak . .

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[1] The majority of my Lacan references are to the Bruce Fink translation – I will note when I've made alterations of my own using the French.

. Little was known of the topography of the country beyond the settlements of

these frontiersmen. This is all changed now. The war begot a spirit of

independence and enterprise. The feeling now is, that a youth must cut loose from

his old surroundings to enable him to get up in the world. There is now such a

commingling of the people that particular idioms and pronunciation are no longer

localized to any great extent; the country has filled up 'from the centre all around

to the sea'; railroads connect the two oceans and all parts of the interior; maps,

nearly perfect, of every part of the country are now furnished the students of

geography . . . I feel that we are on the eve of a new era. (Grant 778-9)

According to Grant, technological domination of space, the alterations in language that

accompany that domination, and the general production of knowledge about the space of

the nation that results from these shifts all contribute to the "new era" that the nation was

entering. Intuitively, Grant understood the movement of history to be mediated through

technologies after Reconstruction and, most importantly, through the railway. The

railway inaugurated a conceptual exchange that Grant understood (not altogether

unreasonably) to be a progression. Whereas prior to the war the United States had been

"divided" by cultures, accents, idioms, and literal space, after the war the American

public would learn to speak a similar language by necessity through their social

intermixing in the space of the railway system. History, conceived of as a set of trans-

historical constants that organize contingent events into patterns of causes and effects,

was no longer a self-evident concept in the wake of the total train system. More than this,

the railway indicated that history had never been self-evident even when it had been

assumed as such. The social differences whose interaction provided a narrative of transmission from generation to generation were exchanged for a unity in language and practice that provided a basis for a new kind of knowledge about the nation that could be quantified and controlled. While the railway separated a generation from its local specificity, it unified the nation as a calculable, eternally "nearly perfect" population.

At the same time, this shift in history's mediating term was not as innocent as Grant hoped it to be. The expansion of the railway quickly eliminated the space of the frontier that had separated the civilized from the savage in the American imagination since the first European colonists in the seventeenth century. Rather than American society defining itself through the often violent negation of the savage, the borders that marked this difference were turned in on themselves and became the accelerating, mobile borders of the circulation of capital, borders between the developed and undeveloped (or, more ominously, underdeveloped) spaces of resources for exploitation. The spread of the railway and its pushing back of the savage spaces thus became proof of the moral and social development of the nation, the technological and social categories becoming confused because equated in people's minds. The railway and its institutions would be able to redistribute savage space within the nation itself through its own material presence or absence, creating what Achille Mbembe has called "necropolitical" spaces. To the degree that access to the railway became a precondition for capitalist growth, and therefore "civilization," the negative space created by the borders of the civilizing influences of the railway tracks became an "anti-economy" that structured the means for and justification of the killing of those only conditionally protected by the state, most

visibly in the American practice of lynching which flourished at the end of the nineteenth century (Mbembe 15). As Charles W. Chesnutt described it in 1899, the equivalence between different kinds of development often masked an inequality. Although "now we have steam and electricity and improved sanitation, and professions of human equality," we would only be able to "work around to the fact of" that equality "in due course of time" (*Essays and Speeches* 112). The equivalence of two distinct meanings of "improvement" as increasing technical efficacy and increasing social ease through access to both necessary and luxury goods, as with all hasty equivalences, "prepares the way for eliminating one of them" ("The Problem of the Intrinsic" 469).

Technology in the late nineteenth century became a response to a question that had not yet been definitively asked about history, as Grant's historical intuition phrased in the prophetic mode suggests. It became the solution for the social problems it had itself created. In Grant's national anamnesis, "what is at stake is not reality, but truth," in that it reorders "past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come" (*Écrits* 213). The material structure of the railway provided the conceptual limit to the sense of historical necessity it apparently guaranteed. As the material system of the railway became more ubiquitous, it seemed only to reinforce the sense of its historical necessity as the basis for American political and economic growth. Only through rendering technology as historically overdetermined could Grant give it its new role as the engine of history, representing it as an inevitable progression when it had initially appeared as a radical break. "This is why *the past is never opaque on an obstacle. It must always be digestible as it has been pre-digested*" (*For Marx* 115; emphasis in original).

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Sigmund Freud wrote as much in 1929 when he pointed out the possibility that "technical progress is without value for the economics of our happiness," adding that if "there had been no railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice" (Freud 88). One technology supplements the loss caused by another in an attempt to reassemble a previous social formation for a humanity who has not yet caught up to the change. The logic of the railway "pre-digests" its history in that it provides the terms of exchange between dissimilar social articulations, to an extent determining how they will be valued in their exchanges. What Grant understood intuitively, Freud begins to formulate theoretically: technology to a historically variable degree structures social value exchanges as its principles begin to be taken as trans-historical constants in the nineteenth century. The logic of the railway became dominant not simply as an increasingly ubiquitous mode of transportation in people's lives. It was also dominant as a total train system in its conferral of necessity on the past that led up to it in that the logic of the train system became the means by which historical dominance itself was distributed, both literally and conceptually.

What is at stake in the question of the social effects of the railway system is less the empirical truth of the history the railway system apparently guaranteed than the set of metaphors by which that history's causal unity was assumed. As a metaphor for the society of which it was a part, the railway's metaphorical status as a model for historical movement is essentially a literary question. In an anthropomorphism bizarrely shared by Karl Marx and Andrew Carnegie, after the world was literally connected by the railway system, society as a whole was made available in a more powerful way to a new kind of

biological determinism as a metaphor for its processes than it had been before the war. Society became a unified body not only in Thomas Hobbes's analogical sense of the Leviathan, but in the more literal sense of the railway system that linked the separate spheres of the world together, but with particular principles of articulation unique to it. Whereas Hobbes began his most famous work with confidence that the human heart is "but a spring" and the "commonwealth, or state . . . is but an artificial man," by the nineteenth century this had become something less and something more than a metaphor (Hobbes 3). These principles of growth and regulation through capitalism could be conceived of as the stochastic homeostasis of a mechanical body connected by the railway.

Literary criticism of the past few decades has picked up on the essentially metaphoric means by which trans-historic principles are ideologically assumed and then used to explain historically contingent events. Critic Amy Kaplan's often-cited *The Social Construction of American Realism*, for instance, takes "ideology" to be "those unspoken collective understandings, conventions, stories, and cultural practices that uphold systems of social power" (Kaplan 6). The new historicism, as distinct from an "antimimetic" post-structuralism, leads "critics to chart a more dynamic relation between social and literary structures, one that does not place the text outside society as an imaginative escape" but situates "realistic texts within a wider field of what has been called 'discursive practices,'" which "reclaim the American novelist's engagement with society" (Kaplan 6-7). Other important works on the period such as Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* and Eric Sundquist's *To*

Wake the Nations, similarly take some form of "discursive practices" as a more accurate subject than any empirical "reality" that literature "reflects" in some way. Yet, as Kaplan's description indicates, this new historicism may simply avoid the more pressing question of history as fundamentally metaphorical by implicitly retaining the reflective model that discursive practices "uphold" power structures along mimetic lines but by other means. These discursive histories often mask the ways in which discourse itself is material and historical. "Society," in this form of "discursive analysis," becomes an autonomous object that can be "engaged with" rather than itself being discursive and therefore fundamentally metaphorical. With the failure of human bodies to be vessels of historic meaning, history itself has been turned into a variety of analogical Leviathans by these critics for the same procedures of empirical analysis to be done at a higher level of abstraction, in the name of "discourse" which effectively substitutes for the same "reality."

Following Teresa Brennan, my own project takes as its starting point the ideological critique of Karl Marx by way of Jacques Lacan, whom I take to be a profoundly if perhaps fleetingly historical thinker, somewhat "against the grain," as we say, of many assessments that associate him with a poorly defined and therefore often misunderstood, a-historical "post-structuralism." According to Brennan, critics "under the sway of the Foucauldian antithesis" (which, through its retelling, often has little to do with Foucault), focus on a particular kind of "discourse analysis," that does "not proceed propositionally" (Brennan 5). Those writers "are suddenly susceptible to the notion that the attempt to explain the whole is a mistake" (Brennan 5). Instead, they follow particular

genealogies of the rise of the idea of popular culture, or some other local discourse as an "alternative" to an overly general "history" (Brennan 6). Lacan, however, provides us with "a lever" which "approximates Marxism's explanatory reach" but also "begins to bridge the applicability gap" that led a Marxism that had little to do with Marx and was "so plainly wrong in its industrial premises and centralized conclusions" toward a dogmatism that could not fully develop its own praxis (Brennan 6-7). Lacan "stresses psychical factors . . . in a way which makes the psychical into a material or, strictly, a psychical force which is at the same time cultural" (Brennan 7). If, according to Brennan, Lacan leads us to the conclusion that "the objectification of the other depends on establishing a spatial boundary by which the other by which the other and the self are fixed" that boundary in the late nineteenth century American ideological field was shaped by the railway and that split between the self and the other would be racialized through and through (Brennan 8). While I will disagree with some of Brennan's conclusions about Lacan's theories, I agree that beginning with Lacan's idea of the materiality of the signifier can provide us with a framework to more fully understand a history in language that is simultaneously material and ideological.

My first chapter, then, begins with the work of William Dean Howells, whose career almost perfectly follows the rise of the railway system from Reconstruction into the twentieth century. Howells is often used by critics as a straw-man whose promotion of American literary Realism negatively defines the supposedly more aesthetically ambitious and properly complex Modernism that proceeds it. At the same time, when taken on its own terms, Howells's work was not a monolithic, coherent set of aesthetic

practices but a shifting problematic within an emergent ideology conditioned by the

expansion of the railway and its logic. By following the evolution of Howells's thought

in his use of the railway as a metaphor for how societies function, I will argue that

Howells identifies (almost despite himself) the essential problematic of the total train

system from the dominant bourgeois point of view as it was developing. I use

"problematic" here in Althusser's sense of the word, a "particular unity of a theoretical

formation" in its relation "to the existing *ideological field*" (*For Marx* 32, 62). As an

emergent phenomenon within the existing ideological field, the total train system

presented itself to Howells as essentially ambiguous, as a problem that had no obvious

solution because it had not yet been fully imbricated into ideological certainties. In

particular, the total train system presented itself as a problem to bourgeois consciousness

as a disruption of the social field of which it was a product. As an emergent set of

practices that attempted to ideologically adjust to the telescoping capacities of the

railway, the total train system often appeared in Howells's and other's metaphors in terms

of magic. This magic, however, I will argue, was a way to ideologically and aesthetically

account for the "mythic thought" produced by the railway and its new modes of

articulation, in Lévi-Strauss's sense of the term. By telescoping time and space, the

railway was able to literally juxtapose different political spaces in a previously

unimaginable way. As such it combined and articulated previously distinct spaces and

regimes of knowledge, creating a social effect that could only be understood by Howells

as a kind of secular magic. By the twentieth century, however, Howells's initial optimism

about America had dissipated and the new politics made possible through technologically

controlled space revealed itself to favor an oppressive American politics rather than its liberation.

Whereas my first chapter attempts to define the total train system from within its problematic from the dominant, white, and bourgeois point of view, my second chapter takes the same problematic from a different angle, that of Charles W. Chesnutt. If it took Howells decades to identify the potentially oppressive aspects of the total train system, Chesnutt identified them almost as they happened. The "mythic thought" produced by technological system, as Chesnutt represented them in his novels particularly, was not random. Rather, it served to define and regulate the historical progress of American traditions which, in turn, often implicitly supported white supremacist political structures. As a critique of these structures, I argue that in his last two novel published in his lifetime, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt expands in literary form on an idea he only partially developed in his non-fiction, the idea of "the parallax view." The "parallax view" is an attempt to speak historically but not from a position of certainty. Rather, the parallax view understands history to be essentially contested, but productively so. Viewing Chesnutt's experiments with realism not as a failure to appropriately use its techniques as Howells defined them, as many critics have seen him, Chesnutt attempts to not only critique the empirical assumptions of a white, bourgeois society that assumes and benefits from a linear history, but goes beyond them to develop a perspectival approach to realist literary techniques.

My third chapter moves to the work of the historian and occasional novelist, Henry Adams. By the time Adams privately published his two major works, *Mont Saint-*

Michel and Chartres and *The Education of Henry Adams* in the first decade of the

twentieth century, the logic of the total train system had become a dominant rather than

emergent ideological force in American culture. After his early journalistic work,

histories of the administrations of Jefferson and Madison, and two novels published

anonymously and pseudonymously, Adams rejected the progressivism he had at first

worked toward in his criticism of the political abuses and corruption around the

expanding railway system. Adams came to understand American and, indeed Western,

history as having "snapped," as he put it in his *Education*, around 1900 (*The Education of*

Henry Adams 433). Whereas Howells and Chesnutt had been attempting to represent the

changes brought about by the railway system in its emergent form, Adams described the

fully dominant total train system as a new "empire of coal." This empire would be a

radical break from the Enlightenment tradition to which Adams, as an Adams, felt

himself particularly beholden. While the empire of coal broke the diachronic progression

of Enlightenment thought, it simultaneously instituted a new, synchronic unity by way of

capitalist circulation. The new "empire of coal" created a distinct form of subjectivity in

the modern era for Adams, one that would incorporate the principles of technological

articulation into its own functioning. This new subjectivity would be essentially spatial

and historical rather than grounded in a prime mover that structured history from the

outside. More than the other three writers I discuss, Adams was a world-traveler and

nearly as intimate with European society as with American. Black Americans seemed to

have made almost no impression on Adams, ever the Boston Brahmin, after his

antebellum childhood. Rather than taking black Americans as his figure of the racial

"other," in the second half of his career Adams developed a virulent anti-Semitism that, as other critics have argued, largely stemmed from his intimacy with Europe and its own struggles over racial difference. Adams's anti-Semitism is often dismissed as Adams simply being "of his time" or explained away as an unfortunate bitterness he developed later in life. I argue, however, that Adams's anti-Semitism is, in fact, related to his spatialization of politics by way of the empire of coal that was now global and therefore a structuring influence on global anti-Semitism as well as the more local obsessions specific to American race prejudice. The figure of the "ghetto" as a space apart from capitalist circulation (like the spaces of lynching in the American South I discuss in the next chapter) takes the place in Adams's mind of biological determinism as the justification for racial difference in Adams's thought, marking a shift that would only become even more important in the twentieth century.

Finally, my last chapter looks at the work of James Weldon Johnson, the poet, novelist, anthologist, diplomat, scholar, and early leader of the NAACP. Focusing on his only novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, first published in 1912, I argue that Johnson's lifelong battle against the American practice of lynching can best be understood as a reaction to the political space of the total train system as it had ideologically ossified by the beginning of the twentieth century, and as Adams described it. The political terror against black citizens that reigned in the American South after Reconstruction was essentially "necropolitical" in that it separated political space along racial lines into spaces of safety and spaces where the suspension of the state was conceived of by some as essential to its health. This American necropolitics was all the

more terrifying in that it followed the mobile and accelerating borders made possible by the railway system, creating a calculus rather than geometry of spaces of racial violence that could expand or contract almost randomly from the point of view of any one individual. I read Johnson's novel as a revision of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* in that it revises Franklin's early association between American identity as geographically situated but for a modern environment dominated by the total train system. Similarly, any resistance to specific tactics of domination against a particular race would, necessarily also require resistance to a particular mode of Capitalist circulation. Resistance, in other words, would "not begin by choosing among" different abstract modes of subjectification, but by "no longer choosing" at all (*Écrits* 65).

By taking Lacan as a historical thinker, his ideas help me understand a different kind of causality than is typically assumed, "in silence," as Henry Adams put it, by historians who "had never supposed themselves required to know what they were talking about" when faced with a "wholly new" force such as the railway (*Education* 362-3). When one looks for it, it is, in fact, surprising the degree to which scholars from a variety of disciplines assume the principles of Newtonian mechanics to accurately and completely describe all kinds of causality. I would identify one "lever," as Brennan put it, that Lacan offers us in his own explicitly stated attempt to rethink causality. Lacan gives us a form of causality closer to what Werner Heisenberg has called, following Aristotle, *potentia*. These are the places where typical (which is to say Newtonian) causal relations do not hold. They are causal relations that are simultaneously material but within a mode of materiality that is only constituted in the act of observing it. With this in mind, turning

to these four writers working within a changing ideological field offers us not

"alternative" histories but at least the possibility of alternatives within the "history of a

life lived as history" (*Écrits* 366).

Chapter 1:

An Agent Universally Applicable: William Dean Howells and Technological Space

"*Denken? Abstract? – Sauve qui peut! Rette sich, wer kann!*"
    G.W.F. Hegel, "*Wer denkt abstract?"* (1807)

"It is conjecturable that democracy as we have realized it, and as that mistaken American author has studied and painted it, has a repulsiveness which the ideal does not wear. It looks ordinary, commonplace, uninteresting, as one's face and figure are apt to look in the glass when not made up for the ordeal. This, however, one may very well feel, is not the fault of one's self, but of the glass, and then one does well to smash it, or if not quite that, to impeach its veracity."
    William D. Howells "The Physiognomy of the Poor" (1903)

"Some day I should like to write the tragedy of a man trying to escape his circumstances. It would be funny."
    William D. Howells to William C. Howells, October 7th, 1888

An Absurd Poetry: The Total Train System

When the last spike of the first trans-continental railway in the United States was driven into the ground in May of 1869, the track's completion performed both an economic and a political function. As one of the dignitaries claimed just before the ceremonial golden spike was driven into the ground, the railway would now "span the continent," "wed the oceans," and dictate "the pathway to commerce" ("The Pacific Railroad"). In case anyone in the audience had missed the connection between the expansion of the material infrastructure of the nation and its political unity, another speaker went further. *The New York Times* reported him as saying that the "Great Benton prophesied that someday a granite statue of Columbus would be erected on the highest peak of the Rocky Mountains pointing westward, denoting the great route across the continent. You have made the prophecy to-day a fact." ("Pacific"). Just two days later, "inaugurating the over-land trade with China and Japan," the "first invoice of tea" was

sent ("Pacific"). In the minds of those who constructed it, the Union Pacific Railway was an expression of the continuing effort of the United States to find "India" in the Orientalist mode. These speakers imagined the railway to be part of the inevitable expansion of the United States as both a political entity and an economic system, the latter providing the conditions of existence for the former. Political unity after the Civil War and the fulfilment of the nation's destiny were transformed from a prophecy into a fact through the filling out of geographic space by a railway system which now quite literally spanned the continent.

The railway was for those who controlled it the fulfilment of a process that had begun with the first European colonists in the Americas. Citing Christopher Columbus rather than the Plymouth Colony is apt here in its emphasis on the economic, which is to say the more explicitly rapacious, colonial narrative of American expansion. The promise of expansion was achieved, however, by unexpected because previously un-dreamt of, technological means. Because the destiny of the nation was fulfilled in an unexpected way, the ideology that justified that expansion had to change to account for the realities of history and to reconcile prophesy with fact. The railway system, as a realization of the promise of the United States, weakened one aspect of the dominant American tradition while it reinforced another in a kind of conceptual exchange. These two aspects divide along the lines of what Raymond Williams called the "stronger" and "weaker" senses of tradition (Williams 116). Toward the weaker sense of tradition as a romanticized "point of retreat" after a radical shift in practice, the railroad was a disruptive force (Williams 116). The dream of "India" would no longer be fulfilled by isolated frontiersmen working

to cultivate their own properties, in the Jeffersonian mode. Rather, The West would be a fully integrated part of Eastern business concerns, which would, in their turn, benefit from the resources of the West. At the same time, and as the inaugurators of the railroad hoped to convince the public, the train continued another tradition in the stronger sense of the word. The railroad was also evidence of American ingenuity and innovation. Expansion, as an abstraction meant to fulfill a destiny, had shifted its mediating term for the inaugurators of the railroad. It would now be grounded not in the creation of individuals who carry with them the spirit of the American prophesy but in the cultivation of a technological system that was itself the culmination of the American prophesy. As an expression of American ingenuity, the railway system became a way for Americans to recast this disjunctive experience as a continuity between a past, a present, and a future at a higher level of abstraction. What appeared to be a radical break with the past, could therefore be reintegrated into a totalizing conception of the political domination of space that guaranteed the linear progression of social and economic growth. As the railway worker and union organizer Eugene V. Debs put it in 1899, to be a railroad worker in the nineteenth century was more than simply a job. When one piled "in the fuel to create steam to speed a locomotive along the iron track" one was also speeding along "progress and civilization" at the same time (Debs 232).

If there was a single author who seemed to promote this stronger sense of tradition that gave Americans a feeling of participating in a progressive destiny, it was the novelist, playwright and magazine editor William Dean Howells. In his most often remembered formulation of what constitutes a specifically American literature, Howells

claimed that American authors "concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests" (*Criticism & Fiction* 62). This quotation, absent of its context, is typically the only statement of his that is included in general overviews of the period and is sometimes taken by critics dedicated to the study of Howells's work as a synecdoche for all of his thought on the subject. Selecting Howells as an emblem of American progressive ideology makes a kind of sense from this single quotation. One can already see the ideological compromise Howells at times attempts between the two aspects of American tradition. He claimed to "seek" in the "individual" a way of accessing an unspecified "universal" that is somehow dissociated from "social interests." These social interests, then, are a diversion from the unfolding of the Jeffersonian destiny of America, which can only be found in individuals. Howells hoped to claim for art the place of a mediating term between the individual and the universal, bypassing the social. Thus, through art, Americans could represent to themselves their relationship to a common set of trans-historical values that would not be subject to the vicissitudes of a social history that was not always an obvious unfolding of the presumed destiny of the American people. American artists, in turn, do not choose to represent these aspects of life over others as a conscious decision, but as a tendency stemming from American "conditions," a word which in this context attempts to dissociate the American environment from its historically contingent features (*Criticism & Fiction* 62).

Although he was a dominant figure in American literature at the end of the nineteenth century, by 1930 many writers and critics considered Howells's unwarranted

optimism to be irredeemably old-fashioned. Sinclair Lewis, for instance, took his own

Nobel Prize in literature that year as an indication that the United States was a "nation

come of age" culturally (Lewis). As opposed to the Victorian era of "Howellsian

timidity," writers like Theodore Dreiser and Eugene O'Neill chose to include subjects

that were "terrifying, magnificent, and often quite horrible," in the manner of "the

tornado, the earthquake, the devastating fire" (Lewis). While Howells "had the code of a

pious old maid" and sought to "guide America into becoming a pale edition of an English

cathedral town," the new art of Lewis and Dreiser would include more "passionate and

authentic" depictions of America made by artists who refused to be "genteel" and were "a

little insane in the tradition of James Joyce" (Lewis). This criticism of Howells as a

complacent and conservative figure in the English mold is a common one. At the same

time, this criticism is strange in that Howells himself launched this complaint against

other artists as early as the 1870s in the name of a new and vibrant American art that he

saw himself as promoting. Additionally, by the twentieth century, Howells's art and

criticism had lost much of its earlier optimism, making any summary statement about his

place in the American tradition as its representative optimist more problematic.

  Howells's changing understanding of his own artistic project, in fact, followed a

trajectory that mirrored his political shift from a largely benign faith in a utopic American

destiny to a more circumspect concern about the disparity between the reality of

American life and the rhetoric with which it was justified. I argue that by following the

image of the railway in Howells's work, we can trace his changing attitude toward the

abstract ideal of American politics from a progressive destiny to a hesitation over an

impossible decision brought about by its own contradictions, a "lethal factor," as Jacques Lacan put it. Through Howells's attempts to incorporate the railway into his art, we can see the ideological impact of that technological system as an emergent force in the American imaginary. The shift did not occur in a single stroke and never took the form of a coherent theory. Often, in his later work, the optimist and the pessimist in Howells live side by side. Yet, after the 1880s, a new strand of Howells's thought emerges in which he attempts, if ultimately unsuccessfully, to reconcile the internal contradictions of American technological progressivism. In purely contingent terms, the work of William Dean Howells is perfectly situated to register the ideological shift caused by the railroad system. His career followed the railroad's post-war economic and political expansion as well as the general ideological ossification of the assumptions that apparently naturalized modern technology as an abstract historical force, roughly from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to the end of the century. The railway presented a problem to Howells's realist project in that it was both changing the material conditions of American life that Howells hoped to represent semi-empirically through his realist techniques and was also changing the concept of the social in the abstract, how the material conditions would articulate social spaces. Despite the "real" in the term "realism," when it came to the railway's ability to telescope distances to create new juxtapositions of objects and social spheres, many writers, including Howells, had difficulty treating it as "real" and could only liken the train system to magic.

In Howells's first novel, *Their Wedding Journey*, published in 1872, he was already incorporating the railway into his writing at the level of content. That novel

(which is really more a series of loosely tied-together sketches) describes the honeymoon travels of the Marches, the characters he would later use in one of his most celebrated novels, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. In one chapter, entitled "A Day's Railroading," the majority of the action takes place in a moving railway car. As Howells represents it, the observations of the Marches are to a large degree conditioned by the total train system as both a social space in which strangers come together and a technological space of a car moving at comparatively great speeds through a landscape. These two aspects of the train system already play their disruptive role toward the weak sense of American tradition and a normalizing role, anxiously guaranteeing the stronger sense. In his attempt at reconciliation between the two aspects, Howells describes the railway from a variety of perspectives which forces him to write largely in the conditional mood. The railway as a social space was not generically available to Howells as such but only through a rhetoric of either partialities or potentialities. The Marches, "in the spirit of ordinary American travel," had "deliberately rejected the notion of a drawing-room car as affording a less varied prospect of humanity" (*Their Wedding Journey* 52-3). Rather, they choose the "common passenger-car," which was "in all respects an ordinary carful of human beings, and it was perhaps the more worthy to be studied on that account" (*Journey* 53, 55). The greater variety of passengers on the "common" car are both accidental in their potential differences yet normalized at a higher level of abstraction, as objects of contemplation for narrating subjects describing their plausibly common features. The interior space of the train is one of "complacency" and "comfort" that routinizes the act of viewing variety (*Journey* 53). From within, potentially destabilizing chance is thus regulated by

bourgeois perception of a static quasi-domestic space, a "very amusing world" the narrator goes on to describe almost entirely in the conditional mood (*Journey* 55). Because a space in which variety is normalized through statistical concepts, the "common car" is not just described in the conditional mood, it is ideologically experienced by the Marches in the conditional mood.

The railway, as Howells points out in the first section of this passage, offered the realist artist a new kind of social space, that of the "average" collection of Americans. These social spaces, because made up of strangers whose particular connections to local environments were no longer obvious, normalized an "American type" in general that could be studied as such and converted into aesthetic, realist principles of representation. Rather than a concept of the self-fashioned, idiosyncratic American of Benjamin Franklin's generation, the new American type would be necessarily thinkable because there was nothing left outside of the political reach of the nation that could be essentially different and therefore unintelligible. The railroad helped inaugurate the rise of this new kind of knowledge that compensated for the disruption the railway caused to the presumed differences between Americans. As Ian Hacking has argued, the nineteenth century saw the "erosion of determinism" and the ascendance of "a new type of law … analogous to the laws of nature, but pertaining to people" which were "expressed in terms of probability" (Hacking 1). An "avalanche" of numbers for the measurement and study of populations necessitated the invention of "normalcy" by the institutions that created them to describe those populations (Hacking 5). Normalcy became a convenient concept for seemingly disparate spheres of activity such as "manufacture, mining, trade, health,

railways, war, [and] empire" to control populations and implicitly require that certain behaviors be preferable amongst the people in order to maintain the power of the state in an accelerating world (Hacking 5). Jason Puskar has argued that, extending Hacking's insight, Howellsian realism can be read as a reaction to the rise of insurance companies in the United States. These institutions sought to quantify, naturalize, and normalize the effects of large-scale accidents caused by new instruments for the production and circulation of commodities. Howells's realist project in this argument fosters "social cohesion and communal interdependence" by imagining realism as "a kind of insurance" which allows "writing, like underwriting, to participate fully and unashamedly in capitalism's markets while still working to construct communities of interdependent risk" (Puskar 30). Rather than the "accident" being an unpredictable event that was caused by forces outside of the human realm, the new techniques for creating "normalcy" incorporated the idea of accident into human society itself, making it seem a shared burden of all people. As such, even disruptive events could be rationalized as the result, if unfortunate, of humans in general but not any humans in particular. Howells was aware of this attempt at homogenization through quantification when he commented that Americans are "all, or nearly all, struggling to be distinguished from the mass, and to be set apart in select circles" (*Selected Literary Criticism* 70). Howells at the beginning of his career saw the United States as offering exactly this kind of non-determinative yet still certain historical change fueled by a struggling, fluid social structure that was increasingly given its shape by technological systems.

While this normalizing tendency of the railway provided Howellesian realism with a vocabulary to describe populations, it also was disruptive on the order of the narrative of the nation's history. Although the interior, quasi-domestic space of the railway becomes normalized for the aesthetic gaze of its bourgeois passengers, the exterior view, which the Marches "struck an hour after leaving the city," becomes more confused (*Journey* 53). As they left the city, the Marches "cast an absurd poetry over the landscape" that passed them through the window and "invited themselves to be reminded of passages of European travel by it," placing "villas and castles and palaces upon all the eligible building-sites" (*Journey* 54). The landscape, like the interior space of the train, cannot be experienced as such, despite the apparent immediacy of the perception. Rather, the Marches run through a series of conceptual frameworks which attempt to place the blur of countryside into some kind of intelligible order. Sensing the unseemly foreignness of his initial imaginative frame, Mr. March "patriotically tried to reconstruct the Dutch and Indian past of the Mohawk Valley," for Mrs. March in order to explain what it was that they were looking at (*Journey* 54). In doing so, "he was foiled by the immense ignorance of his wife, who, as a true American woman, knew nothing of the history of her own country, and less than nothing of the barbarous regions beyond the borders of her native province" (*Journey* 54-5). The plurality of potential points of view on the countryside become a confusion of historical and literary precedents through which the Marches attempt to understand or misunderstand their experience. The telescoping of distance cannot be experienced by the Marches as such, but rather must be filtered

through the concept of the nation and its history, conceived of as a difference between the "barbarous" and "civilized" regions that the railway had already collapsed.

The exterior space of the railway, then, is also normalized but in a different mode, that of contingent history rather than statistically average populations. When it comes to history, however, this normalization is less successful for the Marches. As the sexist aside about the inability of American women to understand history indicates, the desire of linking this landscape to an American history attempts to guard the patrilineal progression of property that makes up traditional historic sequence against a "barbarous" chaos. Representing the train in literature, then, required for Howells several simultaneous epistemological frameworks that attempt to respond to the perceptual problems created by the material capacities of the machine's movement through space and the social spheres that are partially conditioned by that movement. These frameworks are juxtaposed in sometimes mutually exclusive discourses that must be reconciled to maintain the dominance of the bourgeois perspective's assumption of development-in-time as well as that assumption's guarantee, if uneasy in this example, of progress both in the sense of a statistically regulated group and that group's uneasy historical continuity.

The two epistemological functions that compete with each other in Howells's first train scene are the statistical, normalizing tendency of the interior space of the train car and the difficulty in maintaining a sense of historical development-in-time for the scenery outside of the train car. Although Howells did not always have an exact vocabulary to encompass the idea, Howellsian realism sought to capture the social atmosphere of the United States not as a static set of observable facts, but as a dynamic process in which

any stability can only be relative. As Howells put it, when "realism becomes false to itself, when it heaps up facts merely, and maps life instead of picturing it, realism will perish" (*Criticism & Fiction* 15). Realism, then, is an attempt to find imaginative and narrative (which is to say causal) links between facts that are more or less faithful to some kind of real world. Whether consciously understood by Howells or not, the very political formation that determined bourgeois consciousness's experience of empirical "fact" was itself rapidly changing as a result of technological systems. The railroad became for many a historical expression of the abstract force of the nation's narrative of "progress." As one contemporary of Howells's put it, progress is "is derived from motion" and is therefore a universal principle of nature rather than a willed activity of individual humans (McPherson 11). Howells's reaction to the implications of the railroad participates in a much broader shift within the dominant American ideology toward a fully bourgeois concept of knowledge and its presumed foundation in universal principles, a shift that, perhaps ironically, would undermine the very assumptions that motivated it.

As Donald M. Lowe has argued, the shift from a pre-modern to a fully bourgeois society required certain assumptions about the ways in which knowledge worked. The most important of these was the introduction of "development" and, more specifically, secular "development-in-time" as a basic formal element of knowledge (Lowe 18). With the displacement of oral communication in favor of typography as a guarantor of knowledge, knowledge became dissociated from particular, speaking individuals as vessels of truth. Rather than the contingent perceptions of individuals, the perceptive field

in the abstract, guaranteed by institutions, became the ground of truth. The various

political and social institutions surrounding the production and maintenance of scientific

knowledge are perhaps the most obvious examples of this broad historical trend. Because

dissociated from particular individuals, knowledge can thus appear to develop over time,

semi-autonomously, as an abstract apparatus rather than a lived experience. As a result,

development-in-time came to be seen as an abstract but necessary quality of knowledge

and the truth it expressed.

The relationship between the railroad system and an imagined totality of United

States society was more than a convenience or a historical accident in the last decades of

the nineteenth century. The railroad became an objective correlative for a new idea of

how societies necessarily change and grow. Despite the economic instability that shook

the country through the post-Reconstruction years in which Howells was writing, Peter

Townsend Austen was still able to claim in a popular essay from 1890 on the changing

nature of American manufacturing that we "all agree that human society is never at rest

and that we must all either go forwards or backwards – *i.e.* progress or retrogress"

(Austen 137). Austen attempted to reassure the public about the long-term effects of

economic instability, claiming that "dishonest trusts and combinations will pass away"

because they will be "prohibited" once their "true nature" is revealed to the American

people (Austen 137). We must all agree to this proposition because, according to Austen,

while the "progress of truth" may be misapplied when it is at first incompletely

understood, this is only a misidentification of truth (Austen 137). In the long run, the

truth is inherently convincing and therefore ensures its own progress. We know truth to

be progress because all progress is necessarily true in Austen's tautological reasoning. He finds proof for this faith in linear progression in the interconnectedness of business concerns, whose elements are attached to one another as parts of a single "organism" (Austen 137).

The railway system was more than simply a new mode of saving human labor. It was also the best example of the development and interconnectedness of the social "organism" whose principals were grounded in abstract nature itself. As Logan G. McPherson, a lecturer on transportation at Johns Hopkins University, wrote in 1907, the railway "performs the function of transportation" which is to say it "generates motion" (McPherson 11). All "progress is derived from motion" just as "atoms unite in molecules" (McPherson 11). These claims are so obvious to McPherson that the "motion effected through human agency which we designate as transportation furthers and continues this progress is not difficult to perceive" (McPherson 12). Cause and effect, in this argument, are immediately obvious to human perception in the bourgeois mode described by Lowe. Although McPherson's analytic argument is shot through with logical fallacies and platitudes, he expresses the odd situation clearly. The railroad system had become both a historically contingent product of American society and the proof of its trans-historic conditions of existence. The *total train system* participates in fundamental universal laws that cannot be altered but can be harnessed for human purposes. As a *total* system the railroad was an expression of a continual progress of natural development and increasing complexity. "Total" in this context does not mean completed or static; just the opposite, in fact. The railway is a "totalizing" system within

this ideological formation because of its plasticity. It is totalizing in that it attaches itself to all other spheres of the productive "organism" as the motor for their development.

As Karl Marx pointed out, the start of the Industrial Revolution was not "the machine" as such but specifically James Watt's invention of the double-acting steam engine. This motor was distinct from regular tools or other "prime movers" such as the water-wheel in that it was "of universal technical application" (*Capital* 499). The "genius" of Watt, according to Marx, was less the machine itself than Watt's patent for the machine which specified the engine "not as an invention for a specific purpose, but as an agent Tho in industry" (*Capital* 499). The steam engine, then, aids in all aspects of the production and circulation of commodities. As a system of exchange, Capitalism's essence cannot be understood through any one example of exchange. Rather, is asserts itself in the movement of all exchanges taken together as a whole, or the "the metamorphosis of commodities through which the social metabolism is mediated" (*Capital* 199). The steam engine makes a fully capitalist exchange possible not through any single exchange but as a motor that intervenes at all points of production and exchange, which affects all exchanges formally and as an acceleration of the rate of exchange in general. The train, then, both fragments previous formations of mercantile exchange in that it accelerates the expansion of Industry's replacement of pre-Industrial production and it unifies new formations in that it gives more economic power to the cities and their factory systems as concentrations of capital. The "total train system" signifies both the ubiquity of the material train system and the formal, conceptual shift

brought about by the accelerated rate of exchange in general that is now economically required at the formal level.

By the late nineteenth century, Austen was willing to put forward a general principle of social progress within capitalism that was widely shared: "*science will enable the members of a community not alone to exist, but to provide themselves with articles both of necessity and luxury without the application of their whole time to the labor of production*" (Austen 138; emphasis in original). "Science" may therefore underwrite capitalism. Taken together, scientific certainties and the technologies based on those certainties must and will govern the rate of expansion of capitalism as a stable, totalizing organism in the long run. Capitalism defines society's parts' relationship to the whole while the rate of exchange between and expansion of those parts is governed by a techno-scientific system which develops in parallel. This techno-scientific system, in turn, guarantees that capitalism's expansion will ultimately progress in a straight, if sometimes unpredictable line towards a bourgeois utopia of the combination of necessary and luxury goods for all, produced by an ever diminishing amount of direct human labor. In Adam Smith's writings from the eighteenth century, the principles of capitalism were guaranteed by the "propensity of human nature" to "truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another" (Smith 117). Exchange was a function of a human nature taken to be a trans-historical constant that limits the horizon of possibility for particular events. With Austen's assumptions about the expansion of the United States, however, the trans-historical base of capitalist exchange had shifted. Scientific and technological progress rather than "human nature" are now figured as the principles of a mechanical, historical

development that guarantees the means and rates of human exchange. Rather than a social system that uses technology for its own ends, The United States was now imagined as a technological system that occasionally required humans to invoke, manage, and hopefully profit from its inevitable development.

The shift from the assumption of historical progress as a function of human nature to that of a techno-scientific principle reimagines the relationship between economic base and cultural superstructure. As Bernard Stiegler defined it, a technological system constitutes a "*temporal unity. It is a stabilization of technical evolution around a point of equilibrium concretized by a particular technology*" (Stiegler 31; emphasis in original). The standardization in technique and use of a particular technology effectively anchors further progress around certain technologies assumed to remain more or less constant for a period of time. In the case of the railroad, this concretization takes on an extremely complex form involving both literal, mechanical unities such as the complementarity between the railroad and the telegraph systems as well as the cultural superstructure brought into being by those technical possibilities, the plethora of social practices that changed to accommodate the new possibilities in transportation. Whereas a technological system, abstracted from the concrete history in which it develops, can be seen along Stiegler's lines as a "point of equilibrium," Howells emphasizes, almost despite himself, that that equilibrium only occurs in the abstract. From the point of view of a lived history, the equilibrium at the level of technological systems also brings with it a series of uneasily reconciled epistemological divisions that manifest themselves as "mythic thought." This mythical thought, in turn, expresses itself magically from the point of view

of the individual. In Howells's particular formulation of that magic, representing the new techno-social spaces would require two complementary conceptual tasks. Technologies such as the railway operate materially, creating conditions for new perceptive experiences that provide the content for representation. At the same time those experiences have a disruptive effect on apperceptive categories, requiring a new syntax in which that content would be expressed.

Organized Lifelessness

William Dean Howells had a problematic and shifting relationship to this ideology of unlimited progress that found its fullest expression in the railway system. To a certain degree, he endorsed it as a secularized version of Christian millennial thinking. After the Civil War ended in 1865, efforts to reconstruct the South in part crystallized around an ideology of messianic progress for which the railway system was an objective correlative. Southerners hoping to rebuild their fortunes and Northerners hoping to put the antagonisms of the past few decades behind them turned to railroads as a means to begin the economic expansion that would guarantee a united nation. As historian Mark Summers put it, no "traveler in the postwar South could have missed the so-called railroad mania . . . Villages with no railroads had to have one, and those with one wanted two" (Summers 32). Fraudulent practices of private businesses, federal mismanagement of money under the Johnson and Grant administrations, and financial bubbles, however, caused economic instability associated to varying degrees with the expanding railroads through the 1870s. Spectacular economic crises (to which I will return in my chapter on

Henry Adams) such as Jay Gould and James Fisk's 1869 attempt to manipulate the gold market and the *Crédit Mobilier* scandal of 1872 undermined the perceived messianic quality of economic and technological expansion. By the close of official Reconstruction in 1877, the United States had not accomplished the utopic hopes for a radically changed South but it had put in place, for better or worse, a system of railways that spanned the entire continent.

In a review of Max Nordau's *Degeneration* from 1895, Howells seemed to endorse the Millennialism common to late nineteenth century American bourgeois consciousness in opposition to Nordau's bleak view of the *fin-de-siècle*. Nordau argued in *Degeneration* that the "disposition" of the end of the nineteenth century was "curiously confused, a compound of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement, of fearful presage and hang-dog renunciation. The prevalent feeling is that of imminent perdition and extinction" (Nordau 2). Howells commented, however, that when one reads Nordau's book, "you are not sure that Dr. Nordau is altogether sober" (*Selected Literary Criticism* 203). While rejecting the value Nordau attributed to Western Society, Howells remained within Nordau's linear, epochal logic. According to Howells, the world "in its thinking and feeling, was never so sound and sane" because "knowledge and greater knowledge are the cause and effect of all that [society] has done in the arts as well as the sciences" (*Selected* 205). He added that if "we stand at the end of things, we also stand at the beginning." (*Selected* 205). Howells partially agrees to the possibility of a disastrous millennial thinking but concludes that even if that were the case, there must be something better after it, better because guaranteed by bourgeois "knowledge." Rather than

attempting to establish final ends, Howells claims that art cannot be "final," for if an

artist "forces himself to be final in things that do not and cannot end here, he becomes

dishonest, he becomes a Nordau" (*Selected* 206). Howells rejects Nordau, not because he

thinks the world may develop in a harmful way, but because no one harmful development

can be the end of the development as such. Any instability can only be contingent, a step

along the way to "knowledge and greater knowledge." Howells does not dispute Nordau

on the basic assumption that bourgeois development-in-time is a feature inherent to

reality. He, in fact, takes that assumption one step further than Nordau. Rather than a

"degeneration," Howells, in true bourgeois fashion, imagines a future with a "widened

prospect" that signals the shift from what Donald M. Lowe calls Christian eschatology to

bourgeois society's idea of "progress." Whereas millennial time comes to an "abrupt,

unexpected end," "the idea of progress presupposed immanent temporality, and provided

a rational vision of the future to its bourgeois beliefs. No one within this progressive

development could leap beyond time. Thus, as the future widened its prospect, the

temporal horizon became more immanent" (Lowe 46). If Howells is overly "optimistic"

as many critics have claimed, his optimism is not his own but that of bourgeois society as

a whole.

The railroad, because it was a totalizing system that governed forms of exchange

in addition to being an increasingly ubiquitous material network, often occured in

Howells's writing obliquely. Its function as an object for characters' contemplation or a

background against which human actions occur reveals the way in which the railroad was

structural as well as material in Howells's imagination. In his novel *A Hazard of New*

Fortunes, published in 1890, for instance, the Marches return, a little older and a little more jaded about the world. Years after the description of their honeymoon, Mr. March is an amateur writer living in Boston who makes his living as a relatively unambitious insurance salesman. When let go from his job, the Marches decide to take up the offer of a friend for Mr. March to help start a new magazine in New York City. After arriving in New York, Mrs. March professes an "infatuation" with the city's elevated railway, "the ideal way of getting about in the world" (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 64). As it winds its way through the city, the track "found and lost itself a thousand times in the flare and tremor of the innumerable lights" (*Hazard* 64). Its path connects the different parts of the city into a whole but seems to follow no pattern for any particular individual. When observing unused train cars at the Central Depot, the objects "waited there like fabled monsters of Arab story ready for the magician's touch, tractable, reckless, will-less – organized lifelessness full of a strange semblance of life" (*Hazard* 65). Like the inaugurators of the trans-continental railroad, the metaphors that seem to lend themselves to descriptions of the railway in this case are Orientalist as well as magical. Magic, here, as a metaphor, attempts to reconcile seemingly antithetical processes at work at the same time. Despite the disorienting structure of the train system, traveling through the city on the elevated track gives its passengers a "fleeting intimacy" with "people in the second- and third-floor interiors" that had a "domestic intensity" (*Hazard* 64). This domesticity, however, is only scopophilic. It is not a fully dialectic relationship between two or more individuals but a "drama" that is "better than the theater" (*Hazard* 64). At stake in these descriptions is the concept of "life" itself with its simultaneous meanings of social and

biological life. The railroad has disrupted both, giving the agency of vivifying change to the "organized lifelessness" of the material structures of the railroad and bringing previously separate spheres of private and public life together in a perverse but attractive "intimacy." These unexpected juxtapositions seem magical because they bring spheres of signification assumed to be separate not only into contact with one another but effectively abolish the line between them, revealing them to have never been natural distinctions at all.

The train as a material means of both literal and conceptual displacement brings together what Claude Lévi-Strauss referred to as a "heterogeneous repertoire" of systems of thought which bear "no relation" to each other but are "defined only by [their] potential use" – in other words the "*bricolage*" of "mythical thought" (Lévi-Strauss 17-8). The steam engine as such has no particular use. It is, as James Watt already knew, "an agent universally applicable." It does, however, provide a system of signification, that of the infinite potential of industrial capitalism to attach itself indiscriminately to and therefore articulate other systems of signification. From the point of view of Howells's characters, this is not a simple claim. The track dismembers the compartmentalized, private spaces of the city. The railway system then reassembles those spaces along the lines of its own logic, creating juxtapositions that are, in effect, magical for the bourgeois consciousness that has not yet fully accepted the change that has already occurred at the level of material process. Although Lévi-Strauss was discussing so-called "savage thought" in systems that, for the purposes of scientific study, he took to be more or less analytically stable, the same formal properties (as Lévi-Strauss also pointed out in

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passing) hold for the aspects of "modern" (which is to say capitalist) societies but are constantly shifting terms for capitalism's perpetual revolution of its own means of production. The addition of steam power and the technological systems that they engender creates exactly these kinds of hybrid forms that appear in some sense magical from the point of view of the individual.

Howells, like his own characters, was unable to satisfactorily describe the new juxtapositions created by the train system using the vocabulary of previous social formations. In an introduction to *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, written years after its publication, Howells confessed as much. The New York he had attempted to represent in his novel from 1890 was, by 1909 when he wrote the preface, "wonderfully, almost incredibly different" ("Bibliographical" 5). The "transitional public that then moped about in mildly tinkling horse-cars is now hurried back and forth in clanging trolleys, in honking and whirring motors; the Elevated road which was the last word of speed is undermined by the Subway, shooting its swift shuttles through the subterranean woof of the city's haste" ("Bibliographical" 5). Although the spirit of that "material city" may be more or less "parallel" between 1890 and 1909, the changes wrought by technological systems made it unrecognizable in both its material and demographic forms ("Bibliographical" 5). Repeatedly in Howells's work, technological systems such as the railroad have the double effect of guaranteeing progress but rendering the progressing object unrecognizable. The now subterranean "organized lifelessness" of the railway had become the condition of existence for the life aboveground but has also changed the means by which that life expresses itself as such.

Technology often, as in the cases of *Their Wedding Journey* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, plays the role of a background against which the action of the plot occurs in Howells's work. Yet, that background also plays a significant role in the determination of the plot. I agree with Amy Kaplan that Howellsian realism presents social change not as a "background which novels either naively record or heroically evade" (Kaplan 9). I disagree, however, that understanding his realism simply to flip the binary, making social change the "foreground of the narrative structure of each novel," is particularly clarifying (Kaplan 9). When considering a phenomenon like the railroad, which functions as a setting that structures possible actions, the difference between foreground and background is of limited use. The material structure of the railroad to a large degree sets certain conceptual limits for the social interactions that occur within it. The perception of space, in both its material and political sense, is warped by this technology and the apperceptive categories by which space was discussed in the nineteenth century were being actively revised in Howells's literature as a result. Howells is unable to avoid the possibility that, in addition to structuring material relationships, the railroad also structured historical and ideological relationships. The means of regimentation introduced by technological systems create not a static space but a techno-political space that juxtaposes mutually exclusive regimes of knowledge in a sometimes disorienting way. As Kenneth Burke pointed out, to describe literary form in terms of a "background" or "scene" is already to activate a kind of materialist thinking in which the "paradox of substance" (a term to which I will return) is made visible (Burke 21). The scene and agents in the scene are imbricated "into a corresponding *articulacy*" that comprises an

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event within this framework (Burke 7). To isolate this dynamic imbrication into a "background" and "foreground" in which one of the categories conceptually precedes or hierarchically supports the other is to in one way or another miss the dialectic between them. Technology, as a tool that is both a result of human intent and a semi-autonomous actor, in Howells's work mediates and partially controls the scenes and agents in a way that was impossible before the expansion of the railway.

The question of the relationship between the "foreground" and "background" of Howells's literature often has been taken up in other terms by his critics, and most often as an implicit question of the status of the "individual," in several senses. Thinking what Kenneth Burke called the agent-scene ratio as a dialectic has often been missing in criticism of Howells, which, in its early stages, tended to focus on the artist himself as an individual, historical actor. Almost all of the critical work done on Howells before the 1970s consists of biographical studies that sought to find personal analogues, either in terms of brute historical facts or more evanescent "sensibilities," for the fictional work of an author who, as one critic put it, "even more than most writers, was made by and helped to make his age" (Carter 13). Although formulations such as this one gesture toward a materialist dialectic, they often result in simply pointing out that Howells did, in fact, live in a time where other things were going on and his literature did, in fact, occasionally refer to them. Depending on the particular critic's politics, these studies tend to figure Howells as a heroic genius or heroic failure who either does or does not mimetically capture what each critic considers to be the most important element of Howells's historical epoch. Howells as a historical figure shaped his culture by bringing

parts of the previously existing social scene to the foreground for literary representation. Howells, for instance, was a "quiet rebel" for Robert Hough, who championed progressive causes by more or less accurately representing the plight of the poor in general to a middle-class audience through fictionalized particular cases. In an anthropomorphic metonymy, the spirit of an age could be explained in terms of a representative individual and vice versa.

After these early critics, the question of Howells's "realism" would often be cast in terms of faithfulness to an individual's experience, both in terms of its fidelity to historically contingent reality and empirically in terms of its fidelity to trans-historic, "scientific" concepts of perception. Techno-political spaces are more often than not partial phenomenon in literature in that they do not directly act but imbricate other relationships. The dialectic between scene and actor that Howells often employs to describe the *articulacy* of "mythic thought" structurally required by the ideology of modern technologies has been difficult to study for critics of Howells who often take the term "realism" at face value. Various criticisms launched against Howells have largely been a result of a lack of vocabulary to describe this kind of ideological formation as in motion, as actively changing. As far back as Roman Jakobson, critics have lamented the ubiquity of "realism" as a term, which often "has more in common with causerie than scholarship" (Jakobson 19). He points out that although realism makes a claim toward re-presenting material objects, what one is often left with after any patient consideration is simply its "ideogram," the ghostly image of a material object (Jakobson 20). Critics have often vacillated between a generic history and a-historical empiricism to conceptually

ground the question of realism. Eric Sundquist claimed that Howells's realist project "failed case by case . . . to renounce romanticism" and therefore could not establish itself as a "stable force" in American literary thought (Sundquist 8-9). Michelle Kohler, on the other hand, finds the individual act of observation to be the "stable core" of Howells's realist techniques (Kohler 194). Both Sundquist and Kohler hope to ground realist techniques in some concept of stability, either the historically consistent use of generic tropes that are formalized after the fact or from empiricist-analytic categories of observation that are taken to be trans-historical. What Burke's comment points out, however, is the historical and ideological articulation of an individual expression cannot be reduced either to history or empiricist categories but is an articulation of the two. Both history and material reality are contingent along parallel lines and are both scenically related to particular, subjected actors. Neither the history of genre (at least in its traditional sense) nor the empirical act of seeing can be extricated from ideological formations, but are in one way or another inflected by them within particular, historically contingent moments.

What is at stake in the lack of dialectic in much of the criticism of Howells is the ways in which the "individual," either as an obvious locus for the synthesis of empiricist categories or an individual who unproblematically wills the course of history, comes to uncritically ground aesthetic and political judgments about Howells's work. Although realism has been promoted or dismissed from a variety of critical frameworks, the very ubiquity of the term "realism" seems to betray a certain ideological attractiveness to the concept. It seems to designate some kind of responsibility toward real social conditions,

even if this is simply a reaction against a perceived solipsistic, unprofitable production of fantasies that has haunted literature in the era of capitalism. On the one hand, empiricism is often the logic by which literature has sought to justify itself to capitalism since the nineteenth century. Empiricism requires objects referred to or implied by literary texts to have some kind of "real world" correlative that can be established through historical documentation. On the other hand, realism often justifies itself to "high art" as a subjective stability which requires a more or less rigorous set of rhetorical rituals for establishing artistic authenticity as an honest observer of the real world that is then generalized to a universal process of aesthetic experience. As critic Michael Davitt Bell notes, when attempting to schematize Howellsian realism within these contending allegiances, one is faced with a "fundamental weakness" that may lead one to "smile" and "make allowances" (Bell 21). Although, while some of this "weakness" may certainly be attributed to Howells's unsystematic way of thinking, it must also be recognized to be inherent in the realist project itself, as a thoroughly historical category. Like Sundquist and Kohler do implicitly, Bell's endorsement of the claim that Howells's realism is "weak" because it is not trans-historically "true" as an *a priori* category betrays the assumed connection between truth and that which is outside of history but still somehow accessible to an individual, a connection that Howellsian realism cannot support, despite his own, "smiling" version of that claim.

Another common mode by which critics attempt to justify art to capitalism, though one that is ultimately subject to the same structural problem, is through the politics of the development of the individual. Regarding his mid-career novel *A Hazard*

of New Fortunes, critic Cynthia Stretch argues that his attempt to represent the public space and politics of a labor strike was the "limit case testing the viability of the public sphere, the author's authority therein, and the possibility of realism itself," adding that none of these categories "stands up to Howells's anxious scrutiny" (Stretch 234). *Hazard* "interrogates the impossibility of the realist project itself as it comes face to face with the intractable conflicts that were the inevitable results of capitalist modernization" (Stretch 245). And yet, Carrie Tirado Bramen argues about the same novel that Howells's interaction with urban landscapes, both personal and literary, forced Howells into a "multivalenced response toward modernity" that "most intriguingly engages our own postmodern sensibilities" (Bramen 85). For Bramen, Howells is an "inveterate *flâneur*" who took the formlessness of the city as the form for his novel, a common critical position toward *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Bramen 84). Both Bramen and Stretch begin their interrogations of politics from the perspective of the individual, either caught within a riot that is a symptom of a larger, "political" event, or as a consumer, enjoying the apparently disjointed (but disjointed only when taken from the point of view of an individual) objects to be found in a major metropolitan area. Yet to take "individual perspective" as an unproblematic position from which true statements can be uttered, misses the dialectic between scene and actor that Howells often employs.

Amy Kaplan, attempting to escape from the individual in favor of generalized discursive practices, argues that Howells's realism attempts to claim for literature a bourgeois authority to "possess and dispense access to the real" by exploring and bridging "the perceived gap between the social world and literary representation"

(Kaplan 13, 9). The desire for social unity was now the product of heterogeneous "powers," including the "social power of fiction," that interact on the discursive plane to form the illusion of unity but strictly from a bourgeois point of view (Kaplan 17). In the case of Howells, this bridging occurs in the potentially democratizing effects of mass media to "construct a shared world" for either antisocial or healthy, productive purposes depending on the case (Kaplan 17). Yet, Kaplan's formulation of realism as "an enormous act of construction to organize, re-form, and control the social world" tends to repeat the previous generation of critics' assumption about the literal shaping of the world by a generalized individual will or an aggregate combination of individual wills (Kaplan 10). Again, what is missing in all these arguments, is the essential partiality of the individual within the scene-actor ratio. Put another way, Howells's train scenes offer us moments in which the subjectivity who wills "has no relation to the real, but rather to a syntax which is engendered by the signifying mark" (*Écrits* 38). The railway imbricates the syntax of previous social formations, multiplying the potential range and speed with which interactions occur. We cannot say of any act of signification brought into relation to a system of signification marked by the railroad that it "must be *or* not be somewhere" but rather that "it will be *and* not be where it is wherever it goes" (*Écrits* 17).

Just *Hair*

Recently, Frederic Jameson commented that literary realism will always be weak in a way that will lead some critics to dismiss it, as has largely been the case with Howells. It is a difficult concept for critics in that it seems to claim access to a reality

they assume in one way or another to be eternal, like the laws of Newtonian mechanics.

At the same time, and to critics' disappointment, realism also always passes away

historically. The constellations of received and emergent practices for legitimizing ways

of viewing society are constantly being revised and challenged both from within their

own logic and from a changing material reality. Both socially articulated practices of

viewing and material objects being viewed, taken together in the dialectic between the

material and the historical, precondition the limits of any possible subject position within

a historically contingent moment of that dialectic. The dominant order must change in

order to remain dominant over a historically contingent set of emergent political

problems. Although usually taken as a set of empirical givens by those who employ them,

aesthetic categories such as realism are invoked in name and revised in fact as an indirect

reaction to changing social and political formations. Each reintegration of a new problem

into a dominant discourse serves as evidence for those in power of the trans-historical

unity of their dominant assumptions. Yet, as Frederic Jameson notes, realism does not

represent universally valid acts of observation on a historically contingent object, either

objectively or subjectively. To take authors at their word that their realism should be

considered objectively empirical or subjectively authentic misses the ideologically

determined selective process of any claim of access to reality. Rather, realism is an

overdetermined desire. It is invoked from within the conditions of the passing away of

social formations that govern observation in its simultaneously perceptive and

apperceptive modes. Despite its claims to empiricism or authenticity, realism "wobbles"

in one's metaphorical view whenever one attempts to think it analytically (Jameson 1).

Realism in general is a "hybrid" concept in which "an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal" (Jameson 5). Although Howells and others often phrase their attempts at realism in the language of the ideal, these claims are always at the same time a response to new social problems whose very nature has not fully developed to be integrated into the assumptions of the dominant bourgeois culture. In other words, realism is an essentially ideological category, but justifies itself not simply from the ideal, but from the material as well.

The term "ideology" is a notoriously slippery one. Ranging from some kind of "false consciousness" that maliciously misrepresents the world to simply the fact of subjects being interpolated into a language system, ideology has a bewilderingly complex set of possible meanings. The railway, however, was ideological in that it seemed to set material limits to social practices. It thus seemed to justify the abstract political assumptions of the United States through a supposedly self-evident, material structure which acted as the substantive copula between the historically contingent givens of a particular mode of circulation and the eternal truths of abstract, natural law. The railway engendered a kind of "mythic thought" when it brought together previously separate modes of thought as they were expressed through particular social and material formations. Throughout his career, Howells wrote a series of plays that attempted to exploit these new material and social formations created by the railway, typically for comic effect. Each play is distinct from the others in that it takes a different space of the railroad system as its scene. *The Albany Depot* tells the story of the misidentifications and misunderstandings engendered, unsurprisingly, by the space of a depot waiting room. *The*

Parlour-Car is a romance between two young people that takes place in an empty car. *The Sleeping-Car* tells the story of misidentification while taking an overnight trip on a crowded car. The action of each play takes the terms by which misidentifications happen, which is to say the terms by which normal, bourgeois politeness do not function, from a different kind of social and material articulation made possible by the total train system. No one play may be exhaustive of the logic of the train system because it is not an object as such. Rather, it is an "ensemble" of objects, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch put it, whose relations are governed partially by this new logic of the train, which can only be represented partially (Schivelbusch 31).

The play that most extensively exploits the new potential of the railway as a plot device, however, is *The Sleeping-Car*. There are several thematic elements which the play repeats in variation. Briefly, it is the story of a trip taken by Agnes Roberts, her small child, and her aunt from Albany to Boston. Mrs. Roberts is hastily returning to Boston to meet her brother, Willis, who is himself returning to Boston from California after having spent many years there in an attempt to make his fortune. Mid-way through the trip, they are joined by Mrs. Roberts's husband who attempts to surprise Mrs. Roberts, and eventually by Willis himself. The action of the play is taken up with a series of comedic misunderstandings and misidentifications. The main characters lose and find their child amongst the identical compartments several times and repeatedly misidentify various passengers as possibly the brother of Mrs. Roberts who has been away from home long enough to have changed appearance to some degree. The precondition for the

kinds of misunderstandings that occur, however, is the political space created by the sleeping-car and the divisions it has introduced that must be navigated by the characters.

The play opens with the niece asking her aunt if she always prefers to take her hair down when she sleeps on a train. The conversation that follows is deceptively complex and will therefore be produced in full:

> AUNT MARY: No, never, child; at least not since I had such a fright about it once, coming on from New York. It's all well enough to take down your back hair if it *is* yours; but if it isn't, your head's the best place for it. Now, as I buy mine of Madame Pierrot—
>
> MRS. ROBERTS: Don't you *wish* she wouldn't advertise it as *human* hair? It sounds so pokerish—like human flesh, you know.
>
> AUNT MARY: Why, she couldn't call it *in*human hair, my dear.
>
> MRS. ROBERTS, *thoughtfully*: No—just *hair*.
>
> AUNT MARY: Then people might think it was for mattresses. But, as I was saying, I took it off that night, and tucked it safely away, as I supposed, in my pocket, and I slept sweetly till about midnight, when I happened to open my eyes, and saw something long and black crawl off my bed and slip under the berth. *Such* a shriek as I gave, my dear! "A snake! a snake! oh, a snake!" And everybody began talking at once, and some of the gentlemen swearing, and the porter came running with the poker to kill it; and all the while it was that ridiculous switch of mine, that had worked out of my pocket. And glad enough I was to grab it up

before anybody saw it, and say I must have been dreaming. (*The Sleeping-Car*

243; emphasis in the original)

This conversation, while apparently a comic digression to introduce the audience to the

idiosyncratic ways of thinking of our characters, also sets the theme of misidentification

and the terms in which misidentification occurs for the rest of the play. The terms of the

conversation are overdetermined by the material and political situation of the train at

more than simply the level of content (the fact that they are talking about habits relative

to railroad travel). There are four distinct misidentifications in the conversation: having

"one's own hair" on one's head or not, hair in general being "human" hair or not, the hair

as either an object or animal in the car, and the misidentification of the hair as a material

object or dream-object. Hair, as an object requiring explanation in the space of the train,

is overdetermined by these misidentifications. Each is a potential answer to the implicit

question posed by the impossibility of having "just *hair.*" For the hair to be neither

"pokerish" nor "frightening" as an object separated from the body it must be articulated

within another system of signification – either the biological human body, the exchange

of commodities, or even dream-logic – but it cannot exist on its own and be intelligible.

Not just the content of this conversation but the struggle they have with form itself are

conditioned by the railroad and the more general ideological formation that it articulates.

The overdetermination of hair in this scene stems from the hair's simultaneous

status as an unidentified material object that is also a signifier in search of a system of

signification, a particular chain of signifying differences that triangulates the object

within symbolic meaning. In other words, it is an example of Kenneth Burke's point

about the essentially dialectic relationship between the concept of a thing and its "scene," between a "container and a thing contained" (*A Grammar of Motives* 3). Burke's point anticipates an observation by Jacques Lacan, made roughly a decade after Burke's, about how signs work to imbricate subjective relationships from within an environment. The signifier, Lacan claimed, is a "unique unit of being [*unité d'être unique*] which, by its very nature, is the symbol of but an absence" (the phrase could also be translated "the unit of being unique") (*Écrits* 17). There is seemingly a paradox in Lacan's definition of the signifier as both present and absent that mirrors Burke's observation about scenes. Describing the signifier in this way, however, Lacan points out the dual meaning of "*unité*" as a kind of being which is both a "unit" and "unity" in English. It is a distinct element that is itself a unified structure of distinct elements. In other words, the signifier makes use of what Burke would call the etymological "paradox of substance," that "the word 'substance,' used to designate what a thing *is*, derives from a word, designating something that a thing *is not*" (*Grammar* 23). When we talk about what something is, we necessarily, implicitly are talking about what supports that thing as a consistent object through a chain of differences from what it is not. Because the signifier is essentially absent in its being, eternally "not in its place," which is present from the point of view of the subject (*Écrits* 17). The misidentification of hair within the physical space of the railway is not, then, a result of the hair's lack of meaning but its overdetermined abundance of potential meaning as an essentially absent signifier. This meaning, in turn, is not simply a "social convention," but is also determined by the signifier's status as a "unit of being," as a material object within a material setting whose being is absent.

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Any one social frame within which the hair can gain a particular meaning is confused by the context of the total train system. From within its material *articulacy*, the train system juxtaposes and breaks down the barriers between different chains of signification from which dissociated hair can gain meaning. It is the displacement of the signifier, its essential absence, which activates the signifying chain that creates meaning through difference, and that

> determines subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their blindnesses, in their success and in their fate, notwithstanding their innate gifts and their social acquisitions, without regard to their character or sex, and that, whether you like it or not, follows the train of the signifier like weapons and baggage (*Écrits* 40). [2]

The material signifier determines the "destiny" of the subject whether he or she "likes it or not" in that it sets concrete limits on the signifying chain within which the subject is interpolated as an individual. Being is the "sub-stance," as Burke would put it, of the essentially displaced signifier (Burke 22). The signifying chain does not determine the acts or destiny of the subject, but determines the subject *in those acts and in its destiny*, as a mediating middle term between an individual body and its social environment. Aunt Mary's subjective experience, her desire to be seen by others as not insane for her misidentification of hair, in other words, is inflected by the material structure of the total train system in its articulations of both material and social relations. As a material scene that is ideological, the total train system inflects the "language" (rather than discourse) in

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[2] I've altered Bruce Fink's translation closer to the original here as there are quite a few questionable choices of translation. My alteration is significant enough that I've cited the French text. Whereas Fink translates "*le déplacement du signifiant détermine les sujets dans leurs actes,*" for instance, as "the signifier's displacement determines subjects' acts," I would argue that the "*dans leurs*" Fink elides is essential to Lacan's point. Fink's translation is on page 21 of that text, should the difference interest you.

which "our message comes to us from the Other and . . . in an inverted form" (*Écrits* 3).

The hair is hair only to the degree that it is imbricated in an intersubjective, symbolic

order that determines the limits of what hair can and cannot be. As the problem about hair

that the two women encounter indicates, however, these limits are not *a priori* truths, but

historical through and through.

Like Howells's characters in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* as they gaze on the

unmoving trains in the train yard, the central question, the "problematic" as Althusser

might put it, that both unifies the content of the conversation between the aunt and her

niece and provides the terms of misidentification in the passage is the question of "life"

itself as an active process from within the "organized lifelessness" of the train system.

There are two sets of binary oppositions that the characters struggle to reconcile from

within the *articulacy* of the various systems of signification created by the railway: the

binary of life and death and that of human and *in*human. On the one hand, the question

occurs relative to the human body and its prosthetics. The women consider hair to be a

part of the body that also can be worked on by Madame Pierrot, semi-autonomously from

the body proper, to be eventually placed within the system of capitalist commodity

exchanges. As they note, one can wear someone else's hair for a price. Hair is both

human and inhuman in that it grows from the body but is objectified and separated

aesthetically from the organic whole as an object. On the other hand, as an object

separated from the body in motion, as a metonym for the "human" as a whole, the hair is

the inhuman part of the human. The live human carries around and wears the dead hair of

live humans in order to fill out the normalized total image of a human with a certain, aesthetically determined amount of hair.

The situation of the train in which the women feel comfortable enough to go through the rituals of sleep but not comfortable enough to do them as they would in their own homes creates additional problems. Whereas these binaries also exist outside of the context of the train, the addition of that setting puts these two binaries into a new relation with one another. Because of the railway system and its loosening of bourgeois etiquette in the name of pragmatic conditions, the functioning of hair becomes less determined but more meaningful. Within the train, hair "will be *and* not be where it is wherever it goes" (*Écrits* 17). On the train, the wig can be a snake and a dream at the same time. As Aunt Mary's story unfolds, the train created the potential for the misidentification of something dead as something alive along certain lines whose stakes are increased by the train as a social space of surveillance. There is, of course, nothing specific to the railroad in these two sets of binaries. Rather, the *total train system* operates as an *articulacy* of content within a particular form. In this case, the questions of life and death and the human and the inhuman are modulated by both its literal setting on a train and the logic of the train system. There are two distancing maneuvers in this passage, one coming to the rescue of the other. The misidentification of dead hair as a live snake is, ultimately, explained away by Aunt Mary as only a dream. By recasting the alienated perception caused by the scene of the railway in terms of a dream, the alienating effect of dreams naturalize and compensate for the alienated perception within the social situation of having to explain

herself to others. Both alienations, however, rely on the fundamental instability of the two sets of binary categories.

I use the term "modulated" to describe the often difficult relationship between the signifier and the signified from within the emergent ideology of the total train system as Howells attempted to represent it. Although there is a "fundamental distinction between signifier and signified" as "two networks of nonoverlapping relations," for Lacan what "dominates" is "the unity of signification, which turns out to never come down to a pure indication of reality" (*Écrits* 345). Whereas the signifier is "the synchronic structure of the material of language," the "second network, that of the signified, is the diachronic set of concretely pronounced discourses, which historically affects the first network" (*Écrits* 345). Signification "only comes about on the basis of taking things as a whole" and "Dialectic derives new strength" from the two "foundations" of signification (*Écrits* 345). Because humans are social, there is no "pure indication of reality" possible from within the sub-stance of "the material of language." Reality is essentially partial from within language, and partial in a historically contingent way that affects its own being to the degree that it is a part of human sub-stance. Signification, then, the process of creating meaning is *fundamentally material and historical* for Lacan and those two terms operate dialectically in any act of signification. It is not "only the subject, but the subjects, taken in their intersubjectivity, who queue up" along the signifying chain (*Écrits* 40)[3]. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that critics of Howells vacillate between the empirical and the historical. And yet, without paying attention to the dialectic movement between them there will always be something insubstantial to this history.

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[3] I've altered Fink's translation again here and have cited the French.

The train has not, then, created a new division. It has not killed something that was alive in this context nor has it brought to life, magically, something that was dead. Instead, and perhaps more importantly, it has made a new division that showed the previous formation to have been a formation rather than a naturally given, inviolable fact. Hair is both alive and dead, human and inhuman. The functioning of the joke at the beginning of the play rests on the two different, already existing problems being juxtaposed by the total train system. The wig and its institutions of production, distribution, and advertising already exist as do the social conventions of their use. Yet, when on board a train, the interactions between these conventions shift partly as a result of the material conditions. Doing oneself up is more challenging, and between the two women there is a general acknowledgement of the loosening of the social conventions around this material act. For these women, whether or not to take one's hair down is a genuine question, a problematic, that presents itself to them as an uncertainty that must be resolved to maintain the illusion of proper etiquette, or, in other words, to maintain a proper *imago* within a fluid ideological framework. While the hair functions as both alive *and* dead, it must be decided as either alive *or* dead given the ideological situation.

Sigmund Freud had, by the late work *Civilization and Its Discontents*, also noticed the railroad's peculiar ability to remap conceptual divisions as a result of new material relations. Registering a certain "factor of disappointment" in the disparity between the promises of new, technologically dominated progress and the individual's experience of that progress, Freud notes the possibility that "technical progress is without value for the economics of our happiness" (Freud 88). The railroad and telephone in

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particular perform a kind of conceptual exchange to supplement a loss. If "there had been no railway to conquer distances my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice" (Freud 88). The telescoping of distance alternatively brings previously disparate elements together while, at the same time, putting others at a remove. Previous regimes of causality and value, the value of presence and absence against the easy circulation of people throughout a geography in this case, are shattered. The remnants of those old regimes are then reassembled along the lines of the technological system. Technologies such as the railway, the telephone, the telegraph and other systems for the telescoping of space fundamentally rearrange the relationship between the perceptive apparatus and any individual's expectations of the objects that are being perceived. In literary terms, terms that Howells either consciously or pre-consciously used to his advantage, the shifting relationships between space and time that Freud noted are represented through distinct "chronotopes," in the terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin. If, as Bakhtin had it, the chronotope is "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" and this connectedness has an "intrinsic *generic* significance," then "The Sleeping-Car" combines several of these chronotopes in a single scenario (Bakhtin 84). Genre is an abstraction that serves to group particular literary works both for critics and writers of fiction themselves. They are then, within literary terms, the abstraction through which traditions of representing practices of viewing assert themselves, both in order to achieve intelligibility for a particular audience, and to break away from tradition and create new forms by contrast for writers.

When Lacan claims that language (rather than discourse) is material, he means precisely that it is chronotopic in general. It mediates various sub-stances which "thicken," as Bakhtin put it, into specific, historically contingent relations (Bakhtin 84). Language mediates the displacement of the absent signifier which gives order to the experience of space-times in language. Technologies such as the railway, as Howells demonstrates, are therefore the material limits to the possibility of the thickening in language of space-time into particular, historically contingent chronotopes. The setting of the play on a train car presents particular difficulties for identifying anything but partial thicknesses. There are three different "thickenings" of political space which interact with each other as the play progresses. Firstly, there is the relatively static space of the domestic sphere. The plot within this chronotope involves the misidentification and misplacement of members of the family. This plot is static in the sense that within the train car itself there are a finite set of elements that only change when the train comes to a halt. For much of the play the characters are literally trapped with one another and only able to solve problems by combining elements in different ways. Both the brother of Mrs. Roberts and her child, for example, are regularly misidentified or misplaced. Secondly, the placement of the scene within a sleeping car divides the domestic space into compartments of semi-autonomous domestic spaces. Although the scene of the railway car attempts to replicate the domestic space of the home for the convenience of the travelers, it also multiplies and juxtaposes many domestic spaces for each of the travelers, whose lines of demarcation become unclear. Thirdly, the car as a whole, the domestic scene and its juxtaposed, alternate domestic spaces, are all in motion themselves. This

domestic play is also, in a sense, a travel narrative. These three chronotopes are not isolated elements, but fused together as a result of the material basis of the train system itself. The rates of interference between one and another are determined by the schedule of the train as passengers change places and exit or enter the car. Characters anticipate an arrival in Boston, porters enter and exit to ensure the proper running of the train, and characters, notably Mr. Roberts enters the train halfway through the play, multiplying the number of misidentifications along already established lines. The mixing of these distinct chronotopes creates a new dynamic of technologically defined political space that produces "mythical thought," the juxtaposition and interaction of heterogeneous forms of signification.

The chronotope of the domestic sphere requires a division between culturally defined spaces. As a fairly standard play in many respects, "The Sleeping-Car" has the traditional unity of time and place required of actual people acting out a script on a stage. The main characters and their difficulties navigating the train form this initial, domestic aspect of the play's chimeric chronotope. Much of the play's plot is, in fact, an effort to maintain the demarcations between the private conversations between Mrs. Roberts and her aunt from the public space of the other passengers, hidden from both the audience and the characters in the private spaces of their sleeping births on the stage. Mrs. Roberts is attempting to return to Boston from Albany before her brother, Willis, because she worries about his introduction to her husband, whom the brother has not met. Rather than the railroad as a technology to bring together disparate populations into a single, American people, Mrs. Roberts's concern is that her brother's time in California will

render him unrecognizable, using words such as "'reckon' and 'ornery' and 'which the same' just like one of Bret Harte's characters" (The Sleeping-Car 243). The integration of the family into a coherent political unit, then, has been disrupted by the train, as Freud feared it had. Not only has Mrs. Robert's bother's physical appearance changed in the intervening years, the social signifiers have changed as well in their "articulacy."

An initial division of cultural practices, particular linguistic idioms in this case, is a precondition for integration into a social unit. The play's anxiety about the loss of any family unit as an active connection between humans must be repeatedly staged as less threatening misidentifications to constantly reaffirm the importance and immediate presence of family ties as a significant determinant of social relations. The play ends, however, with a joke on the popular literary convention of the lost family member returning to solve plot problems. As Amy Kaplan has argued, Howells's writing on the status of art can be seen as an attempt to normalize literature for the bourgeoisie as a productive practice. It, in a sense, may train individuals who are sensitive to its messages in new ways of seeing the world and a more liberal, democratic understanding of a social totality. At first glance, the end of "The Sleeping-car" functions in precisely this way. Throughout the play, the main characters are repeatedly thrown together with someone who, until the very end of the play, is simply referred to as The Californian. At one point, Mrs. Roberts had even suspected that he might be Willis. Of course, The Westerner is not Willis and has no connection to the main characters beyond having been accidentally put in the same sleeping car as them. This man is simply another passenger who, seemingly through random chance, is put in the path of the plot of the play. He is precisely the

caricature of a Westerner that Mrs. Roberts's Aunt Mary fears Willis has become. Yet, at the end of the play, the main characters "adopt" him for the help he has provided them when he offered to fight the other passengers on the car who were annoyed by the plot and volume of the play and voiced their concerns as a disembodied chorus hidden behind curtains in their compartments ("The Sleeping-Car" 253). He has been so helpful, in fact, that the family invites him to share in a family dinner when they reach their destination.

The comedic impact of the "adoption" of the Californian in the play's final moments comes from the chorus of voices from the berths of the sleeping car. When Aunt Mary attempts to question the Californian about his family and his connections, hoping to find some kind of blood tie to complete the trope, the chorus responds by enumerating all the possible connections between the Roberts family and the Californian. He is alternately a lost "son," "baby boy," "wife," "brother," "early friend," etc. (The Sleeping-Car 253). This joke plays two functions. It mocks the conventions of the melodramatic plot and provides an alternative at the same time. By expanding the definition of "familial" to include the Californian, the play attempts to reconcile the traditional divisions of familial life and behavior to include the possibilities created by railway travel. At the same time, it also does away with those distinctions. If everyone can potentially be a part of the same family in the new, democratic space of the railway, the use of the distinction has been effectively disposed of. In attempting to choose between democratic space and familial connection within the space of the train, one loses both.

<u>And – The Children's Graves?</u>

The train does not create, it juxtaposes. And yet, these juxtapositions create new formations of previous social codes. The conceptual divisions between life and death as well as between family and strangers are loosened on the train, if only slightly, only to be quickly dismissed under the pretext of having dreamt them or adopted them. What is at stake, however, in these dismissals that hide the new form of instability of their binaries is what Lacan called "the *lethal factor* [*le* facteur létal[4]]," the impossible choice in which the selection of one option precipitates the loss of both (*Quatre concepts* 237). The scene of the train creates the demand for answers to certain questions. Given the presence of a foreign object, and the necessity of deciding both what it is and what it means, no partial answers are acceptable. Once Aunt Mary has made her cry for help, she is required to account for herself to the authorities, in this case the porter who has come to aid her. It is precisely in the fluid ideological space of the train that material objects are revealed as essential ideological in that they require explanation to the authorities. Previous divisions that were assumed to be natural have, within the conjunctive influence of the train, become less certain. New conjunctions of social codes create new problems for bourgeois society.

By the 1880s, as the total train system started to shift from an emergent to a dominant role in American politics, Howells's initial optimism about America's destiny

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[4] This is a pun by Lacan. "*Facteur*" in this context means both something close to the English "factor" but in French also means "mailman." Like his joke on *unité*, the "lethal factor" is both an element of the whole but also is indirectly determinative of the whole. In this case, the question of whether or not hair is alive or dead is on the one hand absurd and seemingly insignificant relative to the more important issues at hand. Yet, with an odd regularity, the impossibility of that choice inflects the other elements of the scene, distributing the terms by which difference is established.

began to change after the combination of the Haymarket Affair of 1886 and the death of his daughter, Winny, around the same time. Howells became one of the most outspoken critics of the United States government amongst the writers of his generation. The Haymarket Affair was a violent episode in the continuing struggle between Labor and Capital throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century. During a rally in Chicago, held mainly by a loose association of anarchist groups in support of the efforts of labor to establish an 8-hour work day, the police arrived to break up the peaceful demonstration. After a still-unidentified person in the crowd threw a homemade explosive at the advancing line of police, killing and injuring several officers, the authorities opened fire indiscriminately into the crowd of anarchists and passers-by. As a result of the violence, eight prominent anarchists, none of whom seemed to have anything explicitly to do with the bomb other than being anarchists, were arrested, tried, and four of the eight were executed by the state. Although Howells was anything but an anarchist, his previously optimistic view of the nation changed as a result of the trial. As he put it, the Chicago Anarchists were "condemned to death upon a principle that would have sent every ardent antislavery man to the gallows," and he hoped through his outspoken opposition to the execution to "save the American people from allowing an injustice to be done in their name" (qtd. in Kirk 489). Of course, Howells's opposition did nothing for the verdict, leading him to question the political basis for a state that would lead humans to be "doomed" not because of anything they had done, but for "their opinions' sake" (qtd. in Kirk 491). Thought itself had become a potentially capital offense.

In the later years of his career, Howells wrote a very strange essay for *Harper's Monthly* (and, incidentally, an essay typically left out of collections of Howells's work since the 1950s), now referred to as "The Physiognomy of 'the Poor,'" which dealt with judgments of art in this new political environment. In that essay he could not help but include explicitly political statements that mirror the personal shift he had undergone in the 1880s. This essay registers on the theoretical level the issues he had been attempting to represent in perhaps his two most famous novels, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. The subject under question, provided by a reader of the magazine in a letter to the editor, was the depiction of the poor in literature. More precisely, the reader called for "more" and "better" criticism of literature that precisely defines the method by which the "human documentation" of literature may be identified as sufficient to its aim ("The Physiognomy of 'The Poor'" 342). Howells recasts the question by claiming that the "physiognomy of the poor varies from land to land and from age to age. It expresses patience, and despair, or oblivion everywhere, but in our country there is conjecturable also a certain surprise, the bewilderment of people who have been taught to expect better things of life, and who have fallen to the ground through the breaking of a promise" ("Physiognomy" 343). Such a statement from Howells effectively describes the shift in his attitude toward realism and politics after the execution of the Haymarket anarchists which understood the poor "falling to the ground" differently. The "breaking of a promise" he describes demonstrates the degree to which the "progress" that seemed guaranteed by techno-scientific capitalism had begun to reveal its own contradictions and pass away as a lived reality although it might remain in the rhetoric used to justify it. This

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passing away, in turn, has a concomitant effect on aesthetics as Howells had imagined it

previously. "The poor" in this formulation are the statistical average that the bourgeois

consciousness understands them to be as a class, as an aggregated economic category of

human. Howells cannot break away from this model but also registers its inadequacy as a

category describing "the real."

Howells responds to the question of representing "the poor" in terms that would

surprise the critics that labeled him America's resident optimist. He replied that it "was

the glad delusion of the Easy Chair[, Howells's regular column in *Harper's Monthly* at

the time,] . . . that the reader could be persuaded to ask nothing better of the writer than

the truth about the facts. But this was a radiant error; the reader, in his immense majority,

asks nothing worse of the writer" ("Physiognomy of the Poor" 344). Howells continues

that it

> is conjecturable that democracy as we have realized it, and as that mistaken
>
> American author[, Howells himself,] has studied and painted it, has a
>
> repulsiveness which the ideal does not wear. It looks ordinary, commonplace,
>
> uninteresting, as one's face and figure are apt to look in the glass when not made
>
> up for the ordeal. This, however, one may very well feel, is not the fault of one's
>
> self, but of the glass, and then one does well to smash it, or if not quite that, to
>
> impeach its veracity. ("Physiognomy of the Poor" 344)

In this formulation of despair in the face of an "ideal" which has not only passed away

but left a trace of its former promise as an "ordeal" that must be dealt with, Howells

expresses the position of the United States from within the new techo-political space.

Simple reflection, such as that of a mirror, the standard metaphor for representation since Narcissus, is no longer felt as adequate to the task of representation and, in fact, only enacts its own anguished incapacity. Representation, in this particular social formation, can no longer be understood as mimetic in the traditional sense of the word, the "radiant error" upon which his "realism" had been based. And yet, Howells is unable to think beyond the idealism of mimesis towards a truly dynamic sense of the social whole that he elsewhere made rhetorical gestures towards. Politically, this leads to the simple smashing of the glass, the destruction of the social order, the "lethal factor," that had been engendered by the total train system.

Whereas in "The Sleeping-car" Howells exploited the formal elements of the train system and took it as its explicit content, the implications of the railway for his concept of space are also legible in moments that have a less explicit connection to that system. In Howells's work the total train system is in its first stages of becoming structural for the dominant American ideology. As a "total train system," the kind of mythic thought it engenders and the "lethal factor" that it made available became imbricated in ideas of American political space more generally. Two of Howells's most famous novels, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, share a similar moment that occurs to two almost identical characters in which a "lethal factor" occurs in the same way as Aunt Mary's troubles on the train, which is to say with a significant hesitation about the nature of technologically motivated "progress." These moments, however, are decisions brought about by the total train system as a whole, the new concept of political space as warped through the train system, rather than the train as a figure at the level of content.

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Silas Lapham and Jacob Dryfoos both make their fortunes not in finance but in manufacturing and the mining of raw materials. Lapham and to larger degree Dryfoos benefit from the opening up of the West by the railroads as a space for economic exploitation. The *ressentiment* both feel towards the East, whose cultural existence both the millionaires see themselves as financially supporting through their business, is created by the economic complementarity but social inequality of the two economic parts of the nation.

Both these novels are at least in part stories of successful businessmen. Silas Lapham from *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (published in 1885, the year before Haymarket) and Dryfoos from *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (published in 1890, three years after the execution of the anarchists) are almost identical characters in terms of their social type. Both could just as easily be characters in a Horatio Alger novel, having come from poor, rural backgrounds and created fortunes for themselves through hard work. Both, similarly, attempt to integrate into the high society of Eastern cities, Boston and New York respectively, only to find the social codes too strict to allow for their Western mannerisms. At the same time, the two characters share a peculiar detail that Howells added to their narratives: both have moments of hesitation about the position of graveyards within their personal histories. For both characters, their family graveyards become symbolic residue of the past that has been ushered away by the railroad. Although the characters are almost identical, they have the opposite reaction to their family plots. The graveyard, in effect, becomes in Howells's literature the symbolic obverse of the railway. The graves register the railway's symbolic power and precipitate

a crisis for each character in which the lethal question posed by the new political space of the United States must be answered.

The Rise of Silas Lapham, perhaps Howells's most famous novel, begins with a conversation between the journalist Bartley Hubbard and the titular Silas Lapham, at the height of his financial success as a producer and seller of paint. Their conversation revolves around an attempt to construct an intelligible narrative of Lapham's life up to that point for a "Solid Men of Boston" series in a newspaper (*The Rise of Silas Lapham* 3). As such, there are two questions at stake: placing events of Lapham's life into a sequence and giving that sequence a causal relation. The rest of the novel deals with the unraveling of Lapham's life and requires a careful evaluation of the initial terms set forth to come to any conclusion about the meaning of the novel as a whole. When first introducing the subject of Lapham's life, Lapham asks a seemingly naïve question: "you want my life, death, and Christian sufferings do you, young man," to which Hubbard responds that that is precisely what he wants (interestingly misunderstanding Lapham's statement), "your money or your life" (*Lapham* 3). Lapham ponderously responds that Hubbard "wouldn't want [Lapham's] life without the money" (*Lapham* 3). This joke anticipates Jacques Lacan's use of it as a demonstration of alienation as an essential mode by which subjects are formed. The question's significance, besides breaking the ice, of course, is to present an impossible choice at the outset of the conversation. If one chooses life, one chooses to live without the money, a "reduced life [*une vie écornée*[5]]" (*Quatre*

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[5] This is a play on words, in typical Lacanian fashion. "*Écornée*" has the meaning of "reduced," "diminished," or "damaged" in a metaphorical sense but also signifies the folding or damaging of the corner of a page in a book. The "loss," then, is more than simply lacking but actively marked as lacking.

concepts 237). To choose the money would lead to the loss of both the life and the money. The only reasonable response to the question is the one given by Jack Benny when he was posed the same question: "I'm thinking it over" (*Jack Benny Program*). In response to the lethal factor, the only possible action is a hesitation. The conversation that follows this joke has another significant hesitation that repeats the form of the impossible choice but explicitly within the context of the changing political space of America in the age of the railway.

Ironically, Lapham had not made his fortune by going West, despite being cast in the mold of the Westerner. Instead, unlike the rest of his family who had moved West when their Vermont family had effectively broken up, Lapham "hung on to the old farm," "not because the paint-mine was on it, but because the old house was – and the graves" (*Lapham* 7). Although Lapham attempts to protect the tradition that had created him, his family has been fractured by the shifting economic conditions caused by the telescoping space provided by the railway. He at one point had attempted to gather the disparate elements of the family but could only successfully do so once, the only memento of which is a photograph that he keeps in his office. This photograph showed faces that were "a mere blur" because "some of the younger children had twitched themselves into wavering shadows, and might have passed for spirit-photographs of their own little ghosts," the kind of "standard family-group photograph, in which most Americans have figured at some point or other" (*Lapham* 8-9). Like Aunt Mary with her hair, the question the photograph poses within the context of the social significance of Lapham's life is the

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The material conditions of writing and its transmission are also imbricated in the system of signifiers that alienate a subject within the symbolic.

question of life and death, in both its social and biological meanings. The railway dissociates social life (the family, in this case) only to reassemble it along its own lines. Like the Marches and their complex relationship to the railway, the family photograph can only imperfectly reconcile two competing epistemological modes; the family members are a "blur" that is at the same time a "standard." Whereas the railroad was the mechanical means for guaranteeing faster and more certain exchanges, the camera provides the sepulchral means of doing the opposite, apparently capturing a single instant and guarding it. And yet, the difference between the two is presented as an impossible choice. Life, here, is figured and being not entirely dead. The children are already their own ghosts from within the anamnesis of Lapham's "solid" life. The difficulty Lapham has in giving a causal significance to his life is, like the structure engendered by the railroad system, overdetermined. He cannot give a casual structure to it because it is a losing choice between two semantic systems, one of progress and the other of conservation. The two traditions of the railroad in its weaker and stronger senses cannot be fully assimilated without the loss of meaning at both ends of the dialectic.

Jacob Dryfoos in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* faces a similar problem to Lapham but in an inverted way. Throughout the novel, Dryfoos is figured as a typical robber-baron of the Carnegie-type, having been instrumental in the breaking up and suppression of unionizing efforts both of his own workers and attempts by labor to advocate for its interests in general. Toward the end of that novel, however, he and his wife have a conversation that seemingly has nothing to do with the plot which but which complicates him as a villainous figure in the novel. After having returned to New York from a tour of

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his holding in the West which included a visit the old family farm, Mrs. Dryfoos enquires if he was "out at the old place" (*Hazard* 204). Dryfoos responds that he had been and approvingly notes that his men are "sinking the wells down in the woods pasture" (*Hazard* 204). Yet, the change in the landscape brought about by industrial cultivation of land and the manufacturing that requires it brings unintended but necessary secondary effects. His wife then asks "and – the children's graves," to which Dryfoos responds that they "haven't touched that part. But I reckon we got to have 'em moved to the cemetery" (*Hazard* 204). This, for Dryfoos, is not a significant event as it "ain't the fashion anymore to have family buryin' grounds; they're collectin' 'em into the cemeteries all round" (*Hazard* 205). And yet his wife maintains that it still seems "too hard that they can't be let to rest in peace, pore little things" and that she "wanted you and me to lay there too, when our time come, Jacob" (*Hazard* 204). The "fashion" of burying the family follows the expansion of capitalism in the age of the steam engine. Rather than the patrilineal history being marked and conserved as evidence of progress, the graves of families are consolidated, to make way for an expanding agricultural base for the circulation of capital in the United States. Before and after Haymarket, then, the choice for the consecration of family is a simple inversion between fixing blurred children and moving eternally fixed children. Whereas Lapham attempts to be a bulwark against the exchange of spaces as a romantic "point of retreat" for tradition, Dryfoos embraces it as simply the inevitable, progressive change of social practices. The expansion of the railroad that nominally underwrote the political space of the United States has also undermined its historical contiguity. History itself has become another commodity. In attempting to have it both

ways, to ensure the contiguity of history as a patrilineal continuity in time, Dryfoos and Lapham have lost both, with only ghosts or eternally exchangeable graves remaining.

Howells's depiction of the railway, even in these two novels which are commonly considered by critics to be the height of his realist techniques, already bear the traces of the political change he underwent throughout his career. There is, however, another dimension to the "lethal factor" that Howells struggled to represent through the railway system, that of the racial division being systematically redefined and newly enforced in the United States after Reconstruction. In a review of Charles W. Chesnutt's novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, Howells strikes a similar tone to that of "The Physiognomy of the Poor," and indicates another form of the "lethal factor," a racialized one, that would play an essential role in the historical movement of the nation in the final years of the nineteenth century. Of Chesnutt's novel, which follows the story of a race riot, Howells claimed that Chesnutt, as an author of fiction, was also "fighting a battle" against racism in America, "and it is not for him to pick up the cheap graces and poses of the jouster" ("A Psychological Counter-Current in Recent Fiction" 882). Although Howells had "nothing but admiration" for Chesnutt, at the same time, he found that within "the republic of letters where all men are free and equal" the book is "in fact, bitter, bitter" ("Counter-current" 882). Although most critics only quote that summary judgment, Howells continues that "there is no reason in history why it should not be so . . . One cannot blame him for that; what would one be one's self? If the tables could once be turned, and it could be the black race which violently and lastingly triumphed . . . what would we not excuse to the white man who made the atrocity the argument of his

fiction?" ("Counter-current" 882). Howells here recognizes his own limitations, his own

subjective position from within the dominant bourgeois consciousness, which, at this

time, is always also racialized. The task of more fully articulating the critique of the new,

technological progressivism that Howells only began would fall to Charles W. Chesnutt.

Chapter 2:

As If By Magic: Charles W. Chesnutt and the Parallax View

Reality, n. The dream of a mad philosopher. That which would remain in the cupel if one should assay a phantom. The nucleus of a vacuum.
>   -Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911)

And if the writer has any preconceived opinions that would affect his judgment, they are at least not the hackneyed prejudices of the past – if they lead to false conclusions, they at least furnish a new point of view, from which, taken together with other widely differing views, the judicious reader may establish a parallax that will enable him to approximate the truth.
>   -Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Future American: What Race Is Likely to Become in the Process of Time" (1900)

Les deux principaux mouvements sont le mouvement rotatif et le mouvement sexuel, dont la combinaison s'exprime par une locomotive composée de roues et de pistons. Ces deux mouvements se transforment l'un en l'autre réciproquement . . . C'est par l'usage de cette combinaison de valeur magique que la situation actuelle de l'homme est déterminée au milieu des éléments.
>   -Georges Bataille, "*L'Anus Solaire*" (1927)

"In These Reactionary Days"

In 1940, W.E.B. DuBois chose to look back on the final years of the nineteenth century. From that vantage point, he remembered the close of the last century as "a day of Progress with a capital P," adding that "invention and technique were a perpetual marvel and their accomplishment infinite in possibility" (*Dusk of Dawn* 26). In this retrospective assessment, DuBois summarizes not necessarily the reality but rather the feeling of Progress as many writers in the last years of the nineteenth century experienced it. DuBois continues that this experience of technologically driven Progress "was as though moving on a rushing express, my main thought was as to the relations I had to other passengers on the express, and not to its rate of speed and its destination" (*Dusk* 27-8). In the economically and politically turbulent atmosphere of the late nineteenth century, the

"fight on the moving car had to do with my relations to the car and its folk, but on the whole, nothing to do with the car's own movement" (*Dusk* 28). By way of this metaphor, DuBois articulates several broad ideological tendencies of the period through the image of the express train. The confidence in technique and invention and their implications for the future of American society was such that historical progress could be compared to the ineluctable workings of a complex machine. The parts and relations of this machine had already been established and its steady operation was assured by a complex of prearranged maintenance procedures. Historical change in the American mind was no longer a "course of human events," as Thomas Jefferson put it. Rather, it was seen by those within it as an automatic process already established and to a large degree outside of human control. Like a car moving along a railway track, it could be predicted and maintained but its course and speed were outside of the control of its passengers.

By the middle of the twentieth century, DuBois had moved beyond thinking of history as strictly subject to individual will and toward an understanding of history as also guided by abstract forces. In other words, DuBois's metaphor leads us toward what we would now call a structural critique of social relations. In order to assess social relations, one must not only pay attention to the historical accidents of who happens to be thrown together within a particular space at a particular time. Additionally, one must pay attention to the terms by which that "thrown-togetherness" occurs at all, or what conditions the possible set of relations. And yet, DuBois's metaphor reveals other potentially problematic assumptions made possible by this kind of critique. With his training in the social sciences and work towards the development of an empirical science

of history, DuBois was perhaps too eager to accept the automism of technological

relationships as an unproblematic, analogous model for social change. Within this

automism there occasionally lies not a strict materialism but an idealism expressed in the

vocabulary of materialism in DuBois's thought. In accepting a linear model of history in

which cause and effect are guaranteed along the lines of the connections between parts of

a machine, DuBois also accepts that there can be a truth to history in a roughly similar

sense to the truth of the laws of mechanical motion.

Another, perhaps less well known, contemporary of DuBois, however, saw the

analogy between society and a machine as problematic and points us in another direction.

For the novelist Charles W. Chesnutt, who was considered to be the first major African-

American novelist even in his own lifetime, the social sciences and their ambitions

toward empiricism were a much more suspect set of tools for the analysis of something

like American racism as it existed at the turn of the century. As Chesnutt put it in 1899 in

a speech in the Nietzschean mode on the issue of race in America, the American people

had listened for too long to preachers who have "neglected the world unduly" in favor of

an ideal elsewhere (*Essays and Speeches* 112). Chesnutt hoped for a new future in which

"men finally waked up to the importance of the life here, and now we have steam and

electricity and improved sanitation, and professions of human equality," we would

hopefully be able to "work around to the fact of" that equality "in due course of time"

(*Essays* 112). Here, technological systems, rather than guaranteeing the "fact" of social

relations, are the means by which claims about equality are rhetorically justified as self-

evident. By 1899, Chesnutt considered himself to live in "reactionary days" (*Essays* 101).

State-sanctioned slavery had been forgotten in its reality and was starting to be romanticized as the "ideal relation of capital and labor" by writers primarily (though not exclusively) in the South (*Essays* 101). Even as it was occurring, the progress ushered in by technological development, while certainly contributing to the improvement of basic needs for significant portions of the American people, did not automatically lead to the progressive passing away of social inequality or the assumptions that led to that inequality. After the war, the victory of Northern economic models and their technologies of circulation as necessary preconditions for liberal ideology became a self-evident truth, hiding ways in which they became complicit with white supremacist ideology. The rhetoric of progress through the trope of technology, when taken as self-evidently beneficial to all, served only to silence any critics of American society and its economic base.

This chapter will not argue that there is a necessary, causal relationship between American racism and technology as such. Rather, I will be arguing that the railroad and its technological systems of control became important tropes for discussing how social regulation operated in post-Reconstruction American society. In particular, I will be focusing on Charles Chesnutt's use of the railroad as a trope to demonstrate how two regimes of control, technology and racial difference, mutually reinforced one another and, in their pairing, helped perpetuate a white supremacist concept of linear history. At times, Chesnutt uses these two systems as DuBois does, as an analogy in its most innocuous sense. Chesnutt, a black author writing literature with an explicitly "ethical purpose," described his own work in his early years as an attempt to enlighten a primarily

white American audience about the severity of racial prejudice and its violent consequences in their own country (*"To Be an Author"* 171). Part of his attempt to do this involved a simple, analogical use of the technological trope. He to some degree attempted to explain a phenomenon that his white readers were ignorant of, racial prejudice from the perspective of the oppressed, in terms of something they felt confident they understood, technological systems. At other times, however, the trope of the railroad plays a more complex role in Chesnutt's literature and thought. Rather than simply attempting to explain one system of regulation in terms of another, he implies that technological systems inform the modes of social regulation available to Americans. More than just an explanatory scheme, the assumed qualities of technological systems become a part of racial thinking through their metaphoric quasi-equivalence. As transportation technologies changed from novelties that were understood as expressions of the abundant American energy and industriousness to systems that were assumed to be an integral part of society, guaranteeing economic and social progress, technology to a greater degree became a model for ideal systems of regulation. This ideal of necessary and assured progress, for Chesnutt, rather than liberating individuals, shaped how injurious prejudicial traditions were perpetuated from generation to generation.

As an essayist, novelist, school teacher, stenographer, public speaker, and trained lawyer, Charles W. Chesnutt faced a peculiar set of contending forces when he began his literary career. As a part of the first generation of black Americans who "never saw a slave," as he put it, the very nature of what constituted political life was in question (*Essays* 25). As the old political order built on state-sanctioned slavery reorganized itself,

there was a great debate about what the country and its people were to become as a result of the military defeat of the South and the at least nominal inclusion of former slaves as full citizens in the nation's political institutions. Chesnutt thought of himself as belonging to a people "without a past" whose only political option for survival in America would be to build a new future (*Essays* 58). This new future, however, would have to contend with a rapidly changing political landscape after the Civil War that saw massive reconfigurations of both the population and concentrations of capital in the nation. Despite the state's efforts through the Freedman's Bureau as well as those of private interests to rebuild the South, the political and social reform that some antebellum abolitionists had hoped for did not come to pass. The lack of social reform, however, did not prevent the United States government from solidifying its control over the North American landmass through the rapid expansion of railroads, telegraph wires, and other technologies for the circulation of consumer goods and information. It was also a time that saw what Alan Trachtenberg called the "merger movement" of corporations that owned these technological systems (Trachtenberg 4). The growth of private corporations through their consolidation in the United States accomplished a "major realignment of economic power," consolidating the ownership of wealth in the nation into fewer and fewer hands (Trachtenberg 4). By 1904, "about three hundred industrial corporations had won control over more than two fifths of all manufacturing in the country" and by 1929 "the two hundred largest corporations held 48 percent of all corporate assets . . . and 58 percent of capital assets" (Trachtenberg 4). As DuBois pointed out, and Chesnutt witnessed, however, this expansion and consolidation of economic and therefore political

power was, more often than not, built on the "struggles of the massed millions" in the final analysis (*The Souls of Black Folk* 3). In a society dominated by a growing economic and political inequality that was in many ways hostile to his political life, Chesnutt was forced to imagine what a new politics might be, not only as it was coalescing around him, but as it might be in the future. As he put it in his novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, the new age was that of "the crowd" created by new, technologically driven systems of regulation (*The Marrow of Tradition* 81). Old concepts of self-sufficient individualism were no longer applicable to a political world dominated by masses of people whose actions were governed by technologically dominated political spaces.

The three primary terms I will use to describe the society Chesnutt attempted to portray in his fiction are "prejudice," "technology," and "the parallax." The first two of these terms are, of course, entirely too broad to be practically useful in any analytical sense. Here, however, I will be using them in more specific senses than they usually encompass. Both terms describe ways in which specific human practices are justified by way of abstract principles of force. In the case of "prejudice," the concept that Chesnutt most often takes as the primary political target of his work, particular prejudicial practices are conceived of as the expression of the abstract force of tradition. Tradition is often metaphorically described as a kind of weight of previous generations on the current one or a compulsory behavior established by previous generations that may be resisted but can never be denied by the current. As Chesnutt put it, it consists of the "habits" of "doing injurious things because others do them" that are passed from generation to generation (*Essays* 223). "Prejudice," therefore, is a tradition that regulates the behavior

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of individuals to one another through the abstractions of social valuations that have already been assigned. What is "always at stake" when considering the transmission of these kinds of valuations from generation to generation through language is "the agreement between the subject and the verb," as Jacques Lacan put it (*Écrits* 371). From the point of view of the prejudicial individual, his or her actions are always done in the name of someone else, splitting the acting subject historically, and confusing the agreement between subject and verb in actions in the present. From within the tortured logic of prejudice, present prejudicial actions are often done in the name of preserving a continuity with an imagined past in order to bring about a future that is both the repetition and realization of the past. The present, therefore, is always a moment of crisis in historical continuity from the prejudicial point of view. Economies of valuation are regulated in the abstract from the prejudicial point of view by an often racialized concept of a society whose force of tradition defines the individual. The prejudicial individual imagines himself or herself simply as the vessel for a regulatory, trans-historical principle of imagined continuity that is anthropomorphized into a pure "people." The continuity of this people (both a singular and a plural from within the tortured logic) must be maintained for the principles of historical development to remain the trans-historical principle they are assumed to be.

"Technology," similarly, stores and regulates abstract energy for human ends. It is the mechanical means by which humans control the mode and rate of the expression of potential energy. As Robert E. Baynes put it in a textbook on thermodynamics in 1867, energy is "the power of doing work" (Baynes 3). Even this most basic definition of

energy betrays the first steps of an anthropomorphism. Technology, as an apparatus designed to automate and standardize certain processes of human work, regulates the potential energy of material objects for human ends. As Martin Heidegger put it, modern science "pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces" with its technologies (Hediegger 21). Technology creates nothing but transforms inchoate energy into human work along prearranged lines. By the turn of the century, the two versions of force, the mechanical and social, were confounded in many people's minds as having similar characteristics that control the development of the observable world. For Chesnutt, "prejudice," and "technology" both participate in a concept of historical movement, each becoming a mutually reinforcing model for how social and literal energy may be regulated through human (which is to say "political") means.

My third term, "parallax," Chesnutt suggestively if briefly develops himself in his essay "The Future American." The "parallax" is a constitutive conceptual gap. It does not lead from two self-evident truths to a third, necessary conclusion as with syllogistic thinking. Rather, it takes positive statements themselves to be essentially ironic and develops lines of thought that can function as asymptotically true. Whereas technology and tradition, from an ideological point of view, invoke a rhetoric of continuity in history to legitimize themselves, the "parallax" assumes history to be essentially discontinuous. Continuity, from the parallax view, is the illusory effect of taking a vantage point on history rather than inherent to it as a concept. Linear history requires, for Chesnutt, the act of taking a stand, or putting in *stasis* (from στάσις, "standing" or "setting"), certain questions about historical causality in order to make a claim with the certainty of a

syllogism. The parallax does not refute syllogistic thinking but is, in fact, a precondition for it; it is a hesitation before the positing of the major and minor premises. Whereas both "prejudice" and "technology" attempt to guarantee a single historical line of progress for the dominant American ideology, a parallax view on that history will begin from the ambiguities that necessarily arise from the assumption of certainty and lead to a perspectival understanding of history conceived of as essentially contested. "The parallax," as it is understood in terms of binocular human vision, is the illusion of depth created by the disparity between the positions of the eyes that became socially regimented through the historical naturalization of the Cartesian coordinate system. With that coordinate system, an essential gap, whose differential creates the illusion of three dimensionality, becomes empirically true rather than subjectively convenient to the degree that it can be mapped through an arbitrary system of differences. Chesnutt argues the value not of ignoring that relationality is ultimately based on an illusion, but that the illusion itself is the value and must be treated on its own terms.

More recently, the term "parallax" has been developed by Slavoj Žižek and Kōjin Karatani. As Karatani put it, the parallax is not an equivocation between thesis and antithesis but an emergence of a position "in the form of antinomy, which exposes the fact that both thesis and antithesis are nothing more than 'optical delusions'" (Karatani 3). As such, unified subjective positions are always plural in that they rely on the "perspective of the other" within their own logic (Karatani 2). Race itself functions as a parallax, for instance, in DuBois's formulation of the "Negro . . . born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world" (*The Souls of Black Folk* 8). Reliance

on the metaphor of sight in this case is more than a simple, arbitrary analogy. It reveals

the subject to be essentially plural in that it is essentially partial and perspectival.

Chesnutt was more circumspect than DuBois about the degree to which this color-line

might allow anyone the transcendental possibility to "merge his double self into a better

and truer self" (*Souls* 9). Rather, Chesnutt's work often understands the visual to itself be

constituted doubly. In effect, the color-line doubles a double in order to take a new

position on the supposed initial clarity of the "American world." While DuBois's

comments on racial division have been extremely productive for thinkers of what it is to

be racialized within American society, Chesnutt may offer us a new position on DuBois's

formulation, one that sets that being within a dialectic, historical movement rather than

DuBois's tendency toward a static idealism.

Technological systems such as the railroad have been essential in the historical

establishment of particular parallax relationships as empirical certainties (rather than

truths). The introduction of the Cartesian coordinate system and the painting techniques

of Early Modern Europe, the "battle of geometers vying to make us forget the 'high' and

the 'low'" in favor of "a *vanishing-point*," had regimented a particular set of arbitrary

systems that guaranteed the certainty of human vision as Paul Virilio has argued (*Open

Sky* 1) The introduction of the consumer train, however, had the opposite effect. As

Wolfgang Schivelbusch has pointed out, the blurring effect in human vision produced by

new speeds of travel revealed to the passengers that their vision was not a medium for the

conveyance of external truths, but an apparatus that registers "a relationship of light"

(Schivelbusch 49). The train did not directly cause a destabilization in the assumed

certainty of vision. It revealed it to have always been unstable, but unstable along specific lines that could be systematized through mathematical models. It is no accident that the railway plays such an integral role in the thinking of a writer such as Chesnutt. In the American context, the association of the perception of skin color had long been a justification for the creation and regimentation of social distinctions. The regimentation of sight and racial difference are therefore necessarily linked for Chesnutt. As the train reveals the fundamental instability of sight, its grounding of racial difference similarly became unstable. And yet, to point out the illusory quality of the regimentation of particular relations, as Chesnutt is quick to qualify, does not take any of its power away, but, in fact, can make its power even more certain.

Over the span of Chesnutt's career, the author saw the victories made for the political rights of black Americans in the last years of the Civil War and the early period of Reconstruction overturned by an intransigent Southern legal system at the state level and compromising political deals at the federal level. As popular historian Jerrold M. Packard put it, "the end of Reconstruction" in 1877 "represented a catastrophe of incalculable magnitude" for African-Americans (Packard 62). After an initial period of relative inclusion for former slaves in the political system, "whites began to map out a new master-servant relationship, one they hoped would look as much as possible like the old" (Packard 41). Initially, one form this effort took was the so-called "Black Codes" which "often required public transportation to segregate facilities for blacks or even to bar them entirely from trains, carriages, and omnibuses" (Packard 42). Spaces of consumer travel were particularly targeted by white legislators because only "on public

transportation did whites and blacks merge in perceived social equality, the state that so aroused white fears" (Packard 70). To limit the political control possible for newly freed slaves, Southern legislators understood the ability to move freely about the country as a threat to the established political order. It was not until late in the late nineteenth century, however, that the "Black Codes," a collection of state-level legislation and unwritten social agreements, became federal law with the institution of Jim Crow.

A decisive shift towards the establishment of truly systemic segregation came in 1896 in the form of the Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* which established as federal law that "states and their agencies were free to use racial categorization to segregate public places, as they had been doing and would continue to do" until it was overturned in 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (Hoffer 1). More than simply setting the legal precedent for segregation laws in the United States for decades to come, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case clearly articulated an influential version of the problematic parallax of racial difference as it existed at the time. The case involved Homer Plessy, a black man "of mixed descent, in the proportion of one-eighth African blood," who sat in the section of an inter-state passenger train designated for whites only by Louisiana state law (*Plessy v. Ferguson* 1). He was then "ejected" from the car "for no other reason than that the petitioner [Plessy] was of the colored race" (*PvF* 1). The case was eventually taken to the Supreme Court. The council for Plessy, including the novelist, lawyer, and friend of Chesnutt, Albion Tourgée, argued that the Louisiana segregation law violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments in giving unequal treatment to blacks and whites. In the majority opinion, Justice Henry Billings Brown

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dismissed Tourgée's arguments, claiming that laws "permitting, even requiring, [the two races'] separation, in places where they are liable to be brought into contact, does not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race to the other" (*PvF* 3). If any difference was perceived in the treatment of races, Justice Brown claimed, it is "not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it," adding that if "the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality, it must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other's merits, and a voluntary consent of individuals" (*PvF* 6). Ironically, in introducing racial terminology into the legal record, the arguments made by Tourgée in fact assured that racial difference, that a uniquely "African blood" existed, could and would be considered by the court as an argumentatively viable category at the federal level.

In an aside, however, Justice Brown revealed in even more detail the strange parallax thinking employed in this prejudicial ruling. He pointed out that the "power to assign to a particular coach obviously implies the power to determine which race the passenger belongs," which he recognized as difficult at best (*PvF* 5). He avoided the question, however, "since the only issue" he had to deal with was "as to the unconstitutionality" of the Louisiana law (*PvF* 5). In an oblique extension of this problem, Justice Brown continued that "in any mixed community, the reputation of belonging to the dominant race, in this instance the white race, is 'property,' in the same sense that a right of action or of inheritance is property" and can therefore be subject to suits for damages if a white man is deprived of his rights by being seated in a non-white carriage (*PvF* 5). At the same time, if a black citizen were to be assigned to the same

carriage, "he has been deprived of no property, since he is not lawfully entitled to the reputation of being a white man" (*PvF* 5). The "circular reasoning" of Brown's argument, rather than simply a contradiction stemming from ignorance or carelessness, was a necessary ambiguity arising from racial thinking (Hoffer 128). In Justice Brown's ruling, two parallax concepts are related, "property" and "race." "Whiteness" becomes the presence of property while "blackness" denotes its absence. Effectively, according to Justice Brown, only the white race can claim the "inheritance" of presence in the American legal system. Class and race in the American legal system were explicitly articulated as two aspects of the same relationship to the signifier. Both race and property are simultaneously present in that they create real effects and are embedded in material relationships and yet are ontologically absent in that they have no material substance themselves, in any typical sense. They are both signifiers in Lacan's use of the term I described in my previous chapter. Given the requirements of the Louisiana law, as Brown points out, any one conductor would be placed in the impossible position of deciding on the race of every passenger and also in the position of deciding property or non-property as a corollary. Sight, in this example provides the *kairos* for these parallax concepts in which neither the thesis nor the antithesis of the presence of race-property are correct. The determination of race requires "reputation," or *reputatio,* being the subject of reflection for the Other. The power of the conductor's ability to assign race rests on it being initially, essentially ambiguous. Which decision the conductor makes does not matter in general. It is only important that the decision be made in every case to repetitively maintain the presence and authority of property.

The right to establish and enforce an arbitrary (but not random) system of differences within the American context is not obviated by the illusory nature of the system but guaranteed by it. It is this form of political complexity that Chesnutt is particularly aware of and articulate about, although to a large extent this dimension of his thinking has been neglected by his critics. The literary criticism of Chesnutt's work has mainly fallen into two categories, the normative and non-normative. The chronologically first, normative trend is the important political work done from the 1940s into the 80s of securing a place for Chesnutt and other black writers like him within the academic tradition at all. Many of these works focus on arguing for the inclusion of Chesnutt's work as of sufficient literary quality to merit being discussed at all by academics. Often, these arguments adopt the aesthetic categories of the dominant tradition and attempt to demonstrate the degree to which Chesnutt himself is a "master" of certain literary techniques considered by academics to be aesthetically preferable. Typically, critics argue that his works are acceptable to an aesthetic dominated by Modernist values of the density and complexity of tropes and a sufficient skepticism of "politics" that is limited to explicit statements of allegiance to contemporary political organizations or the adoption of a political vocabulary associated with a specific issue of the moment. While drawing academic attention to black authors in general and Chesnutt in particular is an important political gesture, those critics tend to argue the degree to which the political and aesthetic values they assign to Chesnutt do or do not match their own. A major Chesnutt scholar, Joseph McElrath, for instance, rejects Chesnutt as a "realist" in the mode of William Dean Howells and Theodore Dreiser, for having too Modernist a technique, while critics

such as Dean McWilliams criticize Chesnutt for not being Modernist enough in his "overly didactic" moments (McWilliams 166). By and large this trend in criticism oscillates between taxonomizing Chesnutt into various literary traditions whose defining terms are vague enough to prove or disprove any thesis on the subject.

The second strand of literary criticism attempts essentially the opposite of the first, to demonstrate the degree to which Chesnutt's work is or is not radically subversive toward the dominant political order. These works often focus on various historical trends Chesnutt was subject to or literary techniques that Chesnutt's develops from a specifically African-American tradition, and particularly the conjure story. They also tend to reproduce Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s point about the importance of "signifying" in the African-American tradition. In particular, they argue for the complex and systematic deployment in Chesnutt's work of strategies of resistance to the dominant ideology that allow writers that identify as black, as Chesnutt did, to maintain their authentically black identities and offer critiques of the dominant, white supremacist ideologies they are engaged with while not exposing themselves to the possibility of violent retribution by their primarily white audiences. For example, Sally Ann Ferguson claims that Chensutt's work is simply "race propaganda" for an explicitly assimilationist position, and not sufficiently subversive to be applauded ("Failed Future American" 82). Richard E. Baldwin, on the other hand, considers Chesnutt's conjure stories to participate in a tradition of "subterfuge, indirection, and the manipulation of whites" as a "survival strategy" (Baldwin 387). While these arguments are all undoubtedly correct to a degree and identify important elements of Chesnutt's work, they often resort to a simple flipping

of a binary one way or another. Whether or not any one political act is "subversive" or "assimilationist" varies depending on each critic's more or less reasonable standard for appropriate political behavior toward some pragmatic political end.

While these two main trends in the literary criticism of Chesnutt have been important in understanding Chesnutt's work, both seem to avoid directly addressing Chesnutt's complex attitude to more fundamental ideas about social progress and historical change. They are complex in that they are necessarily incomplete and often do not imply a total political theory that will produce a particular kind of future society. Chesnutt's own statements are at times indicative of a more complex relation to history that may resist any concept of a "true" history at all. Like the question of "realism," the question of history is often divided by assumptions about the correct way in which subjective and objective viewpoints of human events may be represented. Chesnutt, however, is suspicious less of the divide between the objective and the subjective than the idea of history itself as a strictly empirical category. Chesnutt offers the trope of the railroad as a way of understanding the manifold problem of race prejudice in America. The Parallax, rather than a positivistic grounding, is a tension or gap. The difficulty, as posed by Chesnutt, is, rather than deciding to what degree either of one's eyes is the "correct" one, to understand the reality that is created by the disparity as an essential illusion and treat it as such.

"Don't You See that He Is?": The Railroad and Race

Martin Heidegger once commented about technology that it is a kind of question one can pose to the world, a challenge one can offer nature. Each question, in turn, creates its own path. We experience the act of questioning as a kind of beginning, or a first attempt. However, by employing a certain set of concepts, based in language, to interrogate a phenomenon, one has already created a "way" that one is committed to follow if the train of thought is faithfully pursued (Heidegger 3). In this sense, technology is inherently perspectival in that it establishes a copula between the latent energy found in material objects and a socially defined end or use for that energy. Particular technologies create specific political possibilities by initially limiting material possibilities. By conjoining the material to the social through the technological, one has already assumed technology to translate the potential of the material into social ends. Technology, then, is more of a modality than a thing in itself, a mode by which the material and the social are related by way of an apparatus that transforms and distributes energy. Technology, as it is taken by both Jacques Ellul and Lewis Mumford for example, is often defined by the automation and acceleration of work traditionally done by people. The social effects of this automism, rather than a simple substitution of one human actor for his or her mechanical counterpart, are often surprising in their diversity and unpredictability.

As the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case demonstrates, the relationship between technology and the social relationships it affects is a dynamic rather than static one, as part of the debate over that case involved the partial reconciliation of the unique instability of a new, technologically defined public space with the essential instability of race. Technologies

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create possibilities in excess of what is initially considered useful about them and the results of the unexpected effects of latent energy must then be reincorporated into a social end in one way or another if the dominant ideological path is to be maintained by those who benefit from it. The mediation of energy and political ends through technology thus operates anthropomorphically within the imaginary of United States politics. Human ends are projected into the means themselves to maintain the naturalization of race as a category. Thus, as Justice Harlan put it in his famous dissenting opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the railroad's "locomotion" can actually create social mobility for Americans (*PvF* 9). And yet, because the material itself resists any totalizing anthropomorphism by producing effects in excess of the assumed intention, the mediation between the material and the imaginary operates dialectically, sometimes with disastrous results.

In the last two novels published by Charles Chesnutt in his lifetime, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt demonstrates the way in which the dynamic relationship between technology and the imaginary that constitutes the social were mutually regulating one another in America after Reconstruction officially ended in 1877. Chesnutt offers in these novels a complication to the traditional reading of American space and its habit of shaping prejudicial attitudes. The often-cited work of Frederick Jackson Turner remains the dominant explanation of the expansion of American political space. In *The Frontier in American History* he attempted to explain American development through the "existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement Westward" (Turner 1). Although Turner assumed the psychology of the pioneer in breaching borders as the most important

feature of the history of American expansion, his analysis is shot through with another, structural means by which "advance" occurs, namely "railroads, fostered by land grants" (Turner 9). As Paul Virilio put it, this "trans-appearance" of the American frontier, its presence that only marks its state of continually passing away, can only be understood as the experience of the rate at which borders move rather than a solid boundary to be breached by those willing to do it (*The Information Bomb* 21). As a means by which the "universal disposition" of white Americans to expand their boundaries, the "really American" part of history according to Turner, technology structurally regulates the rate of that expansion. (Turner 4, 7). Technology effectively regulates the rate at which ideological space expands over a specific period of time in this American context. For Chesnutt, theses such as Turner's are correct to the degree that they describe the dominant ideology of white America. From the position of those who understand their relationship to that expansion as an object of control, however, the railroad plays a much more ominous role.

The mutual reinforcement of technological and ideological expansion that simultaneously creates the space of the nation and dominates it raises a question for Charles Chesnutt. More specifically, Chesnutt implicitly asks a question that later would be explicitly reformulated by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail": why "didn't you [King] give the new administration time to act" in order to redress political injustices caused by prejudice (King 87). King responded that there cannot be a political action supporting civil rights that is "well-timed" from the point of view of those who most benefit from current structures of power (King 87).

From the position of the oppressed, change occurs too slowly. From the position of the

oppressor it happens too quickly. In other words, justice, the addressing of a wrong,

would always be untimely in some fashion. For Chesnutt, however, this question is

inherent in the term "prejudice" itself and its relationship to the increased speeds of

action made possible by the railroad. A central question of Chesnutt's art and thinking

asks in what time prejudice operates and by what mechanisms, both literal and

metaphorical. Any prejudicial act must be fundamentally unoriginal in that it has already

had its path laid down before the moment of action itself. In the years following the

official end of Reconstruction, the question of race relations (often referred to

erroneously as "the negro question" at the time) revolved around the observation that

American prejudice had (and has) a tendency to repeat itself over and over again in total

resistance to arguments about the illusory nature of race itself or the injustice in a

democratic sense of a dominant social group's oppression of a minority. As Chesnutt put

it, the legal equality of black Americans' right to vote, for instance, was obviously

"foreclosed" by 1903 ("Disfranchisement" 79). What fueled the institution of Jim Crow

was the "defiance" of the constitution by intransigent southern Whites unwilling to accept

or incapable of accepting their military and ideological defeat in the war and their

repetition of racist behaviors carried over from antebellum social formations

("Disfranchisement" 81). Chesnutt identifies the difficulty of understanding racism as

both an act of individual will and as a repetition of previous acts. After Reconstruction,

American racism was dialectic in that it was inextricably tied to the prior history of

racism in America and yet presented something wholly new at the same time. Chesnutt,

however, was quick to make a distinction between the actual mechanisms by which prejudice operates as a deployment of literal force and the rhetorical justification given for the existence of prejudice from the white supremacist point of view. He points out that the technologies that circulate power and the rhetoric that justifies that power to any resistant member of society are dialectic in the sense that they were a confluence of mutating ideas about how linear history, expressed in material social practices, were ideologically justified as trans-historical principles of development.

Three important scenes from his novels *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream* serve to demonstrate the way in which Chesnutt understood technology and social space to dialectically support a specific idea of historical development. More than this, the dialectic between the material system of the railway and the ideology of racial division in America mutually reinforce one another as systems for the demarcation of political spaces of relative safety. The plot of *The Colonel's Dream* follows the homecoming of Colonel Henry French, a white Southerner who had fought for the South in the Civil War. He had made a fortune during the Reconstruction period in New York City through the rapidly expanding Northern economy. In returning to the South, French hoped to help revitalize both his ailing son in warmer Southern climates and the South itself by reproducing Northern, technologically driven progressivism in his native town. He assumed that reproducing more efficient labor practices and introducing new technologies into the South would help to correct the moral and economic errors of a formerly slaveholding society that had not fully reorganized its ideological assumptions after the war. Toward the end of *The Colonel's Dream*, however, a series of events occur

which changes French's understanding of what is politically possible in the post-Reconstruction South. While outside at play, French's sickly child is warned by his elderly black companion, Peter, a hired for him by his father, to keep "'way f'm dat railroad track, honey" (*The Colonel's Dream* 322). It is "as dange'ous as a gun, and a gun is dange'ous without lock, stock, er bairl: I knowed a man oncet w'at beat 'is wife ter def wid a ramrod" (*Colonel* 322). According to Peter, each element of a gun is as dangerous as any other part or combinations of parts to the degree that they are within the ideological formation in which an end, killing, is attached to a means, the machine of killing, and therefore made available to human intention, the will to kill. Not only can a gun kill, but it kills in the name of a certain kind of intention whose features are to a degree dissociated from the person who pulls the trigger.

Technologies shaped by industrial capitalism such as the gun and railway are not simply tools like any other. [6] As I argued in my previous chapter, these technologies are always imbricated dialectically in multiple sets of signifying systems, both material and ideological. They allow for a set of possible actions but those actions are, in turn, shaped by the socially predetermined limitations of the technology. Objects are not inert in Peter's analogy. Each technology, as a mediation between nature and the human, dialectically shapes the object for the subject and the subject for the object. They are the material structures by which the distinction between subject and object is "applied in act"

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[6] It is not essential to this project, but it is interesting to note that many of the industrial techniques for "mass production" that were so linked with the expansion of the railway were first developed as a means of solving the problem of producing firearms with perfectly exchangeable parts. A rendition (one ultimately favorable to the robber-barons, it should be added) of the relationship between mass production and firearms can be found in Charles R. Morris's popular history, *The Tycoons*, which is fairly readable if not particularly scholarly.

(*Four Fundamentals* 62). In other words, "man thinks with his object" and that thought is also structured by historically contingent ideological formations (*Four Fundamentals* 62). It is no accident that the anecdote told by Peter as an example of the danger of guns is precisely that of domestic abuse. An essential part of the "gun" as a material mediation of dominant ideology, is its status as the kind of tool with which "man leaps the frontiers of his domain" (*Four Fundamentals* 62). From within its effective firing range, the gun establishes spatial boundaries of control by way of the ability to distribute death. The gun as a material signifier allows a husband, in this case, to think out loud, so to speak, whether the gun is fired or not. In other words, guns are the power of the sovereign made mobile, infinitely reproducible through capitalist production, and subject to regimes of knowledge. The abuses that regulate certain power relationships are to a degree a matter of moments of decision, but also a matter of the technologies that set the terms of decision-making at all. Who happens to get the gun in the struggle for it is a local tactic given form by the general possibilities of the technology itself. Because the very design of the gun is expressive of a certain range of possible human intentions, the "gun" as a technological system betrays the first steps of a technological anthropomorphism made mobile by capitalist production. The gun is material made in the shape of a human intention. Effectively, Peter's point is that guns do not kill people, anthropomorphisms do.

The train, then, is like the gun in that it is a technological apparatus that produces effects far in excess of any single intention. Those excessive intentions, however, are still limited by the material formations of the technology that are themselves ideological to

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the degree that they make a certain range of power relationships more easily accessible.

Not only do technological apparatuses such as the gun express ideological formations,

such as the terms by which killing can happen in the case of the gun, but may easily kill

in excess of any intention, as with the railway. Although the gun and the train express

different "lethal factors," as Lacan put it, they both set the terms for a specific kind of

impossible choice that creates the subject positions which wager their safety whether they

like it or not.

Despite Peter's warning, the child chases a cat, whom he has been told is magic

and therefore capable of speaking, onto the tracks after a train has come to a halt on them.

The child sees "nothing but the cat, and wished for nothing more than to talk to it"

(*Colonel* 322). French's child had already at this point in the novel been cast in the mold

of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Little Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a quasi-angelic figure of

forgiveness and Christian charity. Even this brief summary of the scene illustrates the

ways in which the narrative might function as a kind of modern parable about the

intractability of social mores, its grim conclusion already fairly obvious. In this

straightforward reading, the destruction of the child could illustrate the ambiguity of

technologically driven progress as the means by which the Northern mode of capitalist

circulation comes at the expense of the unity and security of the family. Thus, the cost of

"revitalizing" the South could be said to be too high a price to pay in its current

condition.[7] The actual events of the child's death, however, confound a simple,

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[7] There are many casual assessments of the novel that boil down to claiming it to be the dramatization of a simple moral of being careful what one wishes for in introducing Northern economic principles into an intransigently racist South. Matthew Wilson, for example, considers this scene to be the "melodramatic" twist in a "sentimental plot" of a novel about "the racist undergirding of the New South ideology" that

allegorical reading of the novel. As a total train system, the railway in this scene is more

than simply an example of "progress." The specific way in which it has remapped

political space is narrated by Chesnutt's narrator in detail. The train is more than a

symbol of progress, and its features have come to define progress to a significant degree.

The railway system, as a technological system, is like a gun – it is material that

has been shaped along ideological lines. In this scene, the train physically and

metaphorically remaps the concept of "safety" along the lines of its own operations. As a

means of dividing space by lanes of controlled motion, the railway is a series of

interconnected vectors of safety for Peter and the child, vectors whose navigation is

anything but simple or obvious, as Peter already knows. In an effort to save the child

before a mechanic starts the train on its way, Peter stumbles on the cat and lands in the

path of the railway car along with the child. The mechanic, not seeing Peter or the child

in his concentration on procedures for starting the train, sets it in motion after switching

the track. Another mechanic, however, seeing Peter, pulls "a lever mechanically, but too

late to stop the momentum of the train," which is "not equipped with air brakes, even if

these would have proved effective to stop in so short a distance" (*Colonel* 323). Carol B.

Gartner accused Chesnutt of being inartistic for dipping "lavishly into sentiment" for

scenes such as this one, in a remark that has been repeated from Chesnutt's own time to

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simultaneously "doubts the efficacy of fiction to affect instrumental reform" (Wilson 148, 174).
McWilliams similarly argues that the point of the novel is self-contradictory in that French himself
somehow "embodies" efforts to remove the Southern elites while in fact perpetuating their elitism
(McWilliams 167). McWilliams, however, makes the error of avoiding a conceptual ambiguity by claiming
both elements as ontological necessities and leaving it at that. To claim that fictional characters "embody"
certain abstract categories misses how ideology structurally determines certain the terms of abstract
decisions prior to their occurrence.

our own (Gartner 155).[8] Yet, apart from the simple dismissal of the scene as sentimental,

at stake here are the preconditions for a relatively new, technologically overdetermined

idea of political spaces of relative safety in the post-Reconstruction American

imagination. Although the purpose of the train is to run regularly and, thus, predictably,

the calculation of that predictability by any one individual relies on an interplay of

vectors of vision and reaction speeds. The processes of deciding and acting between the

two mechanics on the same machine are not sequential but parallel in the technological

system and make up distinct orders of time whose dissymmetry creates the possibility of

disaster in the scene.[9]

The added irony of the child's death, however, is that the train is, in fact, initially

stationary on the track and, even then, potentially dangerous when decision and action are

so far removed from one another in parallel procedures performed by multiple

mechanics. The mechanic operating the train does not take on the attributes of the train

which he controls as in vulgar Marxist alienation. We have not become metaphorical

cogs in the capitalist machine of production and circulation as in the spectacular scenes

from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Instead, the machine has become us in that it regulates our

relations in political space. The mechanic pulls the lever "mechanically," both

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[8] John Chamberlain had criticized Chesnutt in 1930 for plots that "hinge on such advantageous circumstances that the works of Thomas Hardy seem the very soul of the natural by comparison" in order to achieve heightened, sentimental effects (Chamberlain 134). Both McWilliams and Wilson repeat this concern in the 21st Century without adding much clarification as to why sentiment is so abhorrent a literary trait. Additionally, any perusal of newspapers from the period will reveal that such deaths were fairly common, leading one to wonder what kind of resistance-repression is at work when literary critics hope to dismiss such scenes as "advantageous" in their obvious fictionality.

[9] Effectively, the *felix* of the child's relationship to the cat, which attempts to prolong fantastical desire is brought into disastrous conjunction with the structure of the machine's desire to interrupt. This scene can function as an objective correlative to Deleuze's and Guattari's comment that the "desiring-machine is not a metaphor; it is what interrupts" (*Anti-Oedipus* 41).

automatically and in the manner of a mechanic. The disaster happens at a speed that no longer accounts for the time of human thought, but is an effect of a perceptive gap between the regular operation of the machine and its emergency safety procedures. Safety, in the world created by the total train system, is no longer a matter of the safety of a community as a whole or even the safety of the individual from forces outside the community. Rather, safety is a matter of procedural vectors of sight and force that protect spheres of action created by technological complexes of machines which utilize massive amounts of energy.

Safety in any one instance can only be regulated at close to the speed at which it occurs. That speed, in turn, creates a gap in the assumption of continual human perception. Human perception, in this scenario, not only occurs within a particular space and time but at a certain speed, the ratio of the two. One mechanic is preoccupied with his own safety in operating a potentially dangerous machine. The other is able to predict a disaster and initiate a procedure to avoid it. The independent regimes of the two safety procedures, however, ultimately cannot control the energy of the train and the disaster becomes almost inevitable, or, what is perhaps the more damaging option, predictable. Peter's initial warning to the child is therefore prescient in that it is not the "lock, stock, er bairl," the material components, of either the gun or the train that are dangerous. It is the complex of technological anthropomorphisms that treat each piece as potential energy for human ends that create the possibility of disaster. Disaster, therefore, is no longer an accident in the sense of an unpredictable event or an intercession by the gods (dis-aster). It is rather the normal expression of energy within human systems that occurs in the gaps

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created by safety procedures that work slower than the machines they regulate. The political space created by the total train system, then, has no "inside" or "outside" but discrete vectors of variable safety. Any individual's safety is no longer a right granted by the state, but a function of the individual's perceptibility to the vectors of regulation of the technological system.

Not only would technology separate out political space into mobile vectors of relative safety, the logic of the division of spaces of safety created by the railway would in turn be unequally distributed along racial lines and extended to political space of the community as a whole. The disastrous death of the Colonel's son and companion take on an added significance when the two come to be memorialized. Previously in the novel, the Colonel's son had made the Colonel promise that if the son were to die, he should be buried alongside his companion, Peter. The Colonel does, in fact, attempt to honor his son's wishes and buries both his son and Peter in the family's plot of the town cemetery. In reaction to this, however, some citizens of the town, dominated by a "mob spirit," dig up Peter's coffin and return it to the Colonel's porch (*Colonel* 346). The spatial regulation of race, Chesnutt indicates, extends even and perhaps especially to the consecration of the dead. Regulation, in this case, operates at both the levels of the perceptible and the imperceptible. The hidden body violates the townspeople's concept of the purpose of the graveyard as a monument to a community whose social coherence and linear continuity relies on the control of the space of the community through racial division. As they put it in a note nailed to the coffin: "take notis . . . Niggers by there selves, white peepul by thereselves, and them that lives in our town must bide by our

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rules. By order of Cummity" (*Colonel* 346). As critic R. J. Ellis pointed out, this note may have been inspired by one of the lawyers in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case Albion Tourgée's famous novel *A Fool's Errand* from 1879 in which a similar note is delivered to the protagonist of that novel by "The Regulators." In both cases, the assumption of the white supremacist townspeople is that an abstract tradition determines an ontological racial difference that must be historically enforced by "cummities" and "regulators" to keep it ontological. The "mob spirit" in this instance, rather than an uncontrollable desiring, is a bureaucratic desire with a set of arguments, procedures, and rules to go along with it. The relative "safety" of the community's linear progression, consecrated in their ideologically "pure" graveyard, must be maintained by doing violence on any foreign element that attempts to change it. The mob themselves are not the vessels of their linear concept of history, but the protectors of its anxiously autonomous, linear path. Even without an obvious "technology" to mediate the mob's ideological assumption, history itself, monumentalized in the graveyard, has become in a sense a technology, a material mediation of ideological ends, for the dominant white supremacist tradition. Just as the railway guaranteed the continuity of American history into the future, as I argued in my previous chapter, the graveyard works along the same principles but in the reverse, guaranteeing that linearity's connection with the past.

Both the killing of Peter and the child and the rejection of their consecrations are in this sense "pre-judicial" in that the loci of decisions to act, the subjective positions created by technologies, remain categorically outside of the moment of action. For the mechanics, this means the manipulation of predetermined safety procedures for a literal

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machine. For the white mob it also means the manipulation of safety procedures but this time bureaucratic procedures determined by white supremacist assumptions about racialized trans-historical principles of historical progression. The terms of both the mechanics' and the mob's decisions, the "lethal factor" specific to the ideological formation, had already been determined and their outcomes rely solely on the degree to which humans manage the necessary effects of the primary causes efficiently. The expression of race hatred is not a judgment in the strictest sense within the white supremacist logic Chesnutt narrates. Rather, the white supremacists are mechanics – they attempt to regulate history through the appeal to trans-historical principles of progression and can therefore considered to govern "natural" development. The expression of that race hatred, the mob, occurs, in a sense, in a predictably unpredictable manner.

In *The Colonel's Dream*, the pre-judicial act of expelling Peter from the graveyard rather than the death of his son is the cathartic moment of the narrative, the moment where the Colonel decides the only reasonable course of action is to leave the South. By the writing of that novel, Chesnutt's early hopes for rhetorically persuading his primarily white audience to sympathize with the people whose oppression was at least in part due to the pre-judicial assumptions held by the majority had all but evaporated. As he put it in a letter to his publisher, he began to "suspect that the public as a rule does not care for books in which the principal characters are colored people, or with a striking sympathy with that race as contrasted with the white race" (*"To Be an Author"* 171). It is Chesnutt's immediately previous novel, *The Marrow of Tradition,* however, in which the author most fully develops the logic of the railway as an exemplary figure for the

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maintenance of racial division in American thought. Compared with *The Colonel's Dream*, the railway plays numerically smaller part in that only a single chapter of the novel takes place on the train, and, other than that chapter, it is only mentioned sparingly. Yet, that chapter and the other mentions of the railroad play a structural role in the logic of the narrative that demonstrates the degree to which technological thinking regulates racial modes of thought and vice versa.

In *The Colonel's Dream*, the repetitive maintenance of the same in the consecration of the graveyard is the conceptual ground for the forward motion of historical change from the white supremacist point of view. In a sense, it identifies the forward motion of the railway as a potential model for social change but represses it by naturalizing the circular motion that creates the effect of the linear (as the wheels rotate, the train moves forward). In *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt creates his most systematic example of the power and ubiquity of this kind of thinking by combining racial and technological systems in a single scene rather than separating them as he does in *The Colonel's Dream*. In a chapter early in the novel, one of the primary characters through which the narrative is focalized, Dr. Miller, a black doctor, takes a train ride from the North to his home in the South. During the trip, Virilio's "trans-appearance" of political boundaries occurs in which the politics of racial segregation are not immediately applied as boundaries are breached, but come into being incrementally and at an increasing rate. Initially, Miller has a pleasant conversation with a white colleague to pass the time. As the train moves further southward, Dr. Miller's racial stigma changes for the other people on the train. To the "American eye" of the white conductor, Miller becomes

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"black, or, more correctly speaking, brown; it was even a light brown, but both his

swarthy complexion and his curly hair revealed what has been described in the laws of

some of our states as a 'visible admixture' of African blood" (*Marrow of Tradition* 49).

The narrator in this passage ironically describes the perceptive problem of racial thinking

within the techno-political context of the moving train. Combining legal definitions and

the vagaries of the perception of color, Chesnutt, here, specifies the problem of the

impossible decision required of the railroad employee in a *reductio ad absurdum*. From

the position of authority over the regulation of the train required by law of the conductor,

no partial statements are allowed. This decision, however, requires a complex mixing of

heterogeneous terms, a "mythic thought" as I argued in my previous chapter, to the point

of absurdity. Eventually, the conductor does ask Miller to leave the car, causing a verbal

dispute between Miller's white friend and the conductor.

Addressing Miller's white colleague, the conductor inquires if Miller "is with

you" to which Miller's companion, setting the terms for the dispute through a negation, in

turn asks the conductor: "Don't you see that he is?" (*MoT* 52). The conductor explains to

Miller that "this is a day coach, and is distinctly marked 'White,' as you must have seen

before you sat down here. The sign is put there for that purpose" (*MoT* 54). Critic

Elizabeth Abel takes the letters "white," painted in white in the whites only car, and

"black," painted in black in the blacks only car, to play a "mimetic" function, which

"effects a silent translation from the polite social term to its aggressive underside" (Abel

41). The "blurring" of the "distinction between those African Americans who had

garnered a modicum of status and the underclass usually designated by the blunt color

label *black*" (Abel 41). As the details of this scene demonstrate, however, the mimetic

function of the relationship between color and its signifier is only superficial, a corollary

justification of the power structure of which it is a symptom. The sign is a chain of

"letters" in Lacan's sense of the word, "the material medium [*support*] that concrete

discourse borrows from language" (*Écrits* 413). There cannot be a "translation" between

the polite and the aggressive, as the polite function of the sign is itself aggressive in a

different modality. It repetitively marks the authority of the "American eye" of the

conductor as already divisive. The conductor, because is placed in the authoritative

position cannot "see" that Miller "is" because it is precisely the gaze of the conductor that

determines presence in this ideologically imbricated situation. Whether that division is

enforced "politely" or "aggressively" is beside the point. Within the American context, an

individual's relationship to perceptibility in general has already been marked as racial in

that it assumes division that has already been caught up in a power differential of which

race is an expression. As with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision by Justice Brown, racial

distinction is considered natural to the degree that the conductor is there to act as a

guarantor of property in general. As the conductor himself notes to Miller and his friend,

he has already been chastised by his own superiors for not enforcing the racial

segregation laws and has "a family to support" (*MoT* 54). Chesnutt's sarcasm on this

topic is palpable. The signifier "white" in this case does not simply designate a color, nor

does it simply designate a privileged position relative to the consumption of commodities

such as rail travel. Rather, it is a repetition of the signifier as an essentially absent

presence. The property of race legally established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* can only be

asserted as present through a repetition of the ritual of ejecting people from its space, by making them absent. Miller "must have seen" the sign because he did not need to see it at all.

The conductor is not, however, the final arbiter in this scene, although his enunciation of the rule is determinative of the political division that is enforced in this particular instance. The conversation between Miller, the conductor, and Miller's friend is imbricated within a series of hesitations and gazes that condition the terms of the discourse. When the car reaches Virginia, knowing the terms in play more than others on the car, Miller already stands for "a moment hesitatingly" before sitting (*MoT* 52). The conductor "paused at the seat occupied by the two doctors" and "glanced interrogatively at Miller" but moves on (*MoT* 52). Miller "nevertheless followed with his eyes the conductor" while the conductor speaks with another passenger who "turned his head and looked back toward Miller," and, after speaking with that passenger, the conductor "retraces" his steps to confront Miller (*MoT* 53). The passenger the conductor consults is, in fact, Captain McBane, a white supremacist leader in Miller's hometown, who, as a holder of the property of "whiteness" according to the conductor, is able to activate the system of authority that the conductor represents. The system of hesitations and gazes around the expression of power that occurs more through than by the conductor are equally important to the structure of prejudicial expression in the scene. These gazes and hesitations structure moments of "intersubjective communication," as Jacques Lacan put it, where "everything is a trap" (*Four Fundamentals* 93). Both Miller and the conductor are, as Marx put it, "self-alienated" within the structure of gazes that constitutes them as

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subjects from the position of the Other as endowed or not with the authority of property as a signifier ("Alienation and Social Class" 133). Yet, they experience that alienation differently in that, from the position of the conductor, he "feels satisfied and affirmed in this self-alienation, experiences the alienation as a sign *of its own power*" whereas Miller "feels destroyed in this alienation, seeing in it its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence" ("Alienation" 133; emphasis in original). In this moment of intersubjective communication, the structure of race-property constitutes the individual on the train in an "imaginary relationship" (racial difference) to "their real conditions of existence" (property) ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" 162). The conductor is able to rule on color and property as a corollary because of their initial ambivalence. Power differentials established by the train and its procedures occur *at a particular rate* of "trans-appearance" determined by the hesitations of the glances that are a result of the movement of the train.

If Althusser could claim that ideology "has a material existence" and must go through sometimes painful contortions of argumentation to make his point, Chesnutt already knew this through his experience of American racism ("Ideology" 165). Furthermore, Chesnutt understands that this materiality now becomes socially determined through perspectival gaps created and maintained by technological systems. The trope through which Chesnutt attempts to represent this perspectival gap in the literary mode in this passage (and, in fact, the novel as a whole) is irony. As Kenneth Burke points out, irony may easily substitute for the concept of "dialectic" in general ("Four Master Tropes" 503). Put in Burke's terms, Chesnutt's distortion of color in this scene and its

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ideological ramifications parodies its substitution for racial difference as such and "clearly reveal[s] the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise" from within the white supremacist discourse itself, forming an interplay of ambivalences (*A Grammar of Motives* xviii). Scenes such as this one led critic Werner Sollers to write that he believes "Chesnutt's historical imagination, paired with his sense of irony, made him an unusually perceptive witness of his own time" (Sollers 3). Sollers is correct in identifying irony's relationship to history as one of the essential qualities of Chesnutt's contribution to American thought, but to frame this relationship in terms of the author's own, personal role as a "perceptive witness" to history misses what is essentially ironic in Chesnutt's thought. The "visible admixture" of race upon which the law is based, stresses not the "admixture" but, instead, the "visible" aspect of the situation. It does not matter to what degree the signs of race are mixed. If the blackness is visible at all, it is necessarily mixed from that point of view.

Yet, in terms of the legal definition of race, the conductor is activated by Captain McBane as what Lacan calls *le sujet supposé savoir*, the subject supposed to know. As was avoided in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decisions, the legal status of racial difference was left to conductors to decide in the moment of enforcement of separate cars for different races. Both the majority and dissenting Supreme Court opinions on this acknowledged the impossibility of this decision yet avoid including this aspect of the situation in their decisions as it falls outside of the realm of the language of the law they were adjudicating upon. Yet, as Chesnutt's novel points out, this is an essential moment in the assumption of racial difference and its regulation. What is at stake is not the "correct" identification

of racial difference in all cases. Everyone from the Supreme Court to Chesnutt to his characters recognize this as obviously impossible. What is at stake, however, is the maintenance of the system that can arbitrarily regulate and therefore affirm the arbitrary distinction. The irony, in Burke's sense, of this scene is irreducibly ambiguous and therefore must be adjudicated upon in order to maintain the dominant power structure. In other words, in the face of an impossible dialectic tension, the arbitrary ruling is the only possible course of action – what remains is to decide the means by which this power may be wielded, by whom, and in what circumstances. In this case, the conductor, as the representative of capital, takes that role.

Chesnutt's point in *The Colonel's Dream* demonstrated the way in which racial distinction operated similarly to the structure of technological progressivism in its regulatory processes. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, however, that eruptive quality of racial division through a technological logic exists as a structural element of the act of vision within a technological system. The historical present, in fact, occurs in the gap created by several gazes happening simultaneously but only being authoritative in retrospect. The "present" of pre-judicial politics does not in any real sense exist. It is a moment of crisis in the assumed continuity between a future of the railway and the past of the graveyard. The evasive power of prejudice, its ability to continue in a modulated form despite its patent absurdity, in fact, relies on its non-existence in the present. It is always grounded in a past and projected into a future whose contours have already been determined by the assumption of an *a priori* historical mechanism of change, that of technology. What Chesnutt implicitly develops, however, is the possibility for speaking from within the

gap, not as a necessarily quasi-uncertain present, but as a positive position of non-linear

political positing. His term for this gap is the "parallax."

"I See Myself Seeing Myself": The Parallax View

    "Irony," like "technology" and "prejudice," is an extremely expansive term and

thus difficult to define in any precise way. For Chesnutt, however, the concept of irony

was an essential element to understanding race and how it operates in American thought.

Chesnutt's critics have pointed out that irony can be a technique of subversion in which

one half of a dialectic speaks a language that both replies to the other and means

something else to itself. Chesnutt, however, implies that subversion's target, prejudice,

also operates by means of irony. Any ironic subversion of that order, while sometimes

politically useful as a means of evasion of the dominant ideology, cannot directly address

the power that also gains its legitimacy through irony. This kind of political dialectic

plays out with particular force within technological spaces. In Chesnutt's works, trains

literally penetrate or transgress political boundaries. For some critics, the railway's

breaching of political boundaries through destabilizing sensory experiences becomes a

place for a potentially new politics in which traditionally strict racial categories may be

questioned and new relationships formed (although that potential is rarely realized).

Critic Julia H. Lee, for instance, incorrectly summarizes Chesnutt's train chapter in *The

Marrow of Tradition* by claiming that the figure of the train "forces each character to

consider the relationship between African Americans, the Chinese, and the laws that are

meant to define their relationships to America" because the train itself "defamiliarizes"

sensory experience, "thus destabilizing the social relations and cultural assumptions that make up our lives" (Lee 347). At issue here is the casual use of "thus" in Lee's formulation of the effects of the railroad on racial division, as if racial division had been a stable category before the appearance of the train. The more radical possibility, and the possibility that more closely follows the text itself, is that instability is constitutive of both racial division and the sensory apparatus that supposedly grounds racial division in differences in skin color. What the railroad and the ideology that surrounds it as an assumed instrument of social-historical change reinforces, rather, is a *particular form* of instability that supports white supremacist ideological assumptions.

Chesnutt's view of the railroad, albeit only partially developed in his writings, may be more complex than simply offering a destabilization that reveals the absurdity of racial division as an empirical or legal category. Although the space of the railway certainly offers the potential for destabilizing political categories, Chesnutt also suggests that there is nothing necessary about this causality and, in fact, it has the potential of reinforcing particular instabilities that support the white supremacist order to the same degree. In his novels, and *The Marrow of Tradition* in particular, Chesnutt employs the trope of the railway as a dominant form of structural political control. This control works through the materiality of technological relationships that anthropomorphically relate material conditions to social ends through regulated conceptual instabilities. Because they are essentially anthropomorphic, literature is often the clearest medium in which this articulacy is visible. The creation of potential instabilities in moments of decision that arise necessarily from the tropes of seeing that are assumed to be natural Chesnutt calls

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"the parallax view." Chesnutt's parallax posits a heuristic rather than stable position from which speaking about history as a dynamic process may be possible but is by no means assured.

For Chesnutt, the parallax view serves as a counterpoint to the dominant concept of a more or less unified, autonomous subject speaking simultaneously from and about a particular tradition of social assumptions. This counterpoint both incorporates the assumption of a stable speaking subject in it and moves beyond it to a certain degree. Within the practical realm of literary representation, the parallax is a position created through the deployment of a set of tropes that show the necessary plurality of supposedly unified subjective positions. The dominant trope of much of Chesnutt's polemic writing is sarcasm, a more contextually specific form of irony. At first glance, Chesnutt seems to repeat many of the rhetorical strategies of other black public figures of his generation, a generation the poet and scholar James Weldon Johnson would later dub the "oratorical generation" (*What Now?*). In the mold of Frederick Douglass, many of Chesnutt's writings profess to an even-handed, objective evaluation of the current social state of the United States. In its traditional argumentative form the stated purpose of these public writings was to convince a hostile, mainly Northern, white audience of the injustices being committed in the country and of the urgent need for legislative and social change. Chesnutt employs literary tropes that go beyond the traditional plea, however. Chesnutt's sarcasm does more than mock the sections of the American public that either implicitly or explicitly support the white supremacist assumptions he seems to be arguing against.

Because his sarcasm so thoroughly permeates his writing, his positive statements are negated through sarcasm, but those negations are in turn negated to create parallaxes.

A representative example of Chesnutt's particular mode of sarcasm can be found in his essay on "The Future American," which has received some attention from critics although without much agreement as to its significance. His stated purpose with the essay is to correct the "conscious or unconscious evasion" other essayists have made "of the main elements of the problem involved in the formation of a future American race" (*Essays* 121). Its main theme interrogates "amalgamation" between races and the effect this will have on race prejudice, an "amalgamation" that has already been going on for the entirety of United States and Western history (*Essays* 123). The "mechanical mixture" of races, Chesnutt argues, could conceivably be forcibly required of the population by a government interested in dealing with the issue of race as a means of eliminating of any clear racial markers (*Essays* 125). Biologically justified racial types as they were understood by his audience could, mathematically, take a few generations in this scenario to be so confused that they would cease to be indices of race. Superficial distinctions between skin-color or the texture of one's hair would be forcibly dissociated from a specific hereditary line. Critic Sally Ann Ferguson has been one of the strongest voices of opposition to Chesnutt's politics as found in this and other essays of his with a similar theme. She claims, taking Chesnutt literally at his word, that this indulgence in speculations on racial mixing "clearly reveals the limited nature of Chesnutt's social and literary goals" ("Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks" 109). His position is limited, according to Ferguson, to "alleviating white color prejudice" against "color-line blacks or those of

mixed races," and treating the plight of "genuine negroes" (Chesnutt's term from his essay "What Is a White Man?") as "virtually insoluble" ("Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks" 109-10). While Ferguson is certainly right to point out the places where Chesnutt's personal, bourgeois ambitions affect his thinking, it is difficult to take this division as essential to what is primarily interesting in his work when he also spent a significant amount of time arguing that any racial division is itself a false premise.

From the outset of "The Future American," the argumentative frame that Chesnutt provides for his argument belies the content. As he puts it at the beginning of the first section of his essay:

> if the writer has any preconceived opinions that would affect his judgment, they are at least not the hackneyed prejudices of the past – if they lead to false conclusions, they at least furnish a new point of view, from which, taken together with other widely differing views, the judicious reader may establish a parallax that will enable him to approximate the truth. (*Essays* 121)

More than simply a rhetorical gesture of humility meant to placate a potentially hostile reading audience, Chesnutt's qualification of his argument is more significant when his sarcasm is taken into account in its specificity. In fact, the parallax in this context implicitly critiques the nature of the "objectivity" that it ostensibly is attempting to claim for its own argument. The possibility that Chesnutt offers is an attempt to approximate a truth through the gap of the parallax, not as a concession to uncertainty but as the basis for a positive statement that moves beyond a tradition that defines the limits of what one can be certain about, the "hackneyed prejudices of the past." Ultimately, Chesnutt's

argument in this essay is an ironic position on the trans-historical principles upon which

historical movement is assumed to be based in the white supremacist tradition. The

traditional opinion of white supremacist America took the dominance of the white race as

inevitably "winning out" over any inferior influence "by some strange alchemy," as

Chesnutt put it, within the rhetoric of a kind of social Darwinism (*Essays* 122). Chesnutt,

on the other hand, rejects the automaticity of this kind of historical thinking, while

appearing to adopt it for his own argument. Although he does accept that "selection and

environment" are to some degree determinative of some aspects of racial difference,

these elements are not a replacement for *a priori* principles, as in the white supremacist

Social Darwinism (*Essays* 122). Like technological progressivism, the white supremacist

position assumes historical change along the lines of causal, linear development to be an

a priori law of nature. Historical change is therefore an immanent character of material

relations actually in the world. Change, then, in effect, has always already happened. We,

as historical creatures, are simply waiting for the inevitable laws of nature to express

themselves. Chesnutt, by contrast, assumes historical change to be necessarily

retrospective and created through parallax gaps, constructed from "widely differing

views." Linear historical causality, in Chesnutt's model, is not immanent in material

relations but a function of multiple points of view on something that has already

happened and can never fill the sematic field of possible meaning from any one point of

view.

     To illustrate his point, Chesnutt tells a story he had read in a newspaper "whose

omniscience of course no one would question" in which a Chicago merchant who did

business in Texas was revealed by the paper to be a "mulatto" (*Essays* 126). Chesnutt goes on to write that shortly "after the publication of the item reflecting on the immaculateness of the merchant's descent, there appeared in the Texas newspapers, among the advertising matter, a statement from the Chicago merchant characterizing the rumor as a malicious falsehood" (*Essays* 126-7). Between the newspaper and the merchant, the question of race is one of the accurate application of empirical categories, and the answer to this question has important effects on the life of the merchant. To be publically labeled a "mulatto" in his society would in all probability affect his business relationships. And yet, from the third position, that of Chesnutt himself in his peculiar sarcastic mode, the question does not lie in the truth as constructed by the two poles of the dialectic. Rather, the ultimate target is the assumed "omniscience" of the newspaper that the merchant's dispute calls into question. Whereas the merchant, being a merchant, is economically required to take the omniscience for granted and simply argue the antithesis of that institution's claim, Chesnutt is not. Rather than a subversion that simply negates the initial claim, Chesnutt also negates that negation by sarcastically undermining the very terms by which racial division is claimed at all. It is less that the merchant is or is not a mulatto – he is from the white supremacist point of view to the degree that he is accused of such. Through the ironic parallax, the question is suspended in a moment of hesitation when "omniscience" itself, the *sujet suppose savoir*, is revealed to be incapable of control over the total semantic field.

The parallax, then, taken more generally, is a constitutive gap. This gap, in turn, is by definition always a differential. As with binocular human vision, for example, depth

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perception is created in part by the differential between the planes of vision of the two

human eyes taken together in a single act of seeing. Importantly, any one image is always

the result of "the difference in the positions and shapes of the images in the two eyes"

(Howard and Rogers 2). The plane of sight which is assumed to be a stable mode of

human understanding is always, in fact, the result of the reconciliation of two distinct

vantage points, a distortion, albeit a distortion that is socially normalized in the abstract

and useful for individuals in the particular. Chesnutt's phrase, then, the "parallax view,"

is redundant, but pointedly so. A parallax can only be several places from which to

"view" the object in question, taken simultaneously in a single rhetorical act. Any clear

position on the question must create a picture, a necessarily distorted picture, through an

atmosphere. The very definition of an act of vision, then, takes into account an initial

ambiguity that necessarily creates the conditions for another claim of clarity.

In the realm of ideological relations, this parallax gap as outlined by Chesnutt,

clarifies the difficulty in understanding Louis Althusser's claim that ideology is a

"representation of the world whose imaginary distortion depends on the imaginary

relation to their conditions of existence" and that this "imaginary relation is itself

endowed with a material existence" (a claim that is itself another version of Lacan's

"signifier" put within an explicitly Marxist vocabulary) ("Ideology" 166-7). Paul Ricoeur

took this concept from Althusser to mean that the distortion of ideology necessarily

implies that there is an initial, relatively stable object in order for a distortion to occur,

that ideology in the final analysis is "not distortive but integrative" (Ricoeur 57). To map

Ricoeur's response onto the problem Chesnutt outlined, the fact of the dispute between

the merchant and the newspaper would imply the necessary, stable truth of the race of the merchant. But this criticism misses the point by insisting on a direct causality that ideology does not necessarily follow. What Althusser and Chesnutt both suggest is that ideology's relationship to the material is closer to the causal model of quantum than classical mechanics. As Werner Heisenberg notes, quantum mechanics, whose elements cannot be directly observed, does not fit within a neat concept of "reality." Rather, taking an Aristotelian term, material objects can better be understood as "*potentia*" that do not necessarily follow usual "logical patterns" (Heisenberg 156). Classical mechanics describes certain relationships more or less well at relatively large dimensions. And yet, these descriptions should not be taken for reality but a particular "tendency toward reality" (Heisenberg 156). What Chesnutt suggests in the realm of ideology is that there is no ideological object to view except as it is approached from a position that constitutes it. In effect, objects are not there to be distorted but an initial distortion creates the effect of stable objects of ideology. *Potentia* have a different causal logic than is found in classical mechanics. Rather than necessary causes, all causes remain sufficient. Like the railroad itself, this weakly causal ideological system places limitations on what is possible. It regulates tendencies but does not command necessities.

More recent theoretical works by Slavoj Žižek and Kōjin Karatani have developed a similar concept of the parallax, coming from a position within modern critical theory rather than from Chesnutt's practical politics. What Chesnutt illuminates in this concept is its relation to technology as a means of socially regimenting parallax views. Karatani, in fact, uses technology to illustrate his theoretical point about "the

parallax" without fully investigating it. Karatani points to the unsettling effects of photography on people's relationship to their own images as an example of a "pronounced parallax" (Karatani 2). While the traditional analogy for philosophical introspection had been the mirror in which one identifies one's self as object, the introduction of photography complicates the easy assumption of a unified subject by presenting us with a new, uncanny view of ourselves. For a brief moment when someone "first" sees their photographic image, they are presented with themselves as an essentially "plural subject" (Karatani 2). Whereas Karatani's work remains within the strictly philosophical, treating the material reflection as a common metaphor for the self-reflection of philosophical thought, Chesnutt seems more willing to follow Lacan in claiming that "man thinks with his object" (*Four Fundamentals* 62). The sarcasm that Chesnutt employs in describing the dispute between the merchant and the newspaper points out the reification at work when its method of circulation, its ability to be both here and there, is improperly taken by its readers as an abstract "omniscience." It is through the parallax created by these material structures that the full significance of Chesnutt's politics can be understood as the technological regimentation of a present absence.

Although critics are fond of quoting a young Chesnutt's journal in which he proclaims his "high holy purpose" in writing novels that express an authentically black point of view, Chesnutt's concept of the relationship between politics and literature did change significantly during his life (qtd. in Andrews *xvii*). By the end of his career, Chesnutt to some degree regretted his decisions in writing *The Marrow of Tradition*.

When he accepted the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP for his contributions to the cause of equality in 1928, Chesnutt commented that he had "no apologies" to make for his seemingly disappointing career as his books were written a "generation too soon" (*Essays* 514). Both *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream* did not sell as well as he had hoped and Chesnutt never published another novel in his lifetime. He claimed in his speech that whenever he let his "feelings get the better of [him] and [became] dogmatic and argumentative" in his fiction, its "artistic quality suffered" (*Essays* 514). In that speech, Chesnutt seems to endorse the idea that he was somehow a failure as an artist. For an artist, however, who so radically questioned not only the superficial elements of prejudice, but the ideological basis for it, "failure" in terms of adherence to a dominant standard of success was almost inevitable.

Almost thirty years before his acceptance of the Spingarn Medal, Chesnutt described *The Marrow of Tradition* as a "purpose novel" (*Essays* 169). This purpose was to "throw light upon the vexed moral and sociological problems which grow out of the presence, in our Southern states, of two diverse races, in nearly equal numbers" (*Essays* 169). The metaphor of "throwing light" is apt here in that Chesnutt goes on to describe the true problem of racial division to be the concept of "tradition" which has no corporeal presence in itself. As I argued in my previous chapter, systems of signification such as tradition participate in the sub-stance of the historical development of discourse as it effects language. According to Chesnutt, his novel attempted to "picture, through the medium of narrative, the atmosphere in which these problems must be worked out – an atmosphere of which the dominant note is Tradition" (*Essays* 169). In a somewhat odd

evasion, Chesnutt never exactly defines the "problems" that arise from the "two diverse races." Instead, Chesnutt describes the "atmosphere" in which problems arise and are worked through. To describe Tradition as an atmosphere, in the context of his metaphor, gives it a structurally determinative role that has a dialectic movement in history. If, as in his term "the parallax," no single position can be taken with certainty of its ground, the metaphor of vision and light as illuminating truth changes its significance. As Lacan termed such relationships, tradition creates the effect of "seeing oneself" in the act of seeing but from another point of view. Because the self must be mediated through its object, the distortions of the atmosphere in which the *imago* of the self is created determine that representation to some degree. Tradition operates more like technology than a positive categorical statement. It structurally inflects rather than creates. Rather than vectors of light, tradition plays the role of an additional refraction of that light that creates the image that we take to be reality. Tradition, then, is not an object itself. It is material, however, in that it must be approached by way of its real effects on representations and their distortions. It is in *The Marrow of Tradition* where Chesnutt most extensively structures his novel to account for this concept of "tradition," and it is in that novel that the complex temporality of prejudice is most fully incorporated into the structure of his narrative.

Why Does the World Want to Murder a Child?

It is perhaps unsurprising that a novel structured around the absent sub-stance of Tradition should be so confusing a plot for critics. By the publication of *The Marrow of*

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Tradition in 1901, Chesnutt was at the height of his ambitions for a career in fiction writing. In Chesnutt's own words, the plot of the novel is fairly straightforward. It has "several threads of interest, the chief incidents being concerned with the fate of the child of a proud old family [, The Carterets,] related by an unacknowledged tie to the family of a colored doctor," Dr. Miller (*Essays* 169). The "father of the child leads a reaction political movement against the Negro, while the doctor is at the head of an enterprise for the education and uplift of his people" (*Essays* 169). Besides these main "threads," there is also "a crime, followed by a threatened lynching" and an "episode of injury and revenge, another of wrong and forgiveness" (*Essays* 169). Chesnutt's own description of the plot of his novel differs noticeably, however, from those given by his critics. In summarizing the novel, Chesnutt's critics rarely place the focus of the plot on Major Carteret's child, as Chesnutt does. More often, they focus on Major Carteret's attempt to win political advantage for his white supremacist movement, on Miller, the "colored doctor" that is attempting to "uplift" his people, or upon the interplay between the Miller family and the Carterets.[10]

Each of these acts of attention by critics, of course, is entirely reasonable as the structure of the novel, its weaving together of several threads that at times are related and at others are not, requires the reader to choose what he or she considers most important as his or her conscience dictates. At the same time it seems telling that Chesnutt and his

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[10] Critics William L. Andrews and Ryan Simmons both take the Carteret and Miller families together as a dialectic center of the novel. Matthew Wilson and Julia Lee understand Miller himself as either the "mouthpiece" for Chesnutt and therefore the novel as a whole or the consciousness through which the main themes of the novel work themselves out (Wilson 113). Dean McWilliams and Willie J. Harrell, on the other hand, find abstract foci for the novel in the contest between the "political" and the "family" plots or in "southern prejudice" taken as a homogenous whole (McWilliams 155; Harrell 27).

critics should so immediately diverge from one another, not only on what the novel is about, but also in what kind of abstract terms the novel should be discussed. Chesnutt's critics prefer to consider the novel in terms of either a literal or metaphoric topography. Many critics choose to find a particular character to attribute the ethical "center" of the plot and draw their map of event relative to that center in an attempt to find the authoritative voice, *le sujet supposé savoir*, which will be a correct place of judgment on the rest of the action. The hinterlands of the plot are then understandable to the degree that an organizing center makes use of them for didactic purposes that reinforce the values of a particular centralized institution. Miller's calm, bourgeois rationality and focus on the protection of property and family (which does, in fact, closely mimic the kind of approach Chesnutt often took to his own affairs), for example, inflects how we should read the values voiced by other, more revolutionarily-minded characters. Alternately, those who prefer a more literal topography make sense of the novel through its battle lines. Either the two families, who occupy different sections of the segregated town, or the two races taken as a wholes and are literally, topographically cordoned off from each other constitute the tensions of the plot of the novel. For Chesnutt, however, these topographies are less important than the Carteret child's "destiny." Rather than any topography that understands narrative conflict in the quasi-militaristic vocabulary of certain kinds of revolutionary politics, Chesnutt prefers the unfolding of a particular weakly causal problematic, more related to the mechanics of a particular institution's functioning or non-functioning than the topography of total relations. In other words, rather than the metaphoric relations between the workings of a town's political totality

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and the topographic, synchronic images we use to understand them, Chesnutt prefers the metonymic or diachronic - the town not as a static totality but as a dialectic function within a mutating totality.

The novel itself begins with the birth of the new Carteret child. After a difficult delivery, the narrator describes Major Carteret as breathing "a silent prayer of thanksgiving" for the new life, knowing "in advance that it will bear its Father's Name" (*MoT* 10, "Ideology" 176). "All nature" also rejoices at the birth of the child "in sympathy with the happiness at the fruition of this long-deferred hope, and to predict for this wonderful child a bright and glorious future" (*MoT* 10). The narrator describes the birth of the child as a manifold relation, not simply to the parents of that child, but to an anthropomorphized "nature" itself. At the same time, when focalized through Carteret, contingent relationships take on added meaning. "With the child's first cry a refreshing breeze from the distant ocean cooled the hot air of the chamber; the heavy odor of the magnolias, with its mortuary suggestiveness, gave place to the scent of rose and lilac and honeysuckle. The birds in the garden were singing lustily" (*MoT* 9-10). For Carteret, the material and the social are intertwined naturally. Carteret experiences the anthropomorphic pairing of natural and social development as unproblematic, as *for* himself. Carteret remains alienated from the nature that grounds his concept of patriarchal progression in that his own power is in the transmission of the "Father's Name" rather than this own being. Yet, Carteret experiences this alienation as *for him*. With this introduction to Major Carteret, we see Chesnutt replicating the machinations of dominant ideology outlined by Howells in my previous chapter as a kind of "mythic

thought" understood metaphorically as a kind of magic. The natural order and the human order are placed in parallel with the child already assumed to provide a racial continuity of the family name from a past and into the future. The social and the natural are, from this point of view, in "sympathy" with one another. Because it is a description of dominant ideology, however, this particular form of magic, the juxtaposition of two heterogeneous regimes of signification, is understood when focalized through Carteret as simply the way things are in a kind of natural magic.

In a move that Chesnutt will repeat in the novel, however, chapters that are focalized around Major Carteret, such as the first, will widen their scope at the very end to establish a parallax position. The primary rhetorical mode in which Chesnutt describes parallax in his novel is litotes. In this case, the litotic parallax is established through a servant whose job requires her to be in close contact with the Major. With the birth of the child, the narrator adds an ironic view from Mammy Jane, the child's black nurse who has been with the family for decades. Unlike the Major, Jane was "not entirely at ease concerning the child" (*MoT* 10). Mammy Jane discovers under the child's ear

> a small mole, which led her to fear that the child was born for bad luck. Had the
> baby been black, or yellow, or poor-white, Jane would unhesitatingly have
> named, as his ultimate fate, a not uncommon form of taking off, usually resultant
> upon the infraction of certain laws, or, in these swift modern days, upon too
> violent a departure from established social customs. It was manifestly impossible
> that a child of such high quality as the grandson of her old mistress should die by

judicial strangulation; but nevertheless the warning was a serious thing, and not to

be lightly disregarded. (*MoT* 10).

With the narrator's shift in focalization comes a shift in the "suggestiveness" of nature's

anthropomorphic relation to socially produced meaning. Instead of the reciprocity that

assumes nature to mirror the progress of patrilineal families, for Mammy Jane the mole

under the child's ear becomes a stigma or an "*anamorphosis*," in Lacan's sense of the

term, the distortion that traps the desiring gaze of the viewer (*Four Fundamentals* 92).

While nothing about the future of the child has been decided, the contours of any possible

decision are structurally present before there is even an object to contour. In effect, the

child has become the bearer of the "lethal factor," the impossible choice, of the white

supremacist assumptions of historical movement. The ultimate horizon of the politics into

which the child is born requires particular kinds of symbolic deaths, in this case the

possibility of "judicial strangulation" or the scent of magnolias. The baby, therefore, as a

signifier metonymically displaced onto the mole for Jane, refracts meaning for both

Carteret and Jane depending on their point of view. In this case, the baby is itself

Chesnutt's parallax, or the object that inhabits the gap within possible perspectives.

Although Jane feels it unwise to warn her employers of the danger the mole

represents, she does go so far as to take a vial of water the child had been washed in to a

conjure woman in the neighborhood, replacing it under the child's pillow as a precaution.

The resolution of the chapter, in an even more explicitly ironic mode, reinterprets

Carteret's narrative as a kind of "development," as Kenneth Burke would put it, in which

several perspectives are taken together, simultaneously ("Four Master Tropes" 512).

Additionally, "none of the 'sub-perspectives' can be treated as either precisely right or precisely wrong" ("Four" 512). Rather, irony charts the "return" of a term within the dialectic movement as its opposite ("Four" 517). The narrative juxtaposition of the two focalizations, the two vantage points, creates a parallax position that "refracts" meaning in two senses taken together. The mole redirects certain meanings (the modern usage as with the refraction of light) through its rhetorical accommodation of diametrically opposed meanings (its obscure usage) (OED). As a newborn, the child holds meaning for both Jane and Carteret. Yet, there can be no stable meaning about the child's future from these positions on the child as a "lethal factor," simply being a material space for adult speculation. As a carrier of social meaning, marked from birth, the child, ironically, in being born returns as not yet having been killed. From within racial logic made mobile by the railway, to choose life for the child is to choose to be not yet dead enough. Litotes describes the particular conceptual structure Chesnutt creates with his peculiar mode of sarcasm.

That the metonymic substitution of the child and his mole should occur within the competing discourses of magic is unsurprising given the community in which he is born. The "mythic thought" of Major Carteret understands magic to be simply a metaphor for the historical certainty of the linear progression of a racial purity that secures his own power. Mammy Jane's "conjure" magic, however, is a more flexible understanding of systems of signification in that it operates through litotes, through the parallax, rather than Major Carteret's parallelisms. Frederick Douglass in 1881 had already pointed out the similarities between racism along the "color-line" and the supernatural. He described

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race prejudice as a "moral disorder, which creates conditions necessary to its own existence, and fortifies itself by refusing all contradiction. It paints a hateful picture, and distorts the features of the fancied original to suit the portrait" (Douglass 567). As a result, people who believe in the veracity of the portrait are similar to "those who believe in the visibility of ghosts" (Douglass 567). Douglass points out, recast in Lacanian terms, the power of race as a material signifier, a present absence or "ghost," which structures the distribution of terms (*le* facteur *létal* – the distribution of its impossible choices) in American racial discourse. Douglass goes so far as to say that although some freedmen had gained some independence by 1881, he has "ceased to be the slave of an individual," the freedman remains "the slave of society" (Douglass 568). It is this weak causality of racial thinking that is in an asymptotic sense "material," that Chesnutt dramatizes in *The Marrow of Tradition*. As a material object, the mole is insignificant. As a pure signifier, however, the mole operates through litotes, creating a parallax view between two forms of magic, which are in turn racialized modes of viewing the juxtapositions of heterogeneous systems of signification.

Ultimately, in fact, Jane's worries are proven correct in a certain sense. In the first third of the novel, the young Carteret child nearly loses his life several times by almost falling out of a window, choking on a small rattle, or being smothered by the family cat. Despite no permanent harm coming to the child, as the novel progresses, even the child's mother falls "prey to the most agonizing apprehensions" about her child (*MoT* 46). When Mrs. Carteret eventually finds one of Jane's conjure items in the child's bedroom, her "first impulse was to throw the bag into the fire, but on second thoughts she let it remain.

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To remove it would give unnecessary pain to the old nurse. Of course these old negro superstitions were absurd, - but if the charm did no good, at least it would do no harm" (*MoT* 108). In this example of litotes in which doing good and doing no harm are not entirely equivalent options, the mother's moment of hesitation is a hesitation over two different parallax views on the lethal factor of the child, those of Major Carteret's natural magic that structures a white supremacist history and the conjure that produces Chesnutt's parallax view. In effect, conjure actually occurs within the *diegesis* to the degree that the prejudicial thinking embedded in language structures the discourse of its characters. Conjure here operates through a weak causality structured by litotes, forming parallax positions. The immaterial structures of prejudicial discourses produce actual effects through the mother's actions whose basis is in the gap of a series of metonymies beginning with the mole and continued through Mammy Jane's conjure objects. Conjure, then, describes the weak causality of historical movement in opposition to the direct causality assumed by Major Carteret's natural magic that underpins the white supremacist understanding of unproblematic, linear history.

Chesnutt, in fact, develops the theme of "magic" as a way of structuring perspectives on causality to a greater extent toward the end of the novel regarding social structures as a whole rather than particular political actors. Magic returns in the final scenes of the novel in a more threatening because less obvious form. The culmination of Major Carteret's efforts to consolidate political control of the town for whites is a "riot" that takes up the last chapters of the novel. In the morning of the riot, at "three o'clock sharp the streets were filled, as if by magic, with armed white men" (*MoT* 274). The

crowd, like the mob in *The Colonel's Dream*, is not described as an unruly, desiring *id*.

Rather, the agency of the scene operates through the repetition compulsion of

technological logic. The crowd is present in that it operates and creates effects but exists

nowhere in particular – it occurs "as if by magic." On that morning, "the negroes" in the

aggregate "had noted, with uneasy curiosity, that the stores and places of business . . .

were unduly late in opening" (*MoT* 274). Later, "every passing colored man was ordered,

by the first white man he met, to throw up his hands . . . When he met with another group

of white men the scene was repeated" (*MoT* 274). The crowd is not that of Benjamin's

flâneur within the American context. Rather than an inchoate mass, tradition operates as

a regulating function to legitimize an almost bureaucratic adherence to a repetitive,

regulatory process. The time of prejudice is never exactly present because it is never an

event within a linear causal structure. Rather, it is a-temporal because it is iterative within

the logic of spaces of relative security that are unevenly distributed along racial lines.

Earlier in the novel, the principles that would be put into action at the end are

articulated during a meeting of the white supremacist elements of the town. McBane,

Carteret, and General Belmont, the leaders of the explicitly white supremacist movement,

are oddly explicit about these terms. As the General puts it, implicitly invoking the

language of Max Nordau, they "cannot carry on politics in these degenerate times without

a certain amount of diplomacy" (*MoT* 81). In "the good old days" before the war, white

citizens could command blacks as they would "convicts" (*MoT* 81). In this "modern age,"

however, they "must profess a decent regard for the opinions of even that misguided

portion of mankind which may not agree with us. This is the age of crowds, and we must

have the crowd with us" (*MoT* 81). To have the "crowd with us" however, is not only a matter of rhetoric but of the control of political space (which is to say all space in the era of the total train system) through technological means. In effect, the "riot" comes into being through the combination of technologized space that is available for iterative, managerial control and the tradition that modulates the visible for racial division. The riot only happens after it has happened and will continue to happen as long as the conditions for the effect are generally assumed.

The odd relationship between technology as a dominant system of relationships that mediate the social and the material is stated explicitly at a seemingly insignificant yet decisive moment in the text. In response to a potential lynching in the middle of the novel, one of the more revolutionarily-minded black citizens of the town, Josh Green, at one point suggests that the black citizens "kin fight, ef [they] haf ter" to save the man whose life is in danger (*MoT* 191). Dr. Miller responds, however, that it would be inadvisable to do so as messages "would at once be sent to every town and country in the neighborhood. White men from all over the state, armed to the teeth, would at the slightest word pour into the town on every railroad train, and extras would be run for their benefit" (*MoT* 191). In this exchange, the relationship between pre-judicial politics, technology, and time is brought fully into conjunction. The technological system of the railroad does not need to actually bring mobs of white men to kill in order to maintain dominant power relations. The mere presence of the railway makes accessible certain actions that, in turn, support a particular ideology of predictive action. The circulation of the railroad, then, with its acceleration of goods and customers effectively limits actions

of others through its potential to create crowds in Chesnutt's sense, crowds whose operation is not random but controlled through tradition. Because of the railroad, crowds functionally exist everywhere in that they can potentially exist anywhere.

Several critics of Chesnutt have sought to illuminate the political significance of the riot that takes up the final chapters of the novel by attempting to trace its real, historical model. The most obvious candidate, and the one the Chesnutt explicitly mentioned as influencing the novel, is the "riot" that took place in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898. Linda Beleau and Ed Cameron have argued that Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* attempts to "represent the African American perspective" on that real event in a fictional mode (Beleau and Cameron 7). Fictional works, in this argument, serve to "recontextualize" journalistic accounts in order to supplement the racial "blindness" of reporters whose bias affects their narration of history (Beleau and Cameron 7). Critic Gordon Fraser has made the case, however, that Chesnutt's novel diverges significantly from the historic records about Wilmington. In order to "synthesize the dyadic critical readings [*The Marrow of Tradition*] engenders" one must also take into account details from the New Orleans race riot of 1900 (Fraser 19). Fraser does not, however, explain how one could "synthesize" a "dyadic" reading by pointing out which historical precedent might "most" prefigure a literary one, confusing categorical for statistical reasoning (Fraser 19). As Gilles Deleuze points out, "repetition is not generality" (*Difference and Repetition* 1). That something can be said to repeat does not grant it the status of the transcendental. That details from a historical account have close analogues in a work of fiction, even at the admission of the author, does not make that

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repetition significant as a generalization. Chesnutt's use of parallax positions to structure the novel, in fact, lead us away from the impulse to establish a "true" historical connection in favor of the structural links created by technological systems. Through the repetition of power relationships, the technological system gives the grounds for the appearance of a transcendental principle of history to the white supremacists. Because the technological system allows for the rapid circulation of people, the presence of the white mob must be taken into account in each political decision by the black citizens of the town. Again, although absent, the effect of the railroad is to make the potential for a mob quasi-present at all times under certain weakly causal circumstances. What must be taken into account in understanding the novel's relationship to history is not simply all the riots that did, in fact, occur, but also all the riots that did not occur.

The particular moment of decision Dr. Miller and Josh Green find themselves in is also structured through the technological by a calculation that requires a hesitation. Causes and effects within such a technological system can no longer practically be limited to the simple application of abstract principles to a particular case. Rather than being an "assimilationist," Dr. Miller's point is not that the lynching should not be stopped, but that stopping it would come at a cost higher than the reward given the potential existence of white mobs anywhere. Far from being an agent of progress in any sense other than the economic, then, the railroad effectively creates a different kind of hesitation in political calculation. The white citizens of the town, because the railroad supports the concept of progress that benefits them, are able to pretend as if a classic sense of subjectivity and political action still exists. For a white citizen of the town

lynching was "as a rule, unjustifiable," yet that citizen maintains that "there were exceptions to all rules, - that laws were made, after all, to express the will of the people in regard to the ordinary administration of justice, but that in an emergency the sovereign people might assert itself and take the law into its own hands, - the creature was not greater than the creator" (*MoT* 193). In this neat evasion of the point through the misapplication of an anthropomorphism, any and all actions become permissible when they are grounded by a concept of "the people" that is supported by a white supremacist concept of linear, progressive history.

The implicit question, then, of political action from within the technological system looks fairly bleak. It is unsurprising to some extent that one of the most repeated lines describing *The Marrow of Tradition* is that of William Dean Howells when reviewing the novel on its release. Howells considered the novel too "bitter" in its political outlook, an assessment that has been repeated by critics ever since, including Chesnutt himself. If, however, this novel is "bitter," of what does that bitterness consist? For Howells, there is "no reason it should not be so, if wrong is to be repaid with hate, and yet it would be better if it were not bitter" ("Counter-current" 882). Chesnutt, in his novel, became "inartistic" to the degree that he played "the advocate" for a particular group ("Counter-current" 882). Even Howells whose assessment of "bitterness" has been over-simplified through the years of critical citations to a less complicated opinion of the novel than is really the case, cannot escape the litotic logic that Chesnutt uses in the novel. There is "no reason it should not be" bitter, yet, from within the parallax, Howells simply asserts arbitrarily that is should not be so.

Unlike Howells, whose arbitrary denial of the parallax implicitly takes as its basis the dominant ideology of history, the novel itself importantly ends on an ambiguity. But, as is fitting for a novel riddled with parallaxes, the terms of that ambiguity are important and necessarily arise from the manner in which racial division and technological thinking have been developed in the novel. In the course of the riot that takes up the last chapters of the novel, the Carteret child, once again, is put in danger. Rather than giving an obvious melodramatic ending in which the Cartets and the Millers transcend their racial divide and save the child, the novel gives somewhat more ambiguous ending, although one suggestive of that melodramatic option. The final moments of the novel are taken up with a question and a response between Dr. Miller and another doctor. Miller asks if the Carteret child "is still alive" (*MoT* 329). In response, Dr. Evans replies: "Yes, thank God . . . but nearly gone . . . There's time enough, but none to spare" (*MoT* 329). In *The Colonel's Dream*, Major French's sickly child is killed by the disaster structurally created by the railroad. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, however, the Carteret child remains alive "enough," despite the constant threat of disaster. The lives of these children are metonymic for the patrilineal guarantee for the forward motion of history, yet, within the technological system that history's linearity is precarious at best. From within the parallax, the moment of hesitation constitutes the present from which alternate histories, and perhaps non-linear histories such as those Henry Adams attempted become possible.

Chapter 3:

The Empire of Coal: Henry Adams and Progress without Sequence

In the course of the nineteenth century, as the bourgeoisie consolidated its positions of power, the concept of progress would increasingly have forfeited the critical functions it originally possessed. (In this process, the doctrine of natural selection had a decisive role to play: it popularized the notion that progress was automatic. The extension of the concept of progress to the whole of human activity was furthered as a result.)
  Walter Benjamin, <u>The Arcades Project</u> N11a, 1

Ainsi qu'on le dit de certain carrières, l'histoire mène à tout, mais à condition d'en sortir.
  Claude Lévi-Strauss <u>*La pensée sauvage*</u>. (1962)

At past fifty, Adams solemnly and painfully learned to ride the bicycle.
  Henry Adams, <u>The Education of Henry Adams</u> (1918)

<u>The Story of an Absence</u>

  By the first decade of the twentieth century, like William Dean Howells with whom he had been a member of "The Club" of Boston cultural and intellectual elites in the 1870s, Henry Adams had become disenchanted with American society. The Western world as a whole had "snapped" its "continuity" somewhere around 1900, he claimed in his *Education of Henry Adams* (*Education* 433). In his romanticized version of the movement of history, the West at the time of the First Crusade "was a unity . . . in thought, will, and object" (*Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* 35). By the twentieth century, however, it had become a society of "multiplicity," as he put it in the subtitle to his own *Education*. Adams's claim recalls other, similar statements by artists and intellectuals who would come to be known as Modernists. Unlike Virginia Woolf's famous version of the claim that "in or about December, 1910, human character changed," however, Adams was more circumspect about restricting the claim to the sphere of "all human relations – those between masters and servants, husbands and

wives, children and parents" (Woolf 22). The human itself, what distinguished the thinking, speaking animal from the rest of inchoate nature, was in question for Adams. He, more quickly than most of his contemporaries, located the break in humanity's concept of itself within nature in the reorganization of thought brought about by new technologies. The difference between Woolf's and Adams's verbs in describing the modern situation is, in fact, decisive. When he claimed that civilization had "snapped" he was being very nearly literal.

As we have seen in previous chapters, American progressive ideology in the late Nineteenth Century often assumed social and economic growth to be a necessary corollary to scientific certainty and increasing technological complexity, an assumption not necessarily questioned by Woolf's formulation of the situation. Many people assumed, for a variety of reasons which became overdetermined in time, that it was impossible for "society," conceived as a quasi-biological whole encompassing all human activities whose development can only be linear, to go both forward and backward. As Henry Adams's brother, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., put it in 1869, gravitation "is the rule, and centralization the natural consequence, in society no less than in physics. Physically, morally, intellectually, in population, wealth, and intelligence, all things tend to concentration. One singular illustration of this law is almost entirely the growth of this century" ("A Chapter of Erie" 12). In other words, many Americans assumed that that linear, historical sequence follows universal principles which grounded its development *a priori*. On the face of it, this seems intelligible enough in that it has a clear geometry to it which takes all potential claims about reality to function along the lines of classical

mechanics. Such geometries become problematic, however, when dealing with ideology, whose structuring functions are often much more indirect. After the economic crash of 1893 which nearly ruined his family's fortune, Henry Adams moved from simply questioning why Americans took progress to be a self-evident truth, to actively arguing against the hasty equivalence between the increasing complexity of a scientific and technological system that underpinned capitalism and the social development of the humans that used that system. Although he did not always have the vocabulary to articulate it, for Adams such an equivalence always hid the degree to which technology and even science itself were also beholden to ideological formations as an activity done by humans within real, historical institutions despite their presumed status as entirely disinterested. As his career developed, he attempted to come to terms with the new "multiplicity" in its specificities.

This chapter will argue that Henry Adams's thought developed along with the ideological relationship between American progressivism and technological systems. Most importantly, Adams was particularly sensitive to the rise and ossification of the ideological implications of the railway for social thought. These implications carried on after the railway itself began to recede from the forefront of political struggle after the nineteenth century. For Adams, the ossification of the railway system as an ideological framework led to what he called the global "empire of coal." This was not an empire of a central government over other, conquered nations, but rather an empire of a set of conceptual relations established by the total train system that created its own subjects to the degree that they were within the reach of the combination of its technologies that

organized space and abstract capitalist circulation within that space. Coal, the fuel for the railway, became in effect the coin of the realm which served as the entrance fee for its subjects to participate in the game as a player rather than serving as a cost of playing. Although this empire created the impression of linear development in that it was growing in speed and scope, it did so at the cost of traditional historical causality which was often obscured behind the spectacular images of capitalist development – its novel machines, massive wealth, and equally massive economic crises. Once the railway had filled political space and ideologically ossified a particular set of articulations, its logic became dominant for the maintenance of global capitalism.

The "empire of coal" signified the unification of the world as a technological and capitalist system for Adams but, at the same time, historically cut it off from any causal continuity with the past except as a rhetorical gesture to be activated in the name of a nationalism that rallied populations as a local tactic to secure a better bargaining position in the global game of exchanges. What the empire gained in the extension of space within which its endless exchanges occurred at an accelerating rate, it lost in a causal relation to what had come before it. Although the railway was a product of Western society, for Adams, it brought out a set of contradictions in Western thought about progress that could no longer be tenably held without embarrassment to everyone involved. These contradictions had been there from the very beginning but required the particular, historically contingent ideological formulation of the railway to bring them to a point of "snapping" at the end of the nineteenth century.

From Adams's first two novels and his early journalistic work I will demonstrate

the process by which Adams became disenchanted with the progressivist assumption of

linear historical development that technologies such as the railway seemed to support.

Rather than a continuation of the Enlightenment tradition Adams felt himself beholden

to, the railway, although created by that tradition, brought out contradictions in American

assumptions of historical development that set that tradition at odds with itself in a kind

of historical impasse that Adams could no longer accept after the 1880s. Turning to

specific historical events surrounding the development of the railway system and its

technologies, I argue that the railway offered new concepts of articulation that were both

the result of bourgeois ideas of sequence but exceeded them in important ways to make

the abstraction of causal sequence from technological certainty to human history

impossible for Adams. By initially limiting spatial relations to accommodate for the

railway, containing populations along its own lines, new political formations ossified as a

result. Finally, turning to his later works, the *Education*, his *Letter to American Teachers

of History*, and his *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres¸* Adams began to develop a new

variation on the concept of the modern subject that was formed by this spatial

containment and incorporated the technological into its own operations. At the same time,

this new concept of the subject had the effect of creating a new model of racial thinking.

In Adams's case, Jews rather than African-Americans would serve as a model for a

racialized Other in the West. After the consolidation of the "empire of coal," Western

society as a whole could be treated as an organism at a higher level of abstraction, open

to the metaphor of biological determinism in a more expansive sense that compensated

for its failure to describe differences between individuals. Racism, therefore, rather than a biological difference, became a spatial difference, marked by who was or was not contained within the "ghetto," the space geographically within but conceptually outside of capitalist circulation.

In his early career, roughly from his return from England to the United States in 1868 where he had been secretary to his father who had served as ambassador for the United States during the Civil War to the upheaval in his personal life most notably brought about by the suicide of his wife in 1885, Henry Adams had largely followed his contemporaries in his assumptions of the necessarily linear nature of historical progress. The United States government had been a political space where elected officials met as bearers of "personal and political credit" placed in them by the "common interest" of those they represented, conceived of as a simple aggregate of individual interests ("The Legal-tender Act" 303-4). "Common interest" guaranteed an approximation of a community's collective will, more or less agreed upon between the individuals of the nation. The public, according to Adams "has so thoroughly adopted the idea that it is itself the responsible governing power, and its representatives only delegates to enroll its orders, that the healthy process of criticising [*sic*] a policy once adopted seems to it almost an attack on its own authority" ("Legal-tender" 304). In other words, the American public had come to have the idea of government both ways. It was a mediating institution that did not mediate but directly expressed the will it represented. Agreement could be cultivated and guided into a progressive future which could, in turn, more perfectly reflect that common interest. Institutions such as the United States government

were convenient fictions that represented the reality of individual interests taken together in an abstract "common interest" for the sake of efficiency in practical instances of decision-making. For a young Adams, it was almost an inevitability that he would personally aid in this progress by going to Harvard College and afterwards entering the federal government in some capacity. "For generation after generation, Adamses . . . had gone to Harvard College, and although none of them, as far as known, had ever done any good there, or thought himself the better for it, custom, social ties, and, above all, economy, kept each generation in the track" (*Education* 56). Adams, in defiance of tradition, became increasingly suspicious of the ability of the metaphorical railroad "track" he had been on to guarantee general, social progress in the name of a self-evident "common interest," or, indeed, the unified Enlightenment subject it was meant to aggregate.

Already in 1869, just a year after his return to the United States, in an early journalistic effort, Adams was beginning to employ the figure of the machine to describe the ways in which institutions did not necessarily develop as functional analogies of the aggregate common interest. Instead, he used that figure to describe places were mechanisms for the circulation of an abstract power developed quasi-autonomously from clear human intention. The congressional session of that year was, according to Adams, a "witch's cauldron . . . of corruption," which also resembled a "machine" that "groans and labors under the burden" of its task ("The Session" 611). And yet, a young Adams still maintained that the average American could at least learn a "lesson" by hypothetically visiting Washington to witness the "passage . . . of some little bill, interesting only to

himself, and perhaps having 'a little money in it'" and the inevitable corruption and inefficiency that went along with the effort ("The Session" 610). Although the vocabulary of the autonomous machine was already in his work in a nascent form in the 1860s, Adams at that point retained his faith that humans could rationally overcome these obstacles in a linear development of the powers of the American people to best govern themselves. As technological systems, and most importantly for Adams the railway system, became a dominant rather than emergent social phenomenon in the last decades of the 19th Century, he put an increasing emphasis on the ways in which assumptions of natural historical sequence became not only difficult but impossible for anyone attempting to understand the development of American society. The "track" that Adamses had been on for generations might not, in other words, follow a clear progressive line into a better future.

Henry Adams's early journalism in the 1870s, mainly written in conjunction with his brother Charles, sought to promote reform policies to prevent the corruption surrounding the expansion of the railway system in the United States. Reform, in their minds, involved the effective management of progress by an intellectual and cultural elite. Those who proved worthy of the task would be elevated into that rarified sphere while those who were unequal to it were shunted back into the "people." By bringing progress under the control of rational democratic principles the harmful effects of irrational capitalist expansion and destructive competition between the robber-barons could be largely mitigated to an ever increasing degree. Adams would come in the second half of his career, however, to abandon his previous faith in this kind of reform, in his

more depressed moments describing himself in terms of a new "philosophy of conservative anarchy" (*Education* 392). Even this reactionary nihilism, however, eventually proved untenable for a world that did, it seemed, have the organizing "stamp" of the railway, but which did not function along traditional lines (*Education* 393). Many critics see in Adams's work a decisive difference between his early novels and his later histories. The novels, written in the 1880s, were intellectual diversions in a purely Victorian form for Adams while he wrote his more serious histories of the administrations of Jefferson and Madison. The economic and political crises of the late nineteenth century led Adams in the twentieth, however, to theorize and put into prose non-sequential experiments in historical form in an attempt to represent an economy of abstract forces describing technological systems that were by then fully dominant aspects of American society. And yet, this reading of Adams's intellectual trajectory may place too much unexplained confidence in typically "modernist" literary tropes to demarcate the serious from the non-serious in literature. Although Henry Adams explicitly claimed to William James (though the degree to which Adams was simply attempting to flatter the James family is open to speculation) that his later works attempted something like the experiments of Henry James, I argue that the novels are an important step in Adams's trajectory and should not be dismissed by critics simply for not being Henry James.

Despite Adams's reputation as a representative American Modernist on the basis of his experimental histories, *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* and *The Education of Henry Adams*, both published in the early twentieth century, it seems surprising that critics would consider him at the same time so inept at the representative modernist

genre, the novel. Although since the 1980s, some critics have attempted to recuperate his "under-appreciated" and "brilliant but underrated" early novels, the prevailing sentiment has been that Adams was an inartistic novelist whose "failure" is primarily interesting to the degree that it illustrates "the dangers which his better work overcomes" (*Mind and Art* 89, MacFarlane vii, Scheiber 353). In one critic's summary, the novel as a genre has "always been modern – always concerned mainly with contemporary life, as the name suggests," adding that the novel's ability to represent a polyphonic "formal difference" allows it to respond to a new "world of change," of "trauma, disaster, conflict, and war" (Matz 1, 7, 8). Adams's novels, for many critics, did not have the interest in literary form that expressed this new "world of change," creating only indifferently interesting novels. Putting aside the purely aesthetic question of whether or not these Modernist tropes are better or more authentic art than others, I argue that there is more continuity in Adams's work than many critics admit, in the sense that his later, experimental works attempt to represent the new modes of articulation that compensated for the problems at the level of narrative with which he dealt in his early novels. These narrative problems, in turn, were precisely those brought about by the railway's confusion of causality that American culture more generally was attempting to reconcile. Both the formally traditional novels and the later, experimental histories equally deal with a world of "change" but importantly conceive of that change in different ways that change along with Adams's understanding of how society functions.

His two novels, the anonymous *Democracy* and pseudonymous *Esther*, both published in the 1880s, are essentially the same novel but cast in different sub-sets of

American society. Both novels represent an individual attempting to comprehend the veiled prime motor that they assume to structure the rules for their particular sub-set. For *Democracy* the abstract social energy of "common interests" functions as a veiled prime motor for specific political actions whereas the Christian God does so with personal decisions in the case of *Esther*. Whereas William Dean Howells simply intuited the connection between American Christian Millennialism and American bourgeois progressivism as equivalent guarantors of historical movement, Adams brought the weight of his impressive knowledge of both the Medieval Christian tradition and modern American politics to bear in his attempts to describe those traditions and their particular problematics. The veiled prime motor, an image Adams borrowed from Thomas Aquinas but also applied to the modern forces of capitalist society, was particularly attractive to Adams as a thought-object. As a model for action at a distance, the motor seemed to account for those aspects of American society that did not obviously stem from a concept of individual human will. At the same time, this model of action at a distance that is hidden from but controls the individual became a conceptual impasse for Adams when he attempted to use it to describe any kind of willed progressivism. The more modern technological systems were imbricated into Capitalism in the name of progressivism, the more it became impossible for Adams to think actively from within the logic of American progressivism itself.

In each of Adams's novels, a free-thinking young woman is inducted into a social system that produces and distributes abstract power, the intrigues of Washington politics or the intrigues of New York Christian society, respectively. Each woman is given the

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choice between two overdetermined marriage options, with one suitor representing the chaos of individual will and the other the order of strict determinism. Both women ultimately choose neither suitor, finding both to be unpalatable for reasons that importantly shift from the first to the second novel. As with Aquinas's famous watchmaker God, the veiled prime motors in Adams's novels stand outside of society which they structure through their specific principles of articulation. To understand the society that one is in, for Adams in his early years, one must understand the principles of its external motor that to a variable degree controls human action at a distance. These motors cannot be directly observed but only deduced from the articulations within history that the motor has determined in advance. Historical progress, the progress towards Judgment Day or a bourgeois Utopia, might be mysterious in its specific features from within its movement but, at a higher level of abstraction, was guaranteed by the motor that was outside of that historical movement.

In their narrative form, each novel is, in fact, structured in a way that strangely resembles the classic mystery novel, though they predate the publication of Conan Doyle's first Holmes stories by several years. Between the narratives of the protagonists and their attempts to understand an a-historical, structuring motor, both stories "superimpose" two temporal schemes in a single narrative as Tzvetan Todorov has argued about the traditional mystery story, quoting George Burton (Todorov 44). For a traditional mystery narrative the first story is the "story of an absence," the crime itself whose inaccessibility is a prerequisite for the telling of the story of the crime's detection (Todorov 46). The second, "just as excessive" narrative, that of the detective, "serves

only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime" (Todorov 46). In the traditional mystery story, the two temporalities are two sequences of events, those of the crime and its later detection. Put in Bakhtin's terms, the typical mystery story has a chimeric chronotope. The sequence of events in the narrative serve only as an index of another, already completed chronotope. For Adams's metaphysical mystery stories, however, the protagonists attempt to reconstruct the a-temporal principles of articulation already at work in the narrative of the protagonist. The narrative does not attempt to reconstruct a previous time-space, but rather the timeless principles that make the protagonist's story's chronotope certain for its own characters. Adams's protagonists continually put off decisions until they can be certain of the correctness of the tropes of the narrative they are in. If every "work of art is an uncommitted crime," for Adams's first two novels this is because the revelation of the prime motor never becomes a present, unmediated, or certain ground upon which to base decisions about the future (Adorno 111). In each case, the presence of either a truly representative government or God can only be metaphorically represented as a machine whose motor is essentially veiled and can only be arbitrarily assumed through the mechanistic effects it is assumed to govern.

Democracy tells the story of Madeline Lee, a wealthy New York widow who, "tortured by ennui" in discovering that "so much culture should lead to nothing – nothing," moves from New York City to Washington D.C. (Democracy 3). In doing so, she hoped to "see with her own eyes the action of primary forces; to touch with her own hand the massive machinery of society; to measure with her own mind the capacity of the

motive power" (*Democracy* 7). By juxtaposition, Mrs. Lee hopes to discover the "primary force" that "leads" society in Washington D.C. in compensation for the emptiness of New York culture, which Mrs. Lee understood as simply an effect of an absent power. In fleeing from one city to the other, she was "bent upon getting to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government" (*Democracy* 7). The terms of the "great American mystery," here, are set on the one hand by a progression of not entirely metaphorical, empiricist verbs and on the other by a set of increasingly specific nouns. The parallelism of the construction is, in fact, a conceptual progression that betrays a mechanistic logic which collapses the metaphor of society and a machine. Mrs. Lee takes the revelation of the mystery of democracy to be a matter of "seeing," "touching," and "measuring" the particular means by which American democracy objectifies "primary forces" that operate "the massive machinery of society" by way of "motive power." The kind of articulation Mrs. Lee expects in Washington is essentially technological in its mediation of abstract energy and human political ends by way of the principles of the machine. The difficulty of the initial description of the mystery is, in fact, that the metaphor by which Mrs. Lee understands the abstraction of American government is not metaphorical enough.

Mrs. Lee understands the "motive power" that emanates from "primary forces" to be not only represented but empirically verifiable in its sensory effects through the "machinery of society." The anthropomorphism of society as a machine begins to collapse, however, and Mrs. Lee assumes the procedures of empirically understanding a machine actually to apply to society itself. There is, therefore, already in Adams's first

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novel a certain anxiety to the anthropomorphism of society as a machine. Although in this case it remains for the most part a simple analogy to explain an abstraction in concrete terms, the terms of the concrete half of the analogy already have a way of invading the more abstract half in Adams's thinking. As Jacques Lacan points out, however, this invasion is not entirely surprising. When Mrs. Lee assumes these "primary forces" that shape both material and social articulations in the world to be essentially empirical some such equivocation will always occur. Whereas Mrs. Lee takes the world to communicate its meaning based on *a priori* principles of the synthesis of perceptions, a synthesis whose terms are set in advance by the veiled prime motor, Lacan argues that for the production of meaning in language the "*sensorium* is indifferent in the production of a signifying chain" (*Écrits* 447). Rather, the signifying chain, "imposes itself, by itself, on the subject" and "takes on, as such, a reality proportionate to the time" with "its own structure, qua signifier" which "is distributive as a rule – that is, it has several voices and thus renders equivocal the supposedly unifying *percipiens*" (*Écrits* 447). The reality that Mrs. Lee takes to be the work of a single, unfolding principle, in other words, can only be understood as such through a relationship to reality through a language which is initially essentially "distributive" rather than synthetic. Any possible synthesis can only occur from an initial distribution of terms in language to synthesize. Put another way, Adams, by way of an intuition, half-formulated the "parallax view" that Charles W. Chesnutt began to identify in American politics two decades later. Although Mrs. Lee may think of herself as a particularly alienated individual who hopes to understand her world through the measurement of its forces, Lacan points out that the very terms of that desire, created

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from the split instituted by the signifier, have themselves been made to measure by the concepts Mrs. Lee employs to understand them. To do an injustice to La Rochefoucauld, in other words, we would not wonder where the power of democracy comes from had we not first heard it talked about. The vocabulary of technology that gives the sense of certainty, rather than objectively describing empirical effects, is "proportionate to the time," which is to say historically contingent, as a means of producing social truth.

Because the ultimate source of energy the prime motor represents is essentially veiled, essentially absent for direct sensory experience, the terms of history's articulacy are uncertain for Adams's protagonists and can only be understood in an act of revelation of the whole that never arrives in full. The action of each novel consists of the repeated suspension of a decision of whom to marry in anticipation of a revelation of the prime motor that will, in turn, guarantee the mechanism and set the terms for the correct choice of attachment. There is, in fact, a series of partially revelatory moments in each novel. What is partially revealed, however, is the essential absence of those prime motors to immediate human understanding of the sub-stance of their worlds. Although he did not have a precise vocabulary to describe it, Adams comes to implicitly understand the veiled prime motor as a signifier in Lacan's sense, an absent presence that dialectically structures concepts of reality from within its own material history. The signifier presented itself as a problem for an assumed linear history, grounded in *a priori* principles, and the American progressivism that assumption supported. For Mrs. Lee, moments in which politics should present new options that demonstrate the progression of history often reveal the opposite. Nothing has changed. The sovereign signifier remains within history

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despite the contingent changing of its guard. In his early novels, Adams attempted to retain the features of the idealist veiled prime motor but reaches an impasse when he is unable to reconcile his concept of history with the dialectic movement of the signifier which is not outside of history's own movement. The machine, as a metaphor that anthropomorphically links material reality with *a priori* scientific certainties initially attempts to ground reality in certainty but slowly reveals itself to be just as historical as anything else to Adams throughout his career.

Through the rest of the novel, Mrs. Lee attempts to understand the anxious anthropomorphism at work in the metaphor of democratic society as a machine that allows for the possibility of understanding the essential principles of an a-historic prime motor. While watching the investiture of a new President of the United States soon after her arrival in Washington, for instance, Mrs. Lee, "groaned in spirit" at a procession of well-wishers filing past the president and his wife (*Democracy* 51). The ritual was "worse than anything in the 'Inferno'" for Mrs. Lee, who considered the scene to be "an awful vision of eternity" (*Democracy* 51). The new president and his wife "stood, automata, representatives of the society which streamed past them . . . To [Mrs. Lee] it had the effect of a nightmare, or of an opium-eater's vision. She felt a sudden conviction that this was to be the end of American society; its realization and dream at once" (*Democracy* 50-1). "What put it in [the president's] foolish head," asks Mrs. Lee afterward, "to cease being a citizen and to ape royalty" (*Democracy* 53). The ecstasy of Mrs. Lee's first half-revelation is not a direct connection with a prime motor, but the alienation of being subject to the signifier. The procession she witnesses reifies the signifying "chain"

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through which the signifier is constituted in materially embedded language, the body of the president in this case.

As the subject of a ritual for the endowment of the signifier, the president is not a subject but an object of the power of the people, a body whose subjectivity is "always somewhat apart," hidden "in a car someone else is driving" as Ronald Reagan put it (Reagan 322). With each shake of the hand of a different yet identical "constituent," the power of the people is only made present in a particular body through the endless repetition of an exchange. Because it must be constantly reaffirmed to remain present, the power of the president is, for Mrs. Lee, a mockery of the European sovereign who wields power over subjects from outside of the law. As a representative, the president should be an empty vessel through which the will of the people expresses itself. As Adams said of the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant, one was never sure "that he did think" (*Education* 253). And yet, as the soldier that won the war, Grant "represented order" for the American people (*Education* 249). As a human body which is itself subjectified, the president presents a problem for the unproblematic expression of the will of the people.

The president, as a suspended subject-object can only be understood by Mrs. Lee as a dream, or an object which is subject to a dream-logic. As such, he is a signifier, whose essentially absent nature can never fully express a "reality that can no longer make itself except by repeating itself indefinitely, in some indefinitely never attained awakening"[11] (*Quatre concepts fondamentaux* 69). Rather, the order that the president is

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[11] The translations of Lacan are my own here and in the next quotation and I've cited the French text: ". . . *la réalité qui ne peut plus se faire qu'à se répéter indéfiniment, en un indéfiniment jamais attaint réveil.*"

meant to represent can only be anthropomorphic, a mechanical repetition that reifies the abstraction it is meant to represent. The distortion produced by Mrs. Lee's gaze on the president does not reveal the empirical forces at work in the ritual of power that might explain its place within a predetermined unfolding of a simple mechanism toward a progressive future. Rather than a clear, ideal separation between the dream of democracy and its realization that would guarantee the latter's progressive path toward the former, Mrs. Lee's experience of power as a signifier places both the ideal and the real exclusively within history, within the historical dialectic of the signifier, as America's "realization and dream at once." Because there is no ideal external to history, there is therefore nothing guiding the course of history from a place external to it. Thus, the experience of the president, because of the distortion it creates, is an experience of the "real" which "is that which always comes back to the same place" whether the subject wants it to or not but in a distorted form (*Quatre* 59). Whereas Charles W. Chesnutt might quickly understand this position of power to function as a parallax, as I argued in my previous chapter, Adams could not yet fully begin to think such a possibility. The president, as a signifier, introduces another "lethal factor" in the hesitation between subject and object which, in this case, is also the hesitation between a citizen and a royal as well as a hesitation between history as controlled by subjects or itself subject to the control of an absent prime motor. This impossible decision of American power writ large is precisely the one that is then mapped onto Mrs. Lee's personal decision for a marriage

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"*Le réel est ici ce qui revient toujours à la même place – à cette place où le sujet en tant qu'il cogite, où la* res cogitans *ne le rencontre pas.*"

partner as the novel progresses and the stakes of this equivocation are heightened for

Mrs. Lee.

The choice of marriage partner, for Mrs. Lee, becomes, like her experience of the

president, a false choice between two metaphors, the automaton and the veiled prime

motor, the machine that expresses its principles of articulation through a repetition within

history or an a-historical machine whose principles structure historical repetition, by

which she hopes the presence of power can be established in order to either be guided or

obeyed. After arriving in Washington and witnessing the inauguration, Mrs. Lee quickly

becomes a center of Washington social life, much as Adams himself had done with his

wife Clover. Following nineteenth century novelistic tropes, Mrs. Lee becomes quickly

embroiled in a love triangle.[12] One option is Mr. Carrington, a young lawyer from

Virginia who had fought for the South in the Civil War. Mr. Carrington maintains a

young Adams's idea of progressive government. As a Southerner who fully embraced (to

the degree that that was possible) the Northern government after the war, Mr. Carrington

subscribes to the idea that the United States, as another character put it, is "the inevitable

consequence of what has gone before it" and that all "our civilization aims at this mark"

(*Democracy* 44). The Southern defeat in the Civil War was not a failure, but an inevitable

if tragic step towards the perfection of American governance. Carrington fought for the

South during the war in the same way he worked in Washington after it – out of a sense

of duty to an inextricable destiny placed on him by his dual allegiance to the United

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[12] In fact, it is a love square but I will artificially reduce the terms here in order to sacrifice strict correctness in the name of expediency. Hopefully this will not greatly damage my argument as the fourth element, Sybil, Mrs. Lee's sister, simply multiplies the terms established in the triangle. While Sybil does present an interesting variation on the terms, it is less pertinent to my argument about Adams's intellectually trajectory as a whole.

States in general and Virginia in particular. As that minor character succinctly put it, American government within this framework "is the only direction society can take that is worth its taking . . . Every other possible step is backward, and I do not care to repeat the past" (*Democracy* 44). The necessity registered by this character is a result of the geometry of the metaphor which is taken to literally apply to the abstraction it attempts to represent. On the other hand, Mrs. Lee is also drawn to a Senator from Illinois, Silas Ratcliffe, the suitor she takes most seriously. Ratcliffe does not subscribe to the idea of representative American government but, rather, to the chaos of individual wills within a "political mathematics" of the arbitrary (but not random) economizing and distributing of political force (*Democracy* 90). He sees his role as a Senator to be one of willfully managing the forces of the nation towards his and his party's interests which he considers to be as good as but not representative of anyone or anything else's. Ratcliffe "loved power, and he meant to be president. That was enough" (*Democracy* 50).

The decision between suitors, by the end of the novel, comes to a head when Mrs. Lee makes it known that she intends to choose Ratcliffe, thereby gaining access to the power he represents and the ability to guide the powers of the government toward humane ends. Repeating her earlier "groaning," however, Mrs. Lee slowly understands Ratliffe, through a series of "half revelations," to have adopted a "distorted politics" the realization of which changes her decision to marry him at the last moment (*Democracy* 96). Mrs. Lee makes these discoveries when Mr. Carrington reveals to Mrs. Lee in a letter sent because of the "necessity for [her] knowing its contents" that Ratcliffe had already been corrupted before the events of the novel took place. Ratcliffe had, in fact,

taken bribes to end his opposition to a Steamship Subsidy, and Mrs. Lee takes this as a

sign that any attempt to influence him towards a more humane use of power would be

fruitless (*Democracy* 178). Like the classic mystery narrative in the tradition of Conan

Doyle, however, the revelation of the facts of the crime do not constitute the revelation of

the truth of the absent story. Rather, it is the exaction of a confession, the utterance of the

criminal that marks the narrative of facts as true, which signifies the resolution of the

crisis. That Ratcliffe had taken money in exchange for political influence is, according to

Ratcliffe when confronted with Carrington's letter, "true in its leading facts" and yet

"untrue in some details, and in the impression it creates" (*Democracy* 190). For Mrs. Lee,

this statement, rather than the revelation of the facts in the letter, is the "moment" when

"she really felt as though she had got to the heart of politics" (*Democracy* 191). This

"heart," however, rather than a simple Hobbesian "spring," is ultimately an absence of a

prime motor that would provide a causal structure for the brute facts.

The crime committed by Ratcliffe was, in his own version, motiveless. The

private interests he colluded with "made no open avowal of their reasons" and Ratcliffe

"did not press for one" (*Democracy* 191). In a moment that anticipates Gore Vidal's

insight that the powerful "don't have to conspire because they all think alike," the heart

of American politics is revealed as a structuring silence conditioned by the circulation of

power (qtd. in Solomons). Ratcliffe did not technically violate the letter of the law and

yet entirely violated the spirit of progressivism that Mrs. Lee assumed always to operate,

if at times mysteriously. Reason was not necessary for, and from Ratcliffe's point of view

even hinders, the progress of the expansion and development of American power.

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Whereas Mr. Carrington assumes the machinations of politics to be corrupt because they are secret and therefore not open to public scrutiny and debate in terms of a moral principle outside of historical movement, Ratcliffe understands that secrecy is not necessary for the machine to operate, but is merely a convenience to make the essential operation more efficient in particular instances. The revelation Mr. Carrington offers to Mrs. Lee of Ratcliffe's corruption was never hidden in that it had always, in fact, been in plain view but at a structural level. At the same time, Ratcliffe's corruption also demonstrates the impossibility of Carrington's position as a viable description of the "truth" of American politics.

The silence of Ratcliffe's transaction demonstrates to Mrs. Lee that power in its American form is not expressive in and of itself as the unfolding of an *a priori* principle. Rather, it structures other systems of signification from within history, as a letter containing the truth, passed from person to person, whose revelation changes nothing about its function as a signifier. This circulation, even in this early work of Adams's, can only be understood through the metaphor of technological articulation which seems to account for the ways in which Enlightenment progress fails to describe the workings of American politics. How could the forces of society be economized and put under the control of a rational Enlightenment aggregate subject if its operations were not the sequential unfolding of a mechanistic process but a dialectic, structuring absence that is mechanically repeated and circulated? The aim of this metaphysical mystery novel to understand the absent structure of its own chronotope, in *Democracy*, never comes to

pass but is eternally put off and evaded. Ultimately, the solution to the mystery is that there is, in the final analysis, no mystery at all.

As almost a prescient comment on where Adams's thought would go in his next novel, by the end of *Democracy* Mrs. Lee has "shaken [her] nerves to pieces" and thinks "what rest it would be to live in the Great Pyramid and look out for ever at the polar star" (*Democracy* 200). The "bitterest part of all this horrid story" was, according to Mrs. Lee, that "nine out of ten of our countrymen would say I had made a mistake" in refusing to marry Ratcliffe (*Democracy* 202). The fear that is articulated in the metaphor of politics and machinery is less that, as one critic put it, "mechanization has taken command and human reality has departed from politics" (*Art and Mind* 88). Rather, it is that "human reality" had never been a positive presence that could "depart" from anything, but was the effect of a distortion created by the historical movement of the signifier. The basic assumption of reform – that the predominantly automatic progress of society can be managed to increase the efficiency of its procedure – had been revealed to be not necessarily the case. Rather than progressive, the circulation of power in Democracy is iterative in the manner of an automaton or the circulation of a letter. The contingent features of power may change but the essential structure remains the same. The solution to this impasse offered by Mrs. Lee, however, is simply that of escape. By the time Adams came to write *Esther*, however, even escape has become impossible as a response to the machinic order as part of the development of that order is its expansion.

Adams's second novel *Esther*, written just four years after *Democracy* and published under the pseudonym Francis Snow Compton, tells an almost identical

narrative but on a different theme. Rather than American democracy, the veiled motor

that the equally "free-thinking" Esther Dudley attempts to reconcile herself with is the

"one central idea" of the Christian church, "that idea which the church has never ceased

to embody, - I AM" (*Esther* 7). In this case, the titular Esther feels compelled to choose

between two suitors, the clergyman Mr. Hazard and the atheistic world-traveler and

geologist George Strong (loosely based on Adams's friend Clarence King). Mr. Hazard

attempts to convince Esther that "I AM is the starting point and goal of metaphysics and

logic, but the church alone has pointed out from the beginning that this starting-point is

not human but divine" (*Esther* 7). Strong is, on the other hand, an atheist. "Mystery for

mystery," he claims, "science beats religion hollow" (*Esther* 107). Rather than assuming

a unified subject whose independence is guaranteed by a divine and therefore a-historical

transcendental, Strong believes in pure historical contingency, or, as he puts it, "survival

of the fittest" (*Esther* 103). "If Hazard can manage to convert Esther, let him do it," he

says at one point of the novel, and if "not, let her take him in charge and convert him if

she can," adding that he will "not interfere" (*Esther* 103). Like the choice in *Democracy*,

these correspond to two different positions on "truth" as a means by which contingencies

are put into order and given the sense of causal necessity. In keeping with its subject

matter, however, the choice in *Esther* is more abstract than *Democracy* in that it is a

choice of whether to affiliate oneself with the traditional, Christian determinism or the

apparently novel contingency of Nineteenth Century Social Darwinism. And yet, even in

this more abstract decision, deeply embedded in Christian society from its beginning,

technology interrupts the apparently balanced decision between new and old, conservative and progressive.

Toward the end of the novel, taking the same position as Mrs. Lee does in the beginning of *Democracy*, Esther escapes New York on a train. Having entered into an engagement with Mr. Hazard that the entirety of the New York society who took themselves to be knowledgeable on the subject considered to be unwise, Esther breaks her engagement when she comes to believe that her lack of Christian faith will make marriage to a clergyman impossible within the practicalities of New York society. Fearing being persuaded otherwise by Mr. Hazard, she takes a night train to visit Niagara Falls to collect her thoughts. Niagara would become more and more overdetermined in Adams's thinking as it developed. Twenty-six years after writing *Esther*, in his *Letter to American Teachers of History*, Niagara would come to represent in his mind the "system" that "supplied its own force . . . by degrading its own energies" (*Letter* 175). Or, as the narrator of *Esther* put it, to "have Niagara as a rival is no joke" (*Esther* 144). In *Esther*, Niagara functions as a material correlative, expressed in an anthropomorphism, to Hazard's God rather than Strong's assumptions of historical contingency. It "rambled on with its story, in the same steady voice, never shrill or angry, never silent or degraded by a sign of human failings, yet so frank and sympathetic that [Esther] had no choice but to like it" (*Esther* 143). In this sense, *Esther* more than *Democracy*, retains the hope that the division between the contingent and the determined has some kind of solution in the natural world. And yet, technology already in *Esther* begins to play the disruptive role it will come to fully articulate more fully in Adams's later writing.

During the train trip to Niagara, in an unusually lyrical passage from Adams, Esther "felt excited by the sense of flight and the rapid motion which was carrying her she knew not where, - away into the infinite and unknown" (*Esther* 136). Unable to sleep, she contents herself by watching the landscape through the window of the moving train. Alone with the "noisy quiet of the rushing train" she "stared into the black void outside," finding that nothing "in nature could be more mysterious and melancholy than this dark, polar world, beside which a winter storm on the Atlantic was at least exciting" (*Esther* 136). It is not the view of nature that Esther finds melancholy about the experience, but rather the

> twinkling lights from distant and invisible farm-houses, the vague outlines of barn-yards and fences along doubtful roads, the sudden flash of lamps as the train hurried through unknown stations, or the unfamiliar places where it stopped, while the tap-tap of the train-men's hammers on the wheels beneath sounded like spirit-rappings. These signs of life behind the veil were like the steady lights of shore to the drowning fisherman off the reef outside. (*Esther* 137)

This moment represents a nadir for Esther. For Howells's Marches, gazing out of a train window was problematic for a sense of historical continuity but not decisive. The problems of historical narration could be compensated for by alternate, statistical regimes of knowledge. For Esther, however, the experience marks a snapping that precipitates her decision to marry neither suitor, to choose neither future. As she puts it in the novel's final line, she loves Hazard rather than Strong but cannot bring herself to submit to his law for all that. Unlike Niagara, which is a system that provides its own energy,

technology takes its energy from elsewhere, converting it and economizing it under prearranged conditions. Language, structured by the total train system cannot directly represent the life that Hazard's law supposedly orders from the point of view of the train system but only give "signs of life behind the veil." Technology as a means by which social ends and material means are articulated is a "veil" that is not itself "life" but, instead, mediates it, making it no more sensible than "spirit-rappings" from unseen "train-men." Technology is essentially veiled in that, although it gives the appearance of a prerequisite material reality, it is in fact ideologically determined within history as well. It appears to lead outside by way of scientific principles, only to return once again to history, inescapably.

Through its mediating function, technology reveals sensory experience to not be an unproblematic means of access to truth, but, instead, renders the real world into "signs of life" that suggest but do not guarantee causal relationships. In this moment of despair, the railway provides the formal context in which the indecision created by the seemingly opposite yet structurally similar "poles" of truth represented by the two suitors. Not choosing, in this case, is tantamount to an eternal hesitation between two false choices. Although the train seemingly moves in a straight line towards Niagara, it conceptually allows for the repetition of an impossible decision of the "drowning man," brought about by the total train system. American progress towards either a bourgeois or Christian Utopia becomes not an *a priori* progress but a rhetorical justification for historically arbitrary (but not random) and unequally distributed power between "unknown stations" for Adams by the writing of *Esther*. In this sense, *Esther* is more pessimistic than

Democracy. Ultimately, in Adams's final novel, even if the veiled prime motor did function in the way he assumed it to, humans would be unable to understand it from their position, drowning at sea.

As Adams would later describe the break he suggests but does not develop in *Esther*, the new "power" that the railway helped introduce "was disintegrating society, and setting independent centres of force to work, until money had all it could do to hold the machine together. No one could represent it faithfully as a whole" (*Education* 398). In Adams's late-career vocabulary, one's relationship to abstract force, political or otherwise, had become "a struggle not of men but of forces" and those men "became every year more and more creatures of force, massed about central power-houses" (*Education* 400). Karl Marx, who Adams anxiously studied, hit upon a similar conclusion, albeit in different terms, when discussing the means by which Capitalism reproduces the working-class as an economic category of human. Whereas the "Roman slave was held by chains," the wage-laborer under Capitalism "is bound to his owner by invisible threads," Marx claimed (*Capital* 719). These threads are invisible in that they are "maintained by a constant change in the person of the individual employer, and by the legal fiction of a contract" (*Capital* 719). Marx's thread, like Adams's veiled "power-houses" create and accumulate "creatures of force," that they themselves have constituted as subjects. These power relations do not create the illusion of reality through a direct force like the chains of the Roman slave, but through a formal one that is stamped in material reality and historical through and through. Without the assurance of a prime motor that is outside of history and therefore able to guarantee its path, Adams had finally

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given up his hopes for a self-evident progressivism as his contemporaries blithely assumed it necessarily to exist. Technology would not, for Adams, be the expression of a progressive sense of history. Rather, technology would be the institution that created the sense of progressing in history.

<u>"I Have Met My Death"</u>

As a descendant of two American presidents, and heir to the aristocratic assumption of national political importance, no one had been "given better cards" than Henry Adams in his birth (*Education* 10). And yet, by 1907 Adams also wrote that the tradition that formed him and expected him to guide the powers of the nation had been obviated from the beginning. Adams "and his eighteenth-century, troglodytic Boston," as he put it in the often-quoted first pages of the *Education*, "were suddenly cut apart – separated forever – in act if not in sentiment, by the opening of the Boston and Albany Railroad; the appearance of the first Cunard steamers in the bay; and the telegraphic messages which carried . . . the news that Henry Clay and James K. Polk were nominated for the Presidency" (*Education* 11). The generation of Adamses that produced Henry was a generation whose fortunes were intimately connected to the railway, for better or worse. While Henry was the editor of *The North American Review* in the 1870s, he and his brother, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., collaborated on a series of articles on the corruption occurring in the construction of the railways that shocked the nation and launched Charles into a position of national importance. Partly as a result of this journalistic effort, Charles would go on to run the Union Pacific Railroad for several years (somewhat

unsuccessfully, as it happens, but even Charles could be swapped out for another capitalist). Just as it made Charles's fortune, investment in railroad companies would almost ruin the entire family in 1893 during the spectacular economic collapse of that year. Through his connection with his brother, Henry Adams would have a lifelong interest in the railway, noting the developments in the various railway systems around the world on his many and varied travels. Adams would record the creation of the "Pullman civilization" which he dutifully reported back to his brother by correspondence (*Education* 235). As the first chapter of the *Education* points out, however, the railway introduced a split in the continuity of an American Enlightenment tradition Adams felt himself beholden to more than most and that he had already begun to be suspicious of in his early novels. By 1892, his hopes of reform dashed and his personal life shattered after the suicide of his wife, Adams "felt nothing in common with the world as it promised to be. He was ready to quit it" (*Education* 303).

The effects of this "splitting" that came with the railroad in the 1830s took decades to ossify their form as the railway expanded across America and the globe after Adams's birth in 1838. By 1901, the railway and the technological thinking it introduced had shifted from an emergent to a dominant structural position within American society. The railway as a material object had receded from its place as an urgent political problem, yet the logic it had introduced remained as a structuring principle of human exchange in general. "Russia had vanished," by 1901, Adams claimed in his *Education*, "and not even France was felt; hardly England or America. Coal alone was felt – its stamp alone pervaded the Rhine district and persisted to Picardy – and the stamp was the

same as that of Birmingham and Pittsburgh" (*Education* 393). The coal that powered the railway system had split Adams's world and "stamped" it (a metaphor for the shaping of material reality by social relations Adams shares with English translators of Karl Marx) in its own form, increasing its rapidity of exchange that was both its means and its end.

The railway had levelled society to a certain degree, making all regions reducible to the same term and yet separated each of those regions from any kind of linear, historical continuity with their images of themselves as unique political bodies with their own trajectories of development. One "great empire," the entire world in this case, "was ruled by one great emperor – Coal" (*Education* 393). The engine that was the purpose of that coal, in Adams's late-career imagination, was "but an ingenious channel for conveying somewhere the heat latent in a few tons of poor coal hidden in a dirty engine-house carefully kept out of sight," and whose power could be felt, importantly in a simile rather than a metaphor, "much as the early Christians felt the Cross" (*Education* 361). The engine was veiled, now, not by its removal from history but by its spatial relation to the effects it created which were, in turn, temporally condensed by the speed of transmission between its nodes. Coal became an emperor, then, in that it supplied the energy that created new kinds of historically contingent subjects through the technological systems of production and circulation within a specific space and over a specific time. The articulations required by the material circulation of power had reformed the sovereign signifier from an *Imperator* to a Capitalist system of circulation which established power relations indirectly, as a social form stamped on commodities through their circulation. Although both the Emperor and Capitalist circulation were

signifiers that structured reality, they did so in radically different ways that were historically contingent and could occur simultaneously. From the original, material "splitting" of a spatial relationship to Boston, to the secondary "splitting" that happened at the global level of the subject itself in its relationship to the nation as its *Ich-ideal*, the Enlightenment subject capable of domination over nature had itself, in other words, become subject to the split caused by its own efforts of domination.

More than simply an abstract dispute over the terms by which power was represented in literature, Adams saw the nature of power change in the very historical institutions of the United States itself through the final decades of the nineteenth century in the political struggle over the expansion of the railway. The technologically fueled economic shift that brought about a conceptual shift in how Americans thought of their relation to the nation is, of course, too complex to fully examine in this context. As Henry's brother Charles put it, any single mind can only "fail to grasp" the immensity of the new "Appian Way of America" and the speed with which it was constructed ("The Railroad System" 334). The example of the fight over the so-called "Granger Laws" in the Midwest in the late 1860s and early 1870s that became part of the narrative of expansion that the young Adams brothers documented, however, can serve as a representative example of one way in which steam, "as whimsical as it is powerful," "proved itself to be not only the most obedient of slaves, but likewise the most tyrannical of masters" ("The Railroad System" 346). Through this example, we see the problem that became an ideological impasse for Adams in his literature playing out in the history of

the United States itself and gain a better sense of what kind of new articulation the railway brought about that so affected Adams.

If society had "split," according to Adams, because of the conceptual changes ushered in by the railway, the fight that led to the Granger laws demonstrates the peculiarities of this shift. These laws, instituted mainly in the Midwest at the state level throughout the 1870s and instituted at the federal level in 1887 by the Interstate Commerce Act, sought to regulate the monopolistic tendencies of the railway companies as they developed and their practices changed. They were passed by state and federal representatives largely to placate Midwestern farmers (thus, "granger" laws) who believed the rate-setting practices of the railway companies were prejudicial against them. It was common practice in the 1860s and 70s, as the Minnesota railway lawyer and eventual President of the Chicago Great Western Railway, A.B. Stickney, described it, for railway lines to offer different rates for carrying commodities on different stretches of track. While it began as a pragmatic measure by the railways in part to subsidize construction and operation in frontier areas where mass agriculture had not yet been developed, over time the practice began to be wielded by the companies as a way to control which areas of the country would be developed and which would not to benefit their own interests. As Stickney unequivocally put it, a manager of a few thousand miles of railroad track in the 1880s had the power "through malice, ignorance, or stupidity, to decree which out of say a thousand cities and villages located on his lines should prosper, and which should not" (Stickney 6-7). In other words, the potential for malice, ignorance, or stupidity in a particular manager may or may not have existed before the railway

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system but that system's structuring of political space made certain expressions of malice

possible that had not been before. The railway itself was unmotivated but shaped the

expression of motivation depending on who controlled its workings. With the passing of

the Interstate Commerce Act in 1887, the federal government made it "unlawful for any

common carrier" in the United States "to make or give any undue or unreasonable

preference or advantage to any particular person, company, firm, corporation, or locality,

or any particular description of traffic, in any respect whatsoever" (*Interstate Commerce

Act, Sec. 3)*. The power relationship and the means by which it could be acted upon

between the managers of the technological infrastructure and labor had, however, by that

time already been largely set.

What is more interesting to my discussion of Adams than the institution of a

relatively pragmatic problem and citizens' attempts to legislate away its effects, however,

is the dialectic means by which the problem developed and, in that process, created

political bodies by way of a spatial division and with a specific class consciousness out of

previously disparate farmers, in what economic historians occasionally somewhat

ominously refer to as "interest-group formation" (Gilligan 40).[13] States such as

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[13] Historians for nearly a century and a half have been predictably divided on the significance of the
Granger acts generally and the Interstate Commerce Act in particular. Solon J. Buck claimed in 1920 that
"change has been so swift and spectacular as to approach a complete metamorphosis" in the American
West (Buck vii). "Simple farming communities have waked to find themselves complex industrial regions
in which farmers have frequently lost their former preferred position" (Buck vii). At the same time, some
historians such as Lee Benson have argued that the merchants rather than farmers were the single most
important group supporting regulation as a way to stabilize their own markets in "self-policing agreements"
(Benson vii). Gabriel Kolko, by contrast, claimed that "the railroads, not the farmers and shippers, were the
most important single advocates for federal regulation as such" (Kolko 3). Agreeing with Kolko, though for
different reasons, Gilligan, Marshall, and Weingast claimed that since "farmers were the most diffuse
[interest] group, theirs is unlikely to have been the most active lobby," avoiding any concrete argument on
the issue altogether (Gilligan 41). It seems that scholarly historians on the subject have not shown an
interest in any kind of dialectic that might move beyond arbitrarily designating a certain group's "interests"

Minnesota and Wisconsin, in which the Granger agitations largely occurred were historically unique in that their institution as territories and then states happened at the same time as the railway expanded "itself in the reduction of difference," as Charles Adams put it ("The Railroad System" 343). The two states' development as political bodies were therefore tied up in the pragmatic development of the material institution of the railway as it reduced local difference by way of its connection to Eastern markets for a predominantly agrarian population. As Stickney pointed out, one of the first acts of the first assembly of the Minnesota territory in 1849 was the "granting of charters to railway companies," followed quickly by "laws intended to induce the building of railways" (Stickney 8). Rather than altering preexisting political structures, the railway's logic, in this case, shaped political space in advance of its presence in these territories. And yet, even by 1856, the land of Minnesota "had not been proven" for mass agricultural production and railroad companies were perhaps understandably hesitant to speculate on the purchasing of land and construction of track, particularly after the economic bubble burst on land speculation in Minnesota in 1857 (Stickney 9). Throughout the 1850s and 60s the growing population of Minnesota remained relatively poor and therefore desperate for the perceived economic opportunity the railway might provide its agricultural and lumber industries. By 1871, the now state of Minnesota had made concessions to the railway companies in order to persuade capitalists to invest in the state, providing loans in the form of government bonds to subsidize the construction of track, granting rights of way to railroads through public lands, and making the lands

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to be "important" on the subject so I will restrict myself to referring to them for facts only, as much as that is possible.

bought by railroads immune from taxation. If citizens resisted these concessions, "they were threatened with change of location to such a distance from the existing towns as to destroy them, and build up rivals" (Stickney 11). The railway representatives, of course, tended to describe this negotiation process as bringing the citizens "to their senses" on the subject (Stickney 14). The problem of development as it unfolded in Minnesota was its continually partial character from the point of view of the capitalist, in an example of Marx's point that the potentially infinite number of Capitalists to which one can sell one's labor creates the illusion of free choice by reducing it to an infinite iteration of slight variations on the same choice: to live under the railway managers' version of capitalism or be destroyed by it. There would be no third option.

Any advancement was, from the point of view of the railway companies, not advancement enough to guarantee profitability beyond a doubt which waxed and waned with the periodic busts and booms of the second half of the nineteenth century. The movement of power from within the total train system, was not a matter of *sui generis* maliciousness on the part of the capitalist, but a function of the means of articulation introduced by the railway itself. Maliciousness was a byproduct of a particular mode of technological expansion that unevenly distributed access to control over the means of circulation, a control whose expression happened spatially in the separation of the civilized from the savage through access to the routes of the railway. Intention was not a prerequisite for the system, but the system itself created particular kinds of intention. Different social groups were therefore structured around these new, technological modes of intention rather than any traditional sense of the "will of the people." As it expanded, a

sense of progress was the effect of the solidification of the political boundaries established by the railway. Within this historical dialectic between labor and capital that played out through the mediating term of spatial control, we see the same problem in the practical sphere that Adams was struggling with in a literary mode in his early novels. Although technological advancement was often ideologically assumed to be both a product and guarantor of abstract American "progress," that progression did not unfold through the principles of the veiled prime motor it was assumed to be. From the points of view of the capitalists, the farmers were "senseless" in their demands. From the point of view of the farmers, the capitalists were malicious in their autocratic wielding of power. Because both sides thought the dialectic of power to operate by way of abstract, *a priori* principles, both missed the ways in which historically contingent technologies for the control and distribution of energy for social ends rather than the veiled prime motor structured their relations.

The central problem of the railway, then, came in a set of two splittings. First, the political splitting of space which began as a more or less mutual problem between labor and capital. Where the railway would run to a large degree separated the "civilized" and the "savage" not as a border to be pushed back but as a set of vectors or lanes of motion that were variable and were established within the nation itself. Secondly, this split space eventually ossified into particular power relationships that created the "interests" it was supposedly in service of. Because of the economic and social structure of the railway, the very political space of the nation became a tool for capital to "bring labor to its senses," which is to say create a sense of its own interest exclusively in terms of a specific mode

of capitalist circulation. Because of its new means of spatial articulation, the railway brought with it new means of articulating society and the mechanisms of aggression and retribution that came with it. As Charles Francis Adams put it, the "infinitely varied influences of the railroad system are so much a part of our everyday acts and thoughts that they have become familiar, and have ceased to be marvellous [*sic*]. The changes have been so gradual that we have failed to notice their completeness" ("The Railroad System" 338). This change was complete not simply because it filled out the literal space of the nation but because it revolutionized how that nation imagined itself, literally from the ground up. What it meant to be an individual had changed from a sense of a unified Enlightenment subject who willingly subjected him or herself to the "common interest" to an obviously alienated subject for whom the distributive terms of language had been determined in advance by the articulations made possible by the railway system.

Whereas technologies had been objects used for particular ends, with the advent of the total train system space would now be an effect of technology that would limit possible human actions. More than this, the railroad was imbricated in the creation of The United States as a political space. The railway system "rapidly disseminated one element over a vast wilderness" and "rendered existing America possible" ("The Railroad System" 341). That element was the ability to articulate disparate political spaces as such into a system of exchange that homogenized all objects as exchange-values to the degree that they were in the reach of that technology. In other words, it created an "empire of coal." The change in space created by the railway also changed the way people thought, imagined the country, and behaved toward one another. As Teresa Brennan put it, the

"relation between physical and social determination has been conceived of as a one-way street, when it should allow for two way traffic. The social actually gets into the flesh, and unless we take account of this, we cannot account for the extent to which socio-historical realities affect us physically" (Brennan 10). As Brennan also points out, this two way traffic requires the "containment" of channels of energy along which exchange occurs in historically contingent formations (Brennan 10). I would slightly diverge from Brennan, however, in her claim that "my feelings physically enter you, or yours me" is a useful description of what it would be to imagine "that the subject is not self-contained at the material level of energy" (Brennan 10-11). As I've already argued about the work of Charles Chesnutt, "energy" is the first step of a technological anthropomorphism. Brennan's description (which, admittedly, is to a degree simply an attempt to make concrete a very difficult and abstract point) attributes to energy only the limitations of Newtonian mechanics, which describes its behavior only at certain degrees of magnitude. "Containment" at times does mean something close to the mechanical control of channels of energy at large dimensions but can also mean something more indirect.

As I've also already argued, I much prefer Heisenberg's concept, taken from Aristotle, of *potentia* to describe the ways in which a "reality" that is assumed to function along the lines of Newtonian mechanics is limited. Technology mediates ideology and material reality through a limiting set of *potentia* that determine some features of a potential subject position in advance. With *potentia*, in which certain tendencies are asymptotic toward reality, we get a clearer sense of how indirect relations dialectically determine the supposedly unified (at certain significant dimensions) "me" and "you" that

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exchange "feelings" in history and through language which, following Lacan, is both

present and absent simultaneously. In order for labor to be "brought to its senses" about

the politics of the railway, it first had to be literally, spatially contained by channels for

the transmission of energy and brought within its scope of influence, made part of its

speeds of exchange and its technologically limiting *potentia*. These containments also

happened, however, ideologically, as an indirect limitation of the horizon of possibility in

addition to the more obvious containments of the railway system. In other words, the total

train system, as a complex of containments, both material and ideological, contained

populations at many different points of articulation in slightly different ways that

changed, both with the material conditions and historically as the complex developed.

The new subject that Adams hoped to describe would now be a containment also

articulated by technological systems that makes available a subject for intersubjective

communication, as being the subject of reflection for the other, or having *reputatio*.

The question Henry Adams had come to an impasse about in his novels was, put

in Brennan's terms, the issue of containment, or, put in Kenneth Burke's terms, the

variabilities formed in language between the container and the thing contained. For a

linear, progressive history to make sense as a causal scheme required it to be contained

by the principles of a veiled prime motor. The conclusion that Adams came to, however,

was the failure of a single, universal prime motor to account for the variety of possible

containments in the era of the railway, which, as we have seen even in the work of

William Dean Howells (who did not have Adams's taste for the esoteric), broke down

and reorganized previous modes of containment in language. In *Democracy*, one form of

containment occurred through the repetition of rituals of power. Endlessly shaking the hand of the president was mutual containment of power as a particular kind of articulacy in democracy. In *Esther*, Niagara and the railway were two different modes of containment, with the railway more accurately representing the new mode of social formation than the romanticized waterfalls. The politics that was formed by the railway and would follow it after it fell away from the immediate politics of the day would be shaped by technologies which had become ideologically determined forms of containment that presented themselves as *a priori* truths. Politics, then, would not simply be a matter of abstract allegiance to a principle in the era of the total train system. It would be formally controllable by capital through the technologies it created and which, in turn, created the capitalist formations to come.

Henry Adams was well aware of the difficulty of this "empire within a republic," as he already described the railway system in 1870, in which no single actor could be identified, except as a subject-position created by the material articulations of a technological system and the economic mechanisms they structurally limited ("Gold Conspiracy" 106). As the railway became ideologically imbricated in already established political division between Capital and Labor, it in turn changed their relation to one another as the system developed. Even Adams's favorite personal target to blame for economic instability in his journalistic days, Jay Gould, could not be entirely blamed as an individual for his almost single-handed collapsing of the American economy in 1869. Gould simply possessed the "disposition" for "subtlety and elaboration of intrigue" that the railway system had made "necessary" for the bankers that owned it in the final

analysis ("Gold Conspiracy" 104). The motors that had only multiplied and intensified since James Watt's double-action steam engine proved difficult concepts to represent in Adams's world whose vocabulary had its roots in twelfth century assumptions of unity. He and his contemporaries "felt a railway-train as power; yet they, and all other artists constantly complained that the power embodied in a railway-train could never be embodied in art. All the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres" (*Education* 368). This double split caused by the railway, then, also had a curiously double effect that was difficult to "embody" in art. It forever tore apart the assumed unity of the Enlightenment subject, and replaced it with its own articulations which, in certain respects, were antithetical to previous assumptions. Just as Carrington's revelation of Ratcliffe's corruption was no proof of Carrington's correct principles, the railway did not fully displace the Virgin as a veiled prime motor, but incorporated it into its new formations. While the split had made the sequential continuity of a bourgeois idea of progress impossible to think, it had also unified the West as a "great empire," making its means of subjectification global to the degree that it was in the sphere of influence of the railway.

　　With perhaps Henry Adams's two most famous figures for the two options he represented in his novels, the Dynamo and the Virgin, he reified the two competing models for causality he struggled with throughout his career. Critics have, understandably, tended to reduce the movement of his dense and difficult thought to these images. Leo Marx, in his classic study of technology and the pastoral in American fiction, claimed that *The Education of Henry Adams* before all others, exemplified the

American "habit of defining reality as a contradiction between radically opposed forces"

(*The Machine in the Garden* 344-5). More specifically, Marx argued that it "is

technology (the new railroads, steamboats, and telegraph) that has *separated* Adams from

his family's eighteenth-century tradition. Writing in this vein Adams virtually endorses a

theory of technological determinism," as opposed to the previously dominant tradition of

the pastoral American landscape as "the dream of a retreat to an oasis of harmony and

joy" (*Machine* 3, 346). More recently, other critics have gone even further. Following the

tradition of Leo Marx's influential work, Samuele F. S. Pardini argued that in *The

Education* Adams created the first "history of technology" in the American tradition

(Pardini 22). To view Adams as setting "forceful engineers against inert agrarians," as

Cecelia Tichi put it, or to emphasize the sequential, causal relationship of Adams's

"history," following Pardini, however, is to miss some of the complexity and difficulty

Adams ascribes to technology's relationship to a progressive sense of history (Tichi 138).

Adams, rather, describes the new conditions in which bourgeois history would be

understood from within a technologically driven progressivism. Technological systems,

such as the railway, had rendered sequence impossible for historians attempting to supply

causality to simple chronology. The Virgin and Dynamo were "convertible, reversible,

interchangeable [attractions] on thought" rather than dichotomous poles (*Education* 364*)*.

Adams's formal experimentations do not attempt to save sequence for bourgeois

consciousness but attempt to replace it with a sometimes dizzying series of alternative

organizational models.

It was not until the second half of his career that Adams attempted to formulate

what he considered to be the new intellectual environment brought about by the

expansion and modes of containment of the railway and technology in general. Adams's

own attempt at "literary experiment" in the vein of Henry James as he described his

Education to William James, was an attempt to represent at least his own experience of

this "snapping" (and the physicality of the metaphor is more significant than Leo Marx's

"separation" indicates) (qtd. in Monteiro 158). In his attempt to trace these forces' effects

on himself, Adams questioned the procedures for assembling history that he had been

trained in. Historians, according to Adams, had always assumed "in silence a relation of

cause and effect" so that "if any captious critic were to drag them to light, historians

would probably reply, with one voice, that they had never supposed themselves required

to know what they were talking about" (*Education* 363).

The Dynamo and the Virgin are often presented in criticism as opposite poles of

history that represent to two halves of history that have snapped and organize history in a

"Manichean fashion." In Leo Marx's often-cited formulation, Adams

> uses the opposition between the Virgin and the Dynamo to figure an all-
>
> embracing conflict: a clash between past and present, unity and diversity, love and
>
> power. In his Manichean fashion he marshals all conceivable values. On one side
>
> he lines up heaven, beauty, religion, and reproduction; on the other: hell, utility,
>
> science, and production. (Marx 347)

The introduction of accelerating technologies such as the railway, in this reading, moves

society from one pole to the other at an increasing speed. At the same time, and as we

have seen, what Adams means by the metaphor of the "snapping" of society may not be as simple as the geometry of the metaphor suggests. Importantly, the Virgin and the Dynamo are metaphors for the two models of causality about which Adams had come to an impasse in his novels. As a veiled prime motor, the Dynamo is an image of action at a distance whose split has occurred spatially, from within history. The Virgin, on the other hand, is the classic concept of Aquinas's veiled prime motor which organized from outside of history. As she appeared to St. Bernard, the Virgin was "the great mediator. In the eyes of a culpable humanity, Christ was too sublime, too terrible, too just, but not even the weakest human frailty could fear to approach the Mother" (*Mont Saint-Michel* 90). As his protagonists' refusal to choose between the images indicates, Adams did not necessarily conceive of the choice as one between two radical alternatives, but an impossible choice in which precipitates the loss of both to some extent. Rather than two mutually exclusive truths, the Dynamo and the Virgin are two modes by which the signifier distributes the terms of containment and are both at work although, historically, with the advent of the railway, the Dynamo had taken over from the Virgin the place of dominance for society's image of itself. Rather than controlling thought directly, both the Dynamo and the Virgin control political space in different ways that shaped thoughts about them.

As Paul Virilio has also pointed out, capitalism's control of space as a political tool is a thoroughly dynamic process. As the example of the Granger laws demonstrates, the city is not a central command from which those who own capital distribute orders, a position of control reserved for the Virgin and her representatives. Rather, the "city is but

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a stopover, a point on the synoptic path of a trajectory . . . where the spectator's glance and the vehicle's speed of displacement were instrumentally linked" (*Speed and Politics* 31). Or, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put a very similar point, capitalism "is not at all territorial" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 454). Following Karl Marx, they point out that capitalist economy has become in the modern age "a mobile and convertible substance" that produces "axiomatics," codes that articulate "purely functional elements and relations whose nature is not specified, and which are immediately realized in highly varied domains simultaneously" (*Plateaus* 453-4). As Capitalism deterritorializes labor, making it "free labor" (in Karl Marx's ironic sense of the phrase), with one hand, it reterritorializes it with the other and at a different level of abstraction as "materialized labor" (*Plateaus* 454). The process by which geographic spaces were deterritorialized and reterritorialized in the late nineteenth century was through the shifting *potentia* of the train system. The train system, as a collection of materially based procedures for routine operation reorganizes the relationship between the city and the country as a mobile set of trajectories for both commodities and political "points of view." The Virgin and the Dynamo, in Adams's phrasing, are two "independent centres of force" that are caught in a moment of deterritorialization and reterritorialization during the expansion and consolidation of the railroad and its ideology.

While Henry Adams provides us with works that attempt to articulate the theoretical significance of the shifting power relationships caused by mass technological systems, it is his brother Charles that wrote the more detailed historical account of material aspect of this political shift towards capitalist deterritorialization and

reterritorialization. If an Adams were to be given the title of having founded the history of technology in the United States, Charles would (perhaps ironically) seem to fit that role better than his historian brother. By turning to Charles's writing, a clearer idea of exactly how the conjunction between technological systems and ideological structures operates will allow us to return to Henry Adams's broader theoretical considerations in his late career with more precision. Already in 1878, Charles Francis Adams Jr. remarked that the organizational structure of the railway had become dominant in American, and indeed Western, thought. He claimed that the railway was particularly dominant over the means by which the nation as a whole imagined itself in that it presented "one distinctive problem": it had "usurped" the function that had previously been performed by the highway system (*Origins* 80-1). Although it replaced the highway system, the railroad was, at the same time, "a thing *sui generis* – a vast and intricate formative influence, as well as a material power," in other words, a technology that set material limits on particular ideological *potentia* (*Origins* 81). The "formative influence" of the railroad's "material power" produced, in turn, a new technological thinking that made bourgeois sequential thinking impossible, and, in its impossibility, terrifying.

Charles Francis Adams, in his *Notes on Railroad Accidents*, published in 1879, described the "ghastly record" of the development of the railway system which, as it happens, "began with the opening of the first railroad – literally on the very morning which finally ushered the great system into existence as a successfully accomplished fact" (*Notes* 3). In Charles's "notes" on technology, each new technological component of the railway is tied to a series of events in which a "ghastly" aspect of what a

technology is capable of produces a new technology meant to create a stop-gap in the current system to correct the first technology's problems. Thus, the system becomes more complex as a result of attempts to correct its functioning. In this case, correction does not simplify or rationalize, however. It complicates and proliferates. These technological innovations do make the train system function more "humanely," in that they make vectors of safety more reliable. At the same time, that "humanity" is now a byproduct of an ever more complex and powerful system whose principles of development are more and more strictly technological.

In his collected notes on railway accidents, Charles gives his own version on the causes and possible solutions to the series of railway accidents that had shocked the world since the system's inauguration. This series of horrors, even the comparatively optimistic Charles admits, began with the inception of the railway itself and continued unabated, although in a shifting form that increased in quantitative scope with the railway itself as old problems were solved and new ones took their place. He describes in *Notes*, perhaps the first victim of the total train system, one Mr. Husskison, who was killed in the passive voice during the opening ceremonies of the English Manchester & Liverpool line in 1830. Struck by a train door while distracted by the celebratory commotion at the arrival of the first commercial train at its destination, Mr. Husskison was thrown to the ground between two tracks. One of his legs was unfortunately cast over the track upon which another train was approaching. The train, of course, crushed his leg "shockingly" (*Accidents* 6). Upon realizing what had happened, the crowd rushed to his aid but Mr. Husskison understood the severity of the injury and was reported to have exclaimed "I

have met my death" before being loaded back on the train to be taken in search of medical aid (*Accidents* 6). Mr. Husskison was correct in his assessment of the situation and he died shortly after the incident. At the dinner held after the demonstration of the train, one speaker reflected on the significance of Mr. Husskison's death, reportedly saying that "the melancholy reflection, that these prodigious efforts of the human race, so fruitful of praise but so much more fruitful of lasting blessings to mankind, have forced a tear from my eye by that unhappy casualty which deprived me of a friend and you of a representative" (*Accidents* 8). Again, the killing of Mr. Husskison was effectively done in the passive voice, the railway having confused the relationship between subject and verb, even from his own point of view. Mr. Husskison understood the train to have introduced a new danger into human society that had a direct relationship to what it would now mean to "meet one's death." We have already seen a fictional rendering of the same principles that Mr. Husskinson realized at the very advent of the total train system, in my discussion of the works of William Dean Howells. To control death can no longer be a matter of decision making but of structural control. We saw with William Dean Howells that the railway had loosened the traditional separation between life and death as categories determined by the signifier. As Paul Virilio put it, salvation in the modern era "is no longer in flight; safety is 'running toward your Death,' in 'killing your Death.' *Safety is in Assault* simply because the new ballistic vehicles make flight useless" (*Speed and Politics* 47). The "fruitful blessings" of the railway, as a result, would be experienced at the level of the individual as a "deprivation" of safety that could only be compensated for by the proliferation of more technologies.

Charles Adams, as a president of a railroad company, attempted to identify the practical means by which accidents such as that which occurred to Mr. Husskison could be avoided. The primary solutions Charles identified for the then-current problems of the railway, which involved "a degree of risk which no one would believe ever could willingly be incurred, but for the fact that it is," were the Westinghouse Brake and the Miller Platform (*Accidents* 15). Unable to flee the potential to be killed by these machines, the lanes through which the capacity of the machines to kill would be regulated and standardized by these innovations. Both technologies found new, material means for addressing the old problems of sequence and speed within the pragmatic situation of the railway. In fact, both technologies seek to obviate the reaction times required by new speeds with some kind of regimentation of sequence, either temporal or spatial. From its beginning as a commercial effort, railway cars were typically equipped with standard air-brakes. This meant that in order to stop the train, tubes that ran along the cars would be pressurized by the conductor, which would in turn press down on clamps that created friction on the wheels to stop their revolution. Of course, any damage to the tube would prevent it from pressurizing, leaving the system open to frequent accidents of sometimes colossal magnitude. The Westinghouse brake, however, reversed the action of the standard air-brake, making it a kind of negative capability. With the Westinghouse brake, the lever controlled by the engineer depressurized the tubes connected to the clamps, whose basic state is to be clamped to the wheel. By having the tubes constantly pressurized, the basic state of the wheels is to be braking. Thus, if any error in the system occurs, a state of relative "safety" is the default of the system. The

implicit admission at work in the Westinghouse brake is that control over the force of the train system could no longer reliably be placed in the control of a human. For anything like a "safe" system for human use to be put in place would require the removal of human decision from the equation. In its place, a system of automatic, mechanical procedures could prevent the operation of the machine in order to create a span of time in which a human could identify if there was a problem, what it might be, and how to proceed. "Safety" in this case, means the creation of a space for the time of human thought within the automatic process of the machine – hopefully before it is too late. This time-space of human thought, however, functions as an exceptional case within an otherwise automatic system. The human aspect of the total train system, then, happens at the level of design, prior to its existence, and the level of maintenance, only occasionally intervening in the action of the system under unusual circumstances.

We have, in fact, already seen in my second chapter the ideological effects of the Westinghouse brake play out in detail in a scene by Charles W. Chesnutt, and it may help to return to that example briefly. In Chesnutt's novel, *The Colonel's Dream*, as I've already argued, Chesnutt represented the new divisions of political space in the American South through the figure of the train. The Colonel's young boy and his black servant were killed at the end of that novel by a train that, when started on the track, is not stopped quickly enough to avoid hitting the two who have accidentally fallen in its path. A mechanic on the train, seeing the victims at the last moment, pulls "a lever mechanically, but too late to stop the momentum of the train," which was "not equipped with air brakes, even if these would have proved effective to stop in so short a distance" (*Colonel* 323).

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The point Chesnutt makes implicitly and in passing, Charles Adams makes generally and concretely. The human subject, as a locus for rational decision making has changed its position when placed within the total train system as an ideological reaction to a shift in material practice.

Rather than a tool constructed to fulfil human ends, the human decision making process has, by means of the material structure, been made a secondary process to the workings of the machine itself, even in its absence. Humans, in other words, would now be required to "think with their object," as Lacan put it, and that specific kind of object would be structurally required, in what Marx called the creation of "a *new* need," by the circulation of commodities as it historically took shape through the political and technological struggle with the problems introduced by the total train system (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 93). It is perhaps less surprising, then, that there had been such a struggle between labor and capital over the Granger Laws in the 1860s and 70s. For the Capitalist who benefited from the expansion of the total train system, the decision of the workings of the railway was always already made. The farmers' complaints of non-inclusion in the decision making process were therefore "senseless," tantamount to throwing themselves stupidly in the path of the oncoming train, from the capitalist's point of view.

Whereas the Westinghouse brake attempted to put automatic processes to work in the name of a safety within a temporal scheme, Charles Adams also describes how the Miller Platform attempted to put standardization to work in a spatial dimension to assure the safety of the machine system as a whole. It was soon revealed after the inauguration

of the train system that the telescoping effect of time-space caused by the train system was, in fact, a two-way street. Not only did the train telescope distances, making previously distant spaces closer together in temporal terms, but that telescoping effect could, under certain conditions, recoil on the machine itself. Early trains linked each car to another by way of a simple metal chain. It was quickly discovered that such a means of articulation could not safely withstand the inertia of slowing a train. In other words, when heavy, American train cars were brought to an abrupt stop,

> the platforms between the cars would have been broken off and the forward end of each car riding slightly up on its broken coupling would have shot in over the floor of the car before it, sweeping away the studding and other light wood-work and crushing stoves, seats and passengers into one inextricable mass, until, if the momentum was sufficiently great, the several vehicles in the train would be enclosed in each other somewhat like the slides of a partially shut telescope.
> (*Accidents* 46)

The Miller Platform was invented as a way to evenly distribute the inertia of the train along the entire floor of each car, articulating them at the correct points of pressure to avoid a car behind another from jumping over the floorboards of the leading car. Whereas the Westinghouse brake sought to eliminate human decision from the operation of the total train system in the temporal dimension, the Miller Platform sought to regulate the construction of individual cars at the spatial level, making their articulations standard across the industry. Neither the Miller platform nor the Westinghouse brake introduce radically new concepts into the train system. They, as Charles Adams repeatedly put it,

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employ a "simple" and "obvious" recurrence to correct mechanical principles (*Accidents* 52). Through the histories of these aspects of the total train system, however, we can see the means by which ideology and material reality dialectically shaped one another. Space and time were "thickened" into a particular articulation determined by the railway. "Safety" as a political concept was changed by technological formations and, in turn, determined the path of technological development, making each seem to reinforce the other in a progression that was, in turn, taken to be the progression of society as a whole toward a utopian future. From the point of view of the capitalist who experienced the alienation created by technology as for his own good, the only thing to do would be to "bring to their senses" anyone who could not see this inevitable system's ineluctable workings.

The resistance to these inventions in the American railroad system, Charles put down to railroad operators who were of "a certain type" who "always have protested and will always continue to protest that they have nothing to learn" (*Accidents* 156). Both the Adamses agree, then, that education, taken broadly, had failed the American system, although they disagreed on the ability of the system to adapt to the new multiplicities of American life with the old vocabulary of unity. Charles Adams makes clear that the realm of deterritorialization and reterritorialization would extend to the material itself in which the construction and maintenance of safety within the speeds of capitalist circulation would have to be part of the machine itself. What was gained in speed would be lost in control and reaction time. The only way out of the problem with a "reasonable" loss of human life would be the increasing complexity of the technical system, and its

being brought under the control of few and fewer centers of human decision making. The system itself would be the only apparatus that could deal with the problems it itself had created with enough speed to not make the collateral damage unpalatable to the news-reading public. These technologies, then, operate chronotopically, to slightly (but only slightly) extend Bakhtin's use of the term. They "thicken" particular modes of space-time along prearranged lines that determine the *potentia* of specific, technological modes of containment. These particular thickenings are, at the same time, ideologically motivated and structure material reality through technology. As individual technologies were developed to compensate for the inherent drawbacks of already existing technologies, they combined to form a set of interlocking chronotopes that standardized certain kinds of spatial and temporal articulation, both materially and ideologically.

As Walter Benjamin put it, the very immensity of the railroad and its regimes, both material and social, for establishing interlocking sequences could, ironically, have the effect of confusing sequence in general. People, as the railway was developing, "did not really know how they should react to technological advances," which "had no precedent in the past" ("Firth of Tay" 564). In his description for a radio broadcast describing a train accident that occurred over the Firth of Tay, Benjamin quoted first-hand accounts of the night-time plunge of a railway car off a bridge over the firth. Sequence is made difficult by the technology's arrangement of space relative to the human capacity to understand it. The "first sign of the disaster was not the noise made by the falling train, but the flames that three fishermen noticed at the time, without suspecting that they came from the locomotive as it went hurtling down" ("Firth of Tay"

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567). History, in this case, the placing of chronological events into a meaningful series of causal relationships, becomes an essentially retrospective affair and cannot be directly lived in any sense. The railway ultimately confuses bourgeois development-in-time because the actual forces of which the train is an effect cannot be understood by the human eye. The divisions both of space and subjectivity brought about by the total train system would require, according to Henry Adams a new kind of subjectivity that incorporated the technological into it. It is this new subjectivity that attempts to progress without sequence but within a particular space he describes in his later works, *A Letter to American Teachers of History*, *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* and *The Education of Henry Adams*.

Bicycle Riding

In describing new subject positions from within the now dominant ideology of the total train system, Adams would come to stress historically contingent spatial relations. These relations had become to a degree standardized and temporally regimented through the technologies of the railway above the a-historic veiled prime motor which he kept in his constellation of influences, but in a negative capacity, as a mode of defining the new position by contrast. Although Adams was sensitive to the new technological formations, he was often overzealous in his assumptions of the degree to which variation was eliminated within the new formations. Society, in 1868, when he returned to the United States from England, was already coalescing around large-scale lanes of movement in that it "offered the profile of a long, straggling caravan, stretching loosely toward the

prairies, its few score of leaders far in advance and its millions of immigrants, negroes, and Indians far in the rear, somewhere in archaic time" (*Education* 228). Within his new understanding of the regimentations put in place by the railway, even in its comparatively early stages, old hierarchies that associated a not particularly diverse "other" with "archaic time" and an implied whiteness with modernity by negation remained firmly established in his Brahmin mind. By 1893, when Adams began speculating on the precise features of this new, technologically determined subjectivity required by the total train system also began to introduce racial thinking of a new sort.

Although much has been made by critics of the repression of twenty years of his life in the *Education*, it is no accident that Adams chose to resume his narrative just before 1893. As Adams's biographer, Ernest Samuels, put it, the economic panic of 1893 "opened his eyes to the larger economic and social movement" that had become difficult for him to want to engage with after the collapse of his efforts towards a progressive reformism and the death of his wife (Samuels 124). Significantly, Henry Adams was recalled in 1893 from his nomadic travels to Quincy, Massachusetts by Charles in order to deal with the fallout of the economic collapse. Although Henry, never one for great financial risk, was relatively untouched by the damage of the event, Charles and their other family intimates were severely hit by the crash. Additionally, Henry's social sphere showed signs everywhere of their own precarity under certain conditions. As his biographer put it the

> most conspicuous casualty [of the 1893 panic] was Clarence King, [on whom
> Adams had based the character of George Strong in *Esther*] who escaped from the

hopeless confusion of his affairs by going quietly mad so that he had to be packed

off to Bloomingdale asylum for a few months. Everywhere social circles chattered

of suicides and sudden deaths. (Samuels 117)

As Adams himself put it, in "1871 he had thought King's education ideal, and his

personal fitness unrivalled. No other young American approached him for the

combination of chances – physical energy, social standing, mental scope and training,

wit, geniality, and science, that seemed superlatively American and irresistibly strong"

(*Education* 330). After 1893, however, madness would be not an aberration or divine gift

but a reasonable reaction to an irrational, yet technologically organized capitalism. In a

perverse mode by which the space for the time of human thought could create safety,

Clarence King demonstrated to Adams that madness and the asylum could now function

as a space of safety in the perverse speeds of the total train system. As Andrew Carnegie

wrote in 1893, it "is doubtful if a more disastrous financial cyclone ever blasted a country

to such an extent in so short a time" (Carnegie 355). The panic of 1893 was significant

enough, in fact, to throw into doubt the very process by which valuation was established

at the level of the temporal compression of geographic space.

In many ways, the economic crash of 1893 and the political turmoil that

surrounded it were part of the same struggle that had broken out a couple of decades

before around the Granger Acts. The populist agitations that had begun in part because of

perceived abuses by railway companies had become so organized over time to include the

fight over whether or not the American economy should base its currency on the assumed

natural value of gold. By 1879 the United States had returned to the gold standard after

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the Civil War in which so-called "greenbacks" or government notes had circulated as currency until the Resumption Act of 1875. Effectively, however, throughout Reconstruction "there was a dual monetary standard – the greenback dollar and the gold dollar – the one official and the other unofficial" which existed in an uneasy equilibrium, each benefiting different sectors of the economy (Friedman 27). "World production of gold," however, "had decreased between 1865 and 1890 whereas the production of industry, mining, and agriculture had increased. Moreover, the population also increased: in the United States in 1890 it was almost twice that of 1865" (Cashman 302). The disparity between the increasing population and decreasing access to gold led to discontent over the scarcity of currency and an increasing demand by farmers for currency coined in silver in some sectors of the economy to replace the easy accessibility of "greenbacks." The demand for silver currency in the United States primarily came from farmers whose transactions were typically not large enough to require the gold currency used in international markets. Because the demand for silver was comparatively higher in the United States than other industrialized countries, European governments were able to "relieve" the United States of its fund of "pure unchanging healthful gold" in favor of the now more abundant, "blood-poisoning silver," as Andrew Carnegie put it within the metaphor of the social organism of capitalist exchanges (Carnegie 358). In 1893, "the commercial failure of a stock market favorite . . . touched off a panic for which the stage had been set by the general uneasiness about the currency" (Friedman 108)[14].

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[14] An alternate, perhaps more depressing version of this dissertation could conceivably be written on what Milton Friedman might mean by "general uneasiness" here but, for the sake of a more or less simple

Because more accessible, however, basing the currency on both silver and gold

was perceived by Midwestern farmers as more egalitarian than remaining exclusively on

the gold standard. Writing for the Populist movement that advocated for an expanded

currency in 1893, for instance, senator William Alfred Peffer of Kansas demanded an

"exclusively national currency . . . to consist of gold and silver coined on equal terms" in

order to "emancipate labor" and be sure that the people are "served equally and alike"

(Peffer 665-6). Walter Benn Michaels has argued that this struggle over the very

definition of value and production, what it meant to be treated "equally and alike" within

an economic system, caused a rethinking of literary representation at the time. He

claimed that

> because the economy cannot, on the one hand, be reduced to the material it is
>
> made of (desires, actions) or, on the other hand, be turned into some other person
>
> and reduced to the material that person is made of (consequences), it provides a
>
> singularly compelling image of the naturalist distinction between material and
>
> identity. (Michaels 179-80)

Although, as Adams pointed out, few people in the debate actually understood the

difficult issue, it was swept up in the overdetermined demarcations of political parties and

their allegiances to capital or to labor that had initially been set in the spatial "splitting"

brought about by the railway. Adams himself somewhat facetiously claimed he "had

taken no interest in the matter, and knew nothing about it, except as a very tedious hobby

of his friend Dana Horton" (*Education* 319). Adams had seen the circulation of

commodities create cities in the Midwest in the 1860s and 70s. Material and identity were

explanation of the generally accepted narrative of events, it suffices.

less distinct from Adams's point of view than Michaels argues, missing the dialectic, when it came to the discursive practices that could not be reduced to a single term. Persons themselves are to a certain degree a spatial function for Adams, rather than a category distinct from the circulation of capital. The motion of the total train system's exchanges could make even the strongest of Americans, like Clarence King, go mad in order to escape its impossible decision between value as a circulation and as an imminent, material quality. The most problematic image of this creation of persons through mechanized spatial division that underwrote material value in Adams's later thought is the Jewish ghetto with which he had a complex relationship.

Adams's first attempts in and around 1893 to describe modern multiplicity, brought with it another tendency in his thought that has not been fully accounted for by critics: the intensification of his anti-Semitism late in life. As J.C. Levenson argued, Adams's anti-Semitism took a comparatively strange form to many of his aristocratic contemporaries, becoming an "obsession" after 1892 as a result of Adams's "loss of the Enlightenment faith," the suicide of his wife, and the anger and fear brought about by the economic panic of 1893 ("Etiology" 577). He does not seem to have drifted into anti-Semitism as a cultural obligation of upper-class Boston, but through a slow, personal development. Although not especially anti-Semitic in his early writings for someone of his cultural background, by 1888 Adams's letters began to include offhand anti-Semitic statements, such as his wish to "damn the Jews" during his frustration with having to borrow money in order to make repairs on his home (qtd. in "Etiology" 578). Levenson calls such comments a "Briticized-colloquial defiance of money-lenders" rather than a

developed and targeted anti-Semitism ("Etiology" 578). Although Adams was always "immune to home-grown anti-Semitism of Populist melodrama," his anti-Semitism began to develop as a British-influenced association of particular Jews and bankers ("Etiology" 582). Adams came to see Jewish bankers in particular as profiteers in the fallout of the economic panic of 1893, writing to a friend in 1895 that the "Jew question is really the most serious of our problems. It is Capitalistic Methods run to their logical result. Let's hope to pull their teeth" (qtd in "Etiology" 583). The most virulent, "French" phase of his anti-Semitism developed from this association of Jews and banking to an association between Capitalism as such with Jews as such – the "'Jew régime' of corrupt government and recurrent financial scandals" ("Etiology" 584).

Levenson's argument hoped to determine whether or not Adams's anti-Semitism should be considered systematic enough to classify him with T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as authors whose racial prejudices should be taken by critics as fundamental to their artistic practices for "a post-Auschwitz era" ("Etiology" 570). Levenson ultimately decided that Adams's anti-Semitism should not be considered as recalcitrant as those writers. And yet, one should not be too quick to dismiss Adams's thinking about causality and historical development and his simultaneous growing anti-Semitism as entirely isolable. If the disruption of Western historical continuity ultimately led to an "empire of Coal" which simultaneously unified the world as a mechanistically determined whole and split it from historical sequence, in Adams's mind, this lack of temporal sequence in favor of spatial difference provided the conceptual category that set the terms for a new kind of racist thinking.

Rather than a strictly biological difference, racial categories became geographic for Adams, biological determinism having, by an anthropomorphism, come to rule at the level of society conceived of as a totalizing mechanical organism. Whereas the empire of coal produces subjects by their location within a disjointed circulation and its vectors of relative safety, the Jewish population became in his mind the population that was both geographically exempt from that circulation, "reeking of the Ghetto," and, because outside of the circulation, in a unique place to take the role of controlling, veiled motor for the Capitalism Adams hated (qtd in Levenson 592). Although Adams's explicit anti-Semitism abated with time, the conceptual relation within the new, non-sequential progress Adams attempted to describe adopted racism less as a continuation of old traditions of biological racial superiority than as an economic category relative to capitalist circulation, a function of the biological metaphor that society had become through the total train system, whose racism could exist in the twentieth century in a more mobile form. Effectively, because "contained" by the ghetto rather than the railway system, biological difference could be reinscribed as a spatial difference rather than a biological one.

After around 1906, with the conclusion of the Dreyfus Affair, Adams seems to have to a certain degree conquered the worst of his anti-Semitic outbursts (which had, at any rate, almost always been limited to private conversations and correspondence) in response to the obviousness of the scapegoating of a Jewish man by European society. Although even in the *Education* there are remnants of anti-Semitism, he seems to have either decided that if the Jews were responsible for the worst of what international

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capitalism has become, those effects would not be changed by hating the people who did it, or, and perhaps more likely, he seems to have simply given up caring about the subject at all. In his own *Education*, Adams says relatively little about race. At the same time, he begins his own narrative by explicitly comparing himself to a Jew, a hypothetical "Israel Cohen" who "would scarcely have been more distinctly branded" than Adams himself in his connection with the "track" of Adamses before him (*Education* 9). Although, as Levenson notes, his *Education* was largely (but not entirely) free of the vitriol towards Jews that he had expressed earlier, the concept of the Jew was now available to him as a metaphor devoid of its specific history for that which is marked as outside and alien to the circulation of capital.

Adams wrote that there is no precise definition of biological "race" and probably could not be. He also points out, in his *Letter to American Teachers of History*, that to think of race as a way of organizing humans that is trans-historical is automatically subject to transcendental categories, categories of which he was already suspicious. "So far as concerns the history of man," as he put it, "every period of the earth's history beyond its actual condition, is transcendental" (*Letter* 172). The "archaic time" of the racialized other would, in fact, operate as a transcendental within the new total train system, but from within its own history rather than an a-historic horizon of possibility. In turn, history "began with admitting as its starting-point that the speechless animal who raised himself to the use of an inflected language must have made an effort greater and longer than the effort required for him, after perfecting his tongue, to vulgarize and degrade it" (*Letter* 179). The new "transcendental" would not, like its Enlightenment

predecessor be an *a priori* category of racial difference, but a transcendental produced in reverse as that space which escapes Capitalist circulation and degrades a language that provides meaning, perhaps in the "ghetto" that, in Adams's somewhat bizarre conspiracy logic takes advantage of the system that produced it.

Adams attempted to articulate what subjectivity would be with technological articulation incorporated into it in its very being, from within capitalist circulation in opposition to the "ghetto" that was outside of capitalism's motion. Around the time of the panic Adams became more equivocal about the influence of the railway, which had by then started to become a dominant ideological structure in society but was beginning to recede from immediate political struggle as an object. The railway had been "an active interest to which all others were subservient, and which absorbed the energies of some sixty million people to the exclusion of every other force, real or imaginary" (*Education* 314). And yet, by 1892, the railway was beginning to wane as a new force, in the sense of "novel." For Adams, it "offered less chance for future profit" than it had in 1868 (*Education* 315). Rather, it was becoming "new" in Benjamin's sense of normalized but, at the same time, having "no precedent in the past." Adams "had grown up with" the railway, but nothing "new was to be done or learned there, and the world hurried on to its telephones, bicycles, and electric trams" (*Education* 315). The political struggles over the railway system were more or less decided by the 1890s. And yet, the ideological articulations they had produced went on to dominate social thinking in other forms. So, at "past fifty, Adams solemnly and painfully learned to ride the bicycle" (*Education* 315). Although the world hurried on, the structure that had been created by the railway system

continued to influence the relations between individuals and a technological

progressivism, determined by the railway, which had taken a more complete form.

With his quasi-metaphor of bicycle riding, Henry Adams attempted to rewrite for

the modern age the famous Platonic allegory of a well-regulated transcendental

subjectivity, one that would provide for both the rationality and madness in the new

world. The figure of the bicycle would come to represent for Adams the new subjectivity

that "thought with its object" in order to circulate without either falling into the spatial

ghetto of his hypothetical "Israel Cohen" or the temporal madness of Clarence King as a

necessary prosthetic within the capitalist circulation that required it. In the *Phaedrus*,

Socrates attempted to convince Phaedrus that madness was not necessarily something to

be avoided in all cases. The "greatest goods," in fact, "come to us through madness,

provided it is bestowed by divine gift" (*Phaedrus* 244a5). This divine madness is one

proportion of the "mixture" that is the "ensouled" body of a mortal which Socrates likens

to a charioteer with his two horses, one "noble" and the other "of the opposite stock"

(*Phaedrus* 246b1). While Zeus, "first in the heavens," drives a "winged chariot, putting

all things in order and caring for all," mortals drive "with difficulty; for the horse that is

partly bad weighs them down, inclining them towards the earth through its weight"

(*Phaedrus* 246e5). For Socrates the "soul is immortal" because, like Adams's idealized

version of Niagara Falls, it "moves itself" and that divine movement is "also source and

first principle for the other things which move" (*Phaedrus* 245c10). Through "self-

control," the charioteer is able to economize his forces toward an appropriate forward

motion of the ensemble that unites the sometimes contradictory impulses of madness and rationality, soul and body (*Phaedrus* 254b5).

For Henry Adams in the twentieth century, who had seen his friend Clarence King go "quietly mad" in the face of the economic collapse of 1893, however, the causality of the motion of the soul had become reversed. Self-motion, or pure soul, was no longer thinkable in any significant sense after the introduction of the dynamo and the empire of coal that it required. Rather, humanity had "the air of taking for granted [society's] indefinite progress toward perfection" to the degree that it had "usurped" from God the "rank of lord of creation" (*Letter* 80, 157). It was a child not of Plato but of Descartes's "compromise" to escape "the dead-lock of free-will," that Adams himself had narrated in his early novels (*Letter* 157, 160). Descartes "proposed to free man from material bondage," within the human body, "provided he might mechanize all other vital energies" (*Letter* 159). This paradox, Adams claimed, would leave "the world to go on asserting two contradictory principles," those of the determinism and chaos, or God and Darwin, "in the same breath, down to the present day, to the undiminished embarrassment of Universities" (*Letter* 159). The bicycle then, following Lacan, became Adams's figure for the "signifier marking the place where it begins to be called another name," that of modern subjectivity and its historically specific thought-objects or object-thoughts and their corollary modes of containment (*Écrits* 605) If modernity remains mad, it is no longer a divine gift but a contradiction internal to thought that plays itself out in an embarrassed silence. Because humanity assumed itself to be a prime mover, yet relied on the empire of coal to demonstrate this assumption, the Cartesian world of the twenteith

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century would remain split along the new, technological lines, like the president from *Democracy,* unable to understand in any practical sense that "if a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so" (*Écrits* 139).

In his *Education*, Adams takes bicycle riding as a metaphor for the new, spatially determined subjectivity required in the age of the railway. It is the "mechanized" force that is the wager for individuality instituted by Descartes and made into historically contingent articulations by modern capitalism. The new subjectivity had become dominant partly to the degree that it had become institutionalized at Harvard College by "one's psychological friends" who could explain the new subjectivity only because "it mattered so little to either party" (*Education* 410). Adams, having found that "the psychologists had, in a few cases, distinguished several personalities in the same mind, each conscious and constant, individual and exclusive," professed the fact to be "scarcely surprising" (*Education* 410). For Adams,

> the compound ψῡχή took at once the form of a bicycle-rider, mechanically
> balancing himself by inhibiting all his inferior personalities, and sure to fall into
> the sub-conscious chaos below, if one of his inferior personalities got on top. The
> only absolute truth was the sub-conscious chaos below, which every one could
> feel when he sought it. (*Education* 411)

Rather than Socrates's "self-control," the bicycle-rider now "mechanically" balanced himself. Madness itself had become the "only absolute truth" whose necessity conceptually grounded a mechanistic rationality. If a sequence to human events was possible in the technological age, this sequence was not a positive statement but the result

of a mechanistic "inhibition" grounded in the technical activity of the bicycle. In the wager between soul and body, modernity had chosen the soul, and in doing so had lost both in its new kind of impossible choice. Adams, in 1902, "woke up with a shudder as though he had himself fallen off his bicycle" (*Education* 411).

At stake for Adams in his *Education*, then, is what Lacan referred to as the "history of a life lived as history" in a world that had not yet entirely separated itself from its assumptions of history as an *a priori* category (*Écrits* 366). In order for history, which was no longer self-evident, to be established, it would now be at least partially subject to the material conditions that limited its *potentia*, both materially and ideologically. After Adams's death, it was discovered that he had kept with him at all times a poem of his own composition entitled "The Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres." In one version of that poem, Adams wrote to the Virgin that

> For centuries I brought you all my cares,
>
> And vexed you with the murmurs of a child;
>
> You heard the tedious burden of my prayers;
>
> You could not grant them, but at least you smiled
>
> If then I left you, it was not my crime,
>
> Or if a crime, it was not mine alone. ("Prayer to the Virgin" 126)

Adams was not able, ultimately, to escape the logic of the total train system that had created both a new subjectivity that determined subjects in their acts and created a new kind of racial destiny that would be grounded in the biological determinism not of

individuals but of the social organism as a whole, anthropomorphically reified as a body itself. It would be left to others, including the poet and scholar James Weldon Johnson, to more specifically define the critique of the total train system that Adams had begun in its fully dominant ideological formation.

Chapter 4:

Not Even in Daylight: The Necropolitics of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*

And so we ride,
Over land and tide,
Without a thought of fear –
Man never had
The faith in God
That he has in an engineer!
        James Weldon Johnson, "The Word of an Engineer" (1917)

 If we wish to recognize a reality that is proper to psychical reactions, we must not begin by choosing among them; we must begin by no longer choosing.
        Jacques Lacan, "Beyond the 'Reality Principle'" (1936)

Then nausea took possession of me, and I had grave doubts about reaching my destination alive. If I had the trip to make again, I should prefer to walk.
        James Weldon Johnson, The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man (1912)

The Faint Excitement of Watching Traffic

On June 26th, 1938 the scholar, poet, novelist, and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson was killed in a collision at a grade-crossing between the automobile he and his wife were in and a train. As the *New York Times* reported it, the "author of 'The Book of Negro Spirituals' and other works died a few moments after witnesses had extricated him from the wreckage of his automobile," adding that "both his legs had been broken and his skull fractured" and that identification "of Mr. Johnson was established through personal papers which gave his address as 415 West 148th Street, New York City" ("Negro Leader Dies in Crossing Crash"). By 1938, technological death had become a regular part of life. Identifying people through their papers became a necessity because of the extreme violence done onto bodies by technological force. Additionally, grisly details of the effects of force on human bodies were reported in a clinical, matter-

of-fact tone. Rather than a continued disbelief voiced by Charles Francis Adams, Jr. five decades earlier at the risks run by citizens every day, death by railway had become a normalized event.

By 1912, the year James Weldon Johnson's best-known work, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, was anonymously published, the United States had more or less filled out the physical space of the continent with a system of railroads that inextricably tied the agricultural West with the markets of the East. The American frontier had been closed for more than two decades and was already a mythic object in the American imagination, no longer existing in any real form but remaining as a structure of feeling. Furthermore, 1912 saw the sinking of the *Titanic*, a terrifying tragedy that signaled the scale with which technological devastation would occur in the twentieth century. The *Titanic* represented the "intimate welding" of technological progress and its "sinister mate," disaster, as Thomas Hardy put it ("The Convergence of the Twain" ix). Not only would technology necessarily escalate the quantitative scale and qualitative shock of individual disasters, it would fuel the escalation of American imperialism in Panama and Nicaragua, to bring about political regimes profitable to the interests of the United States. Seemingly by accident, though largely guided by Henry Adams's closest friend John Hay, Secretary of State under the administrations of William McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt, the United States found itself militarily defending its "open door" policies in China and the construction of the Panama Canal that assured the material means of access from Europe to the East. Even as it was surpassed, the logic specific to the train system influenced the concept of development itself. The spatial logic of the railway as it

developed in its expansion across the continent and technical complexity by 1912 had become a truly global process.

In his autobiography, *Along This Way*, Johnson described the new aesthetic experience of the global train system from a local perspective, or, as he put it, why "country people love to meet passing trains" (*Along This Way* 260). Living in the South after Reconstruction, as Johnson knew, would always require a consciousness of political space as also an economic space. Although for many years, Johnson was reticent about his own experiences with Southern violence, he knew enough to know that "a strange Negro on a backcountry road in Georgia was not entirely secure, not even in daylight" (*Along* 259). It was not until Johnson's retirement from his position with the NAACP that W.E.B. DuBois "delivered a shocking tribute to his colleague's activism when he divulged that 'Mr. Johnson . . . was once nearly lynched in Florida, and quite naturally lynching was to him, despite all obvious excuses and explanations and mitigating circumstances, can never be less than a terrible real.'" (Goldsby 166). In his autobiography Johnson wrote that, when staying in the South, he would often join a friend on Saturday afternoons in going to the railway station "to see the four trains come in and go out, two in the morning and two in the afternoon" (*Along* 260). Although he knew none of the passengers arriving or departing, "there was a faint excitement in watching traffic" (*Along* 260). Johnson did not expand on the observation, yet he registered the double-effect of the total train system as something that had shaped political space in the South, making it never "entirely secure" for a black man subjected to the whims of a white population's implicit omnipresence but also giving it a "faint

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excitement" in its material connection to global forces of routine capitalist exchange and its possibilities for rapid change. The train had performed a kind of political exchange between different kinds of security that Johnson had developed more fully in his *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*. While the train gave a kind of reassurance of regularity and connection to a broader world, it also meant that there would no longer be anywhere to run. As he put it later in his career, distance relative to concentrations of capital no longer had any political significance as there were "no more 'vacant' places on earth" (*Negro Americans, What Now?* 5).

In this chapter I will argue that Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, attempts to represent American, black subjectivity as it was structurally expressed through the new, now dominant, total train system. I will begin by arguing that Johnson's novel rewrites the relationship between political space and identity as it was found in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* for the new, material articulations created by the railway. Whereas Franklin's concept of an American subjectivity was based on the plasticity of an identity that could be cast off as a result of geographic distances, Johnson's concept of subjectivity in which geographic distances had been altered by the train system is inextricably tied to capitalist circulation and its requirements on subjectivity. Then, I will turn to the American practice of lynching as a nascent version of what Achille Mbembe called "necropolitics." Johnson's novel, I will argue, bears the traces of its global scene of writing in that the train system allowed the explicitly colonial aspects of the circulation and distribution of power to become dominant in American life in certain sections of the nation by way of the railway system's influence. As a colonial

state that had transitioned into a fully sovereign nation, the practice of lynching allowed

United States culture to retain colonial necropolitical practices to regulate its concept of

itself. Finally, I will argue that this necropolitical element of American subjectification

forces Johnson to imagine resistance to it as a reversal of the creation of necropolitical

spaces. Rather than the creation of dead spaces in which the state guarantees its own

safety through existential violence, resistance should be understood as a tactic for the

creation of time within the Capitalist system of exchanges through the railway system.

Although capitalist and white supremacist goals and assumptions are not

identical, within American society, as Johnson points out in his novel, the alliance

between the two has been long-standing to the point of partially merging in areas that

supported lynching in the late nineteenth century. Once the frontier had been replaced not

simply in fact but in the national imagination by a totalizing technological system, the

frontier's logic of limits to be surpassed turned in on itself to create fantastic borders

within itself that would be empirically controlled for the benefit of explicitly capitalist

political goals but in some cases through white supremacist means. In his Preface to *The

Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, Johnson already signals his engagement with an

empiricist vocabulary based on the assumption of populations whose arbitrarily chosen

features could be statistically compared as a means of producing knowledge about the

state. Some critics claim that the Preface is "revolutionary" in that it ironizes the

assumptions of his white audience and the systems for representing difference, produced

by *fiat* to supposedly analyze the totality of the body politic (Goellnicht 19). As Robert

Fleming put it, the novel can only be read as a "deeply ironic character study of a

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marginal man who narrates the story of his own life" without "realizing the significance,"

producing the effect of a "complex and many-sided" character that evades stereotype

(Fleming 83, 96). In the "Preface," signed by "The Publishers" and actually written by

Johnson himself, the author attempts to control the ways in which the novel should be

read. For its initial publication in 1912, the novel was promoted as an authentic

autobiography and Johnson encouraged this. It wasn't until 1927, after Johnson had come

to prominence as a scholar and civil rights leader that the novel was re-released with the

author's name on it. Like Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* before it, Johnson's initial

release of his novel began to ironize the concept of the unified, speaking subject that is

defined by a narrative sequence of assumed causes and effects before the text itself had

been read by an audience. The novel's irony develops from its simultaneous effacement

of individuality in a work supposed to express the totality of an individual's subjective

experience.

Other critics, however, read the Preface straight, as "a coherent expression of

personalized response to systems of signification and symbolic geography occasioned by

social structure" (Stepto 97). For this alternate reading, the Preface is an honest statement

of Johnson's goals with the novel to represent "in a dispassionate, though sympathetic,

manner conditions as they actually exist between the whites and blacks to-day," making it

"ultimately something less than a novel" (*Autobiography* vii, Stepto 127). Johnson

claimed that writers before him had "treated the colored American *as a whole*" and each

writer "has taken some one group of the race to prove his case" (*Autobiography* vii). He,

by contrast, hoped to create "a composite and proportionate presentation of the entire

race, embracing all of its various groups and elements, showing their relations with each other and to the whites" (*Autobiography* vii). Through this method, he would be able to show his white readers "a view of the inner life of the Negro in America," by way of being "initiated into the 'freemasonry,' as it were, of the race" (*Autobiography* vii). While it is clear that any attempt to represent at a single stroke the multiplicity of black experience in America is necessarily an ironic endeavor, requiring as it does a parallax view, the significance of the irony remains open to interpretation. These empiricist gestures are, first and foremost, correctives to an already established order whose features are only hinted at by the text. The "conditions as they actually exist" are, despite the self-evidence of the claim, are what are at stake in the ironic corrective Johnson offers.

In other words, although Johnson clearly claims to synthesize various black perspectives into a "composite" view for a white audience, what would the nature of that multiform "sphynx" be when the "veil" has been "drawn aside" (*Autobiography* vii)? Whereas DuBois, famously, described the sensation of this "second-sight" brought about by the veil as a "double-consciousness" that created "two warring ideals in one dark body," Johnson, like Charles Chesnutt before him, suggests that the issue is even more complex as the ideals themselves are not unitary, but composites (DuBois 8). The very form of the novel seems to immediately belie its claim of rigorous empirical accuracy to a totality. Whereas Chesnutt's *Marrow of Tradition* from a decade before might have a stronger claim to attempting something like a "composite" view by giving a panoramic treatment of an entire Southern town in a more realist mode, Johnson's novel remains strictly focalized through a single, liminal protagonist through his early life as he travels

around the US and Europe, in a kind of *Künstlerroman*, shifting between and attempting to synthesize slightly different subject positions. These subject positions themselves are, however, overdetermined by the narrator's willful assuming of particular racial identifications, motivated by either a struggle for racial equality or simply the desire not only to survive but to thrive in the United States. The overdetermination of subjectivity, at the same time, is also overdetermined by a shifting dialectic between the container and the thing contained, the deciding subject and the situation that sets the terms of decision, each half of the dialectic affecting the other depending the geographic and social situation in which the narrator finds himself, or at least the self he might tactically prefer in the situation.

The novel traces the development of the protagonist as he moves from place to place and switches from accepting a black identity to passing for white, all the while attempting to develop himself as an individual and survive on his musical talent. Given the famously equivocal ending of the novel, in which the narrator definitively chooses to pass for white, it is difficult to see the Preface as anything but critically ironic of the very terms it sets forth by which to read the novel. Furthermore, given the narrator's final claim that in passing for white, he had "chosen the lesser part" by having "sold" his "birthright for a mess of pottage," the irony that structurally forces itself upon the narrator as the story progresses is that of an unequal exchange rather than a synthesis (*Autobiography* 100). The ironic, unequal exchange that the narrator chooses, in fact, plays out as the narrative progresses in many ways as a spatial transaction, through the system of railways and steamers that now span the globe. To change subject positions in

an effort to survive within American oppression can only be achieved by changing one

space for another, and, as a corollary, one subject-position for another to meet the

variations of a circulating and changing racist culture.

The novel's debt to the tradition of black writers that came before has been well

documented and expertly discussed by critics such as Houston Baker, Robert Stepto, and

Paul Gilroy. Johnson's *Autobiography* can also, however, effectively be read as a

revision of the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin in that it attempts to rewrite

Franklin's playful use of Enlightenment assumptions of political space for the post-

Reconstruction era. By rewriting this foundational American text, Johnson not only

makes a point about the difficulty of understanding a unified subject position from behind

the veil of racism in America, but the degree to which the fundamental plurality of any

subject position reinforced racial division through the material and cultural institutions

shaped by capitalist circulation. As we've seen in the context of Charles Chesnutt's work,

literal mobility was seen as not simply a metaphor but, in the minds of some, a material

guarantee of social mobility in the United States. Franklin helped crystalize this myth in

the early years of the nation, setting the terms for how American's would imagine their

individuality to function. This quasi-metaphor of literal, geographic mobility as a means

of achieving personal development remained intact from Franklin to Henry David

Thoreau's musings on a society "nowhere to be seen" when standing "in the midst of a

huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off," and to Huck Finn's decision

to "light out for the territories" at the end of Mark Twain's novel (Thoreau 241, Twain

373). In each of these examples, following Franklin, the country is posited as a negative

space of freedom in contrast to the ordered, positive social world of the city. For a subject within democracy to exist at all, for these writers, requires a space in which any external influence can be put in abeyance. Nature is, in effect, a space in which alternatives to current conditions can be imagined. And yet, as we have also seen in the context of Charles Chesnutt's and Henry Adams's work, the institution of the railway made any assumption of essential division between the country and the city only a rhetorical gesture. The railway had broken down even the illusion of these divisions, rendering both the country and the city different formations, different thickenings of speed, in the circulation between the agricultural West and the concentrations of capital in the East. It is precisely this concept of the split between the country and the city that Johnson claims no longer exists in the twentieth century as a means for creating a unified subject position.

At a purely superficial level, there are many resonances between the characters of Franklin and the ex-colored man. Franklin hoped to influence his "Posterity" through his writing in that they may "imitate" his example of a slyly industrious proto-capitalist (Franklin 3). Both Franklin and the ex-colored man have an "unlikely beginning," which for Franklin included an escape from his "harsh & tyrannical" brother who had instilled in Franklin an "Aversion to arbitrary Power" (Franklin 20-1, 25). Like Franklin, the ex-colored man is a precocious child genius who often is motivated by the "gratifying" of his "vanity" (a phrasing that is identical to Franklin's) and attempts to escape tyrannical influences to construct a coherent identity within American society (*Autobiography* 44). Coherent identity, in both cases, is understood at a superficial level to mean a separation

of the individual from "external" influences. Identity at its most obvious should be for

these characters a *sui generis* creation. Similarly, just as Franklin partly constructs his

identity as a negation of the ways in which English workers kept "themselves under"

through excessive drinking, the ex-colored man does the same with the cigar makers he

associates with during his time in Florida, who he claims are "careless and improvident"

(Franklin 47, *Autobiography* 33). Both the ex-colored man and Franklin understand self-

fashioning to at least in part require the anthropological study of society to identify and

therefore avoid the abstract forces that hamper other people's ability to accrue power in

some form.

Importantly, however, while there are many superficial similarities between the

local tactics for engaging with society of Franklin and the ex-colored man, the

significance of these tactics within their contexts differs immensely. Like Johnson's

Preface to the *Autobiography*, Franklin similarly offers his life as a potential corrective,

but limited to his own "Posterity" whose own subjectivity may be formed through

imitation of his own. The corrective possibilities of Franklin's text, require the

dissociation of "success" in the world from one's birth, Franklin's own posterity having

to learn of him by reading his text rather than simply being his "Posterity." For the ex-

colored man, however, one's birth remained an issue by way of American concepts of

racial heredity.

Whereas the first half of Franklin's text is essentially a private joke between

himself and his possible posteriors about the public sphere, that joke changes its meaning

for the ex-colored man who was an inheritor not of an active reading of Franklin's text

but the tradition that had misread it, a misreading that had already been inscribed in Franklin's text itself. The first half of Franklin's text, written before the war for independence, is a much more playful text than the second half. The first half describes the process by which Franklin learned to "not only to be in *Reality* Industrious & frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* of the Contrary" (Franklin 68). Appearances, in Franklin's autobiography, exist in the public sphere of the city, where Franklin would carry his products in a wheelbarrow down the main street with no particular goal in mind other than the appearance of industry. Reality, on the other hand, was a strictly personal life that was infinitely malleable and unknowable, hidden behind the mask of public status. For Franklin, the "real" individual does not exist in any social sense, but is merely an assumed prerequisite for a public life. After the Revolution, however, James Abel and William Vaughan asked Franklin to continue his writing, with the new country of the United States as an audience rather than Franklin's own "posterity." They, not understanding the fundamental irony of Franklin's concept of the relationship between public and private selves, exhort Franklin to continue his self-help book as a "key to life," creating "virtuous and manly minds" that would be prepared to enter the "table of the internal circumstances of [Franklin's] country" (Franklin 74-5). These men misread Franklin's facility with creating a public image imbricated within a specific context as a "discovery," that preparation for social life is a "private power" rather than a public one (Franklin 74). By ontologizing Franklin's textual play, Franklin's misreaders set in motion a tautological concept of the subject whose play is now mechanized because assumed to be a private faculty of the "mind" rather than of language. In the second half

of Franklin's autobiography he attempts to play the joke of his original text more or less straight, giving his audience what they request. By including the letters Abel and Vaughn sent him in his unfinished work, Franklin warns his audience that he is doing no more than is asked of him. Like Franklin, Johnson's ex-colored man imagines his confession as "a practical joke on society" (*Autobiography* 1). And yet, the "table of internal circumstances" that constitute the imaginary of the nation that faces the ex-colored man significantly change the contours and significance of the joke he plays.

For Franklin as for the ex-colored man, the possibility of the joke of a public persona's necessary divergence from an assumed private persona to a certain extent rests on movement between geographic locations. Franklin is only able to construct a persona because he escaped Boston for Philadelphia, where his contract with his tyrannical brother is not known or enforced, allowing Franklin more freedom to reconstruct his life away from family ties. Cities in his narrative are locations on a map but also centers of power for the enforcement of laws, with lawless space in-between. When Franklin famously reaches Philadelphia with little more than a "Dutch Dollar and about a Shilling in copper" in his pocket, he meanders through the streets until he finds "many clean dress'd People" moving toward an unknown destination (Franklin 26). Franklin "join'd them, and thereby was led into the great Meeting House of the Quakers near the Market" and, "being very drowsy thro' Labour and want of Rest the preceding Night, [he] fell asleep" (Franklin 26). For Franklin, travel occurs between cities which are figured as places of safety, compared to the wilderness. In Philadelphia, the city provides a context within which individual identity may be ignored or taken up depending on the situation.

For Johnson's ex-colored man, however, the city would function differently. Within the framework of the train system, the city was no longer a unit demarcated by wilderness which created discrete centers of legal and social life. Rather, the country and city had been incorporated into a single, interconnected system of exchanges in which the casting off of an identity would come at a price.

Johnson's ex-colored man found himself in a similar situation to Franklin when he travelled to Atlanta after the death of his mother to begin training in a University. After arriving in Atlanta the ex-colored man's stock of money is almost immediately stolen and, while wandering the streets of the city, he "paused, undecided, for a moment" before the University he had hoped to attend, "then turned and slowly retraced [his] steps, and so changed the whole course of [his] life" (*Autobiography* 29). Rather than a Meeting House in which Franklin heard "nothing said," the institution toward which Atlanta's traffic ran was a University whose function was to train young people to enter the market with saleable skills (Franklin 26). Rather than the pure waste of a silent community, individuality would be constructed along capitalist lines in Atlanta for the ex-colored man. For Franklin, the city offered a space in which temporal sequence and consciousness could be suspended in restful sleep amongst strangers. For the ex-colored man, however, the city is merely a stopping point to be hesitated over while changing course. Without a break in continuity the Meeting House offered Franklin, the ex-colored man is only given the choice of continuing on the railway to Florida in search of any work available.

The train, as a technological system, constructs travel differently than the undifferentiated, "uncivilized" space that separated settlements in Franklin's text. Like the "Train Sermon," commonly given by black preachers in the South, which Johnson quotes in the Preface to his collection of poems, *God's Trombones*, the space of travel now bore positive meaning that constructed social valuation, rather than functioning as a negative space that constructed the meaning of civilization through its absence. The "Train Sermon" "in which both God and the devil were pictured as running trains, one loaded with saints, that pulled up to heaven, and other with sinners, that dumped its load in hell," re-imagined space as a medium for representing vectors of force which distributed value (*Complete Poems* 5). Motion, the movement through space, would be already structured along the lines of a railway and be the vessel by which divine decisions would be carried out. As the narrator describes his train trip to Florida in the *Autobiography*, he "may live to be a hundred years old" but "shall never forget the agonies [he] suffered that night" as he traveled in the porter's basket for want of money to pay the cost of the ticket (*Autobiography* 30). During the trip the narrator was unable to stand "on account of the shelves for clean linen" over his head, the "air was hot and suffocating and the smell of damp towels and used linen was sickening" (*Autobiography* 30). Additionally, at "each lurch of the car over the none too smooth track" he was "bumped and bruised against the narrow walls of [his] narrow compartment" (*Autobiography* 30). It was a common refrain in the nineteenth century that, with the introduction of the railway, passengers on long journeys began to feel "as if you were a package," as Benjamin phrased it, to be transported in the conditional tense from place to

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place rather than active subjects taking part in their own voyage ("Firth of Tay" 565).

Within the context of the American system of Jim Crow, however, this status as an

uncomfortably contained object rather than subject took on an added level of meaning.

To be an object rather than a subject within the space of American society would

necessarily have taken on a racialized dimension in addition to its literal containment.

The ex-colored man is therefore caught halfway between subjectivity and objectivity. The

status of "blackness" is structurally positioned as not subjective enough from within the

total train system.

Both Franklin and the ex-colored man, then, deal with the American imaginary

relationship between political space and the instrumentalization of identity. For Franklin,

the Enlightenment assumption of a unified identity gives rise for dead spaces of

community in which identity may be cast off. Subjectivity guarantees itself for Franklin

because it may be lost in the Meeting House and a personal history can be created in "the

future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming"

(*Écrits* 247). Johnson's rewriting of Franklin effectively reimagines the mode in which

this "becoming" takes place in literal space which then becomes abstracted to a concept

of the individual created in the conditional tense, being treated as if he were a human,

which is to say, as a passenger on the Jim Crow railway. Franklin assumed the individual

to be certain because that certainty may be safely rejected in certain circumstances, to be

reformed later. In the full post-Enlightenment, capitalist world of the Jim Crow South,

however, no such safety existed and no such rejection was possible.

The "future anterior" would already have its mode conditionally set by the railway tracks whose vectors had been determined by the struggle between Capital and Labor over the Granger laws as a reaction to the corrupt practices of the Reconstruction South in the 1860s. Rather than a subjectivity guaranteed by its capacity to be objectified, the new subjectivity of the total train system would require individuals, and black individuals to an even more extreme degree, according to Johnson, to always be halfway between subject and object, in a perverse instrumentalization that functions as Georges Bataille's concept of the tool. Bataille wrote that the

> positing of the object, which is not given in animality, is in the human use of tools; that is, if the tools as middle terms are adapted to the intended result – if their users perfect them. Insofar as tools are developed with their end in view, consciousness posits them as objects, as interruptions in the indistinct continuity. The developed tool is the nascent form of the non-I. (*Theory of Religion* 27)

It is precisely this formation of the non-I that occurs to the narrator as a quasi-object being carried along the total train system. And yet, as more than simply a "developed tool," but a fully integrated technological system, the railway did more than simply function as a "nascent form of the non-I." Technology, when attached to a progressive concept of history, displaces the "perfection" of the means towards an intended result from the human to the divine. Rather than creating a free space of play, as it does for Franklin, the train system in Johnson separates the "sinners" from the "saints" along politically determined lines. The fight over the Granger laws in the 1860s was, in a certain sense, the fight over whether Labor or Capital would benefit from the railway's

capacity to control the lines of demarcation of the railway and, after those had been set, who would be in control of the rates of circulation of commodities. The subjective position of the Capitalist would take Labor as its "non-I" or instrumentalized Other. Labor, in that struggle would be an eternally fluctuating productive capacity to be accounted for by the rational system of capitalist circulation rather than full subjects to play an equal part in the assigning of value to circulation. Johnson points out, continuing the thought, that this fight would inevitably be translated into racial terms given the political history of the United States as it emerged from Reconstruction.

Paul Gilroy has pointed out the importance of travel, the image of the "ship – a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion," for the African diaspora as a modulation of the concept of the "middle passage" that African slaves forcibly underwent within the Atlantic slave trade (Gilroy 4). For Gilroy, this image of the ship as metonymic for travel contained within it the possibility for "counterculture" and conceptual tools with which alternate ideas of sociality could be developed. Johnson, however, also points out another possible facet of a kind of travel imbricated within American capitalism that is less structurally conducive to countercultural possibility. With the railway, unlike the image of the ship that Gilroy illustrates, which mimics Franklin's travel through uncertainty between destinations, has no starting point or end. Rather, it became in the United States circulation as such. In other words, it created subjects as a continuous middle term within the formation of a non-I that could not be associated with a particular "intended result," but simply circulation for its own sake. For

black subjects in the American South, the railway system was a continuous "middle passage," constantly suspended in the middle term.

The National Disgrace

The expansion of the railway system into the twentieth century did not simply change the material structures in which relationships between individuals and the fantasy of a social whole would be instrumentalized through capitalist circulation. The relationship between the state itself and its growing colonial spheres of influence would similarly be instrumentalized along capitalist lines. Johnson was intimately aware of the rate and nature of the United States' imperial expansion. Through the influence of Booker T. Washington, Johnson was able to leave his teaching position in the American South to gain a place within the United States diplomatic service while still a young man. At first, Johnson was stationed in Venezuela before moving to Corinto, Nicaragua in time to witness a revolution against its government. For a time prior to the revolution, Johnson was outside of the sphere of action in the United States' attempts to install and maintain political regimes beneficial to its interests. With this revolution, however, "Corinto became the chief entrepôt for American armed forces as well as a key point of loyalist strength" (Levy 117). While Johnson "of course, did not make policy," he ably assisted "his government's decision to support those loyal to President Diaz" when he personally "stalled the rebels through negotiations lasting several days" during an attack which allowed for the arrival of reinforcements and also allowed "Johnson, the captain of the *Annapolis*, and the captain of the *Denver* to refuse to yield the port" (Levy 117-8). Some

historians have a tendency to describe the United States' interventions in South America, and particularly the building of the Panama Canal, in awe-struck terms; "there really seemed no limit to what man might do" through its feats of engineering, as the popular historian David McCullough put it (McCullough 25). Yet, according to the fortuitously named George Washington Goethals, one of the chief architects of the Panama Canal, the canal was first and foremost "a novel problem in government" as it presented "the necessity of ruling and preserving order within the Canal Zone" (qtd. in Greene 4). Before it was a feat of engineering, it was a feat of the creation and maintenance of political space by military means. Whereas in the American South, railway stations gave a faint sense of excitement partly through their regularity, Johnson also had first-hand experience in the maintenance of that system through military means as a global system.

It was, in fact, during his time in Venezuela and Nicaragua that Johnson "all but finished *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, the novel he had begun in New York," before leaving for South America (Levy 124). Brian Russell Roberts has persuasively argued that the *Autobiography* bears the traces of its global scene of writing. Within the context of black American thought, Roberts sees the *Autobiography* as attempting to evade the polarizing debate of the time between W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington in which DuBois repeatedly attacked Washington for his "diplomatic" approach to white Americans' hesitation to actively pursue equality at either a legal or social level for black Americans. For DuBois, diplomacy was equivalent to hypocrisy in which concession to a fundamentally racist society was always a political loss. Roberts argued that the *Autobiography* should be read as inflected by Johnson's

time as an American representative in South America and "invested in eroding the sedimented methodological categories and racial essentialisms that have influenced readings of strategic indirection as either hypocrisy or diplomacy" (Roberts 292). Johnson "not only hoped that his consular service would function as an indirect argument for racial advancement, but also that the novel he wrote would engage the question of indirection as a method" for interrogating "categories of ambassadorship and compromise in ways that seek to reinvision and racially remap the implications of seeking advancement through oblique methods" (Roberts 295). While Roberts's description of Johnson's rhetorical strategy seems accurate to Johnson's activity as a Civil Rights leader, particularly in reference to his anti-lynching work with the NAACP, when situated within the context of the total train system that linked the markets of the United States to the world's spheres of potentially exploitable resources and lanes of transport for raw materials and products, the significance of diplomacy changes.

"Indirection" is a negative concept that reforms a previous, positive statement. Roberts's choice of the word "remap" is particularly suggestive here of a broader range of reference for the global scene of writing inscribed in the novel which would include technological systems and their implications for politically defined space. Although Roberts does not expand on the term, it acknowledges Johnson's diplomatic activity to be a question of political divisions of space, whose solidity is guaranteed by institutions' dominance of space through the technological control of time. "Diplomacy," as Johnson knew from his time in Corinto, would also be a matter of using speech to create time in-between attacks. Successful diplomacy would therefore to an extent be achieved by

manipulating the times of dispersal of force to favor certain vectors of speed (and therefore force) over others. More than simply good-will or the willingness to appear to take a rhetorically objective position, diplomacy, taking a stance through speech, would also have the temporal effect of interrupting the speed of military action, which had by that time become an extension and weaponization of the speed made possible by lanes of technologically mediated commerce. As a corollary, relative "securities" would be the result of tactics to create a space of more time within a technological system that attempted to eliminate space through the condensation of time.

The logic by which the state guaranteed its own security, both militarily and economically, through violence done on "stateless" people (rebel militias in the case of the Central American revolution) was a part of the United States' concept of itself from its very inception in the form of mob violence. This violence, as one historian put it, "conjure[s] up images of cowboys, cattle rustlers, and a generally wholesome tradition of frontier justice. Lynching, it seems, represents for many a stage in the conquest and settlement of the West" (Brundage 1). As a European colony, the mythic origins of the United States always included a mobile border demarcating the civilized and uncivilized, the "safe" space of commerce and government, and the "unsafe" space of those outside of the state legally yet more or less within it geographically. It may be true that "the practice of organized mobs punishing alleged wrongdoers in a summary fashion was an established custom by the end of the colonial period" and that after "the Revolution, lynching expanded across the frontier, as mobs used whipping, rituals of humiliation, and occasionally hangings to impose social order" (Brundage 3). Maintenance of the social

order, however, had changed after the Civil War and with it the use and meaning of mob violence, particularly in the American South. The "racialization of lynching – the near-exclusive targeting of African American people for punishment by white vigilante mobs – took clear shape during the era of Reconstruction" (Goldsby 17). With the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution in 1868, the state had nominally included all "persons born or naturalized" within its borders as citizens and supposedly prevented the deprivation of "any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law" (US Const. Art./Amend. XIV, sec. 1). At the same time, "on the average, a black man, woman, or child was murdered nearly once a week, every week, between 1882 and 1930 by a hate-driven white mob," a number that does not include "casualties of the urban race riots that erupted during those years" or "the victims of racially motivated murders by a single killer or pairs of assassins" (Tolnay and Beck ix). Rather than a series of unrelated crimes, the practice of lynching constituted a state-sanctioned institution in many parts of the country. White Americans "used lynchings as a tool for maintaining dominance in a society that was forced to accept a revolutionary change in the status of blacks – from slaves to freedmen," as historians Stuart Tolnay and E.M. Beck put it (Tolnay and Beck 257). It is unsurprising, then, that after returning to the United States from South America, Johnson's focus was on preventing lynching, which he called the "national disgrace" ("Lynching" 720) According to Johnson, lynching was an "instrument" used by whites to drive black Americans "out of politics in the South" ("Lynching" 721). This expulsion from politics, of course, was also, from the point of

view of the state, an expulsion from civilization itself, but, importantly for the state's rationalization of the practice to itself, only for limited times and within limited spaces.

Both Johnson and later historians agree, then, that the practice of lynching was an "instrument" or "tool" for specific political ends. In order to form the "will of the people" as a conscious decision, certain spaces became objectified and instrumentalized through a mob to achieve a political goal. The status of lynching as a tool is complicated, however, by its lack of a single, identifiable intention by which causes and effects may be conceptually linked. When journalists "of the 1890s drew upon Victorian ideologies about male sexuality in order to portray lynching as a struggle between white 'manly civilization' and black 'unmanly savagery,'" the mechanism of lynching was created conceptually through the same logic as the railroad itself, as a means by which civilization as an abstraction could be maintained by the dominant white ideology through the "nascent non-I" of the instrumentalized, stateless quasi-subjectivity of black Americans (Markovitz 24). In fact, this mechanism, through the last decades of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century was used for a variety of political purposes.

During the Granger agitations I discussed in reference to the work of Henry Adams, for instance, the United States for the first time "faced the real possibility of a coalition built around common class interests rather than race. The vehicle for this potentially revolutionary development was the Populist movement and the third political party that it eventually spawned" (Tolnay and Beck 175). The American South, however, took a different political course than the West I discussed in the previous chapter. In the South, many who made a living through farming, "blacks and whites alike, were virtually

bound to the crop-lien system that required them to mortgage their maturing crops in exchange for credit from merchants and landlords to meet day-to-day expenses" (Tolnay and Beck 175). While some members of the Southern Populist party "stressed the commonality of African-American and white economic interests," in the face of the crop-lien system, "a persistent undercurrent of racism existed within the party" (Tolnay and Beck 176). As a political bloc, black citizens became an instrument between established political parties to control sections of the vote in a particular area. The "patriarchs of the conservative Democratic party believed that black disenfranchisement would reduce the threat of a political coalition between blacks and disenchanted whites" while "politically estranged whites concluded that the political dominance of the conservative Democrats would be weakened if they could no longer exploit black voters, legitimately or illegitimately" (Tolnay and Beck 180-1). Lynching, as a tool for political control, cannot, therefore be limited to a particular political end: "whether blacks voted Populist, Democratic, or Republican, they represented a potential political threat to someone" (Tolnay and Beck 180). Rather, lynching became a tool for any political outcome in the American South. By creating the possibility for symbolically expelling a part of the community out of politics through lynching, the American political system created a mechanism by which power could be taken by particular parties at the expense of others by way of zones of potential violence. The black community in the American South became a "nascent non-I" and therefore a tool of the political system as such rather than a particular interest within it.

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Toward the end of the *Autobiography*, just such a lynching plays a key narrative role in the trajectory of the ex-colored man's development in that it is the precipitating event for a decision that had been held in abeyance by the narrator about the race he would choose to present himself as to the public. Much has been said about the novel's acceptance or redeployment of the traditional tropes of the "mulatto" in American literature. As critic Roxanne Pisiak put it, the "racial themes and subjects of the narrative not only demonstrate the 'slipperiness' of color lines, they also deconstruct the dichotomies of white and black words, and white and black worlds" (Pisiak 83). And yet, as Pisiak's somewhat casual misuse of "deconstruct" indicates, the maintenance of the color-line through mob violence worked in more complicated ways than the simple revelation of the arbitrary character of a "dichotomy." Other critics have pointed to this decision by the ex-colored man to pass for white at the end of the novel as an example of the intractability of American racism and the betrayal of a progressive politics that would help move American society towards a more egalitarian ideology.

Rather than take a position on which of the two options the ex-colored man should have chosen, I would like to discuss the terms of the decision itself as they relate to the dominant ideology of progressivism and its relationship to the technologies that punctuate and therefore structure the journey of the protagonist throughout the novel. One of the most important ironies surrounding the politics of race around 1900, one that Charles Chesnutt only began to sketch, was the implicit assumptions about the politics of space which assumed an analogy between physical mobility and social mobility. In Johnson's novel, travel is an essential structural element of the development of the

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protagonist. For much of the novel, access to rapid and relatively cheap transportation functions as an escape for the ex-colored man from the structures of American racism that he finds himself in at various points. At the same time, with the final, decisive event of the lynching, this structure of mobility is turned against the protagonist and revealed as a primary means by which the oppressive ideology of America enacts the mechanisms of oppression through its potential to be anywhere at any time. Travel, therefore, functions ironically, simultaneously aiding in the creation of an ostensibly independent subject-position for the narrator and, at the same time, supporting the ideological mechanisms by which that independence is reincorporated into American systems of oppression.

By 1912, as I've argued in my previous chapter, the railway had become a dominant feature of American life, along with the ideology it supported. When it structured the pre-existing legacy of Southern racial violence, the railway crated a new concept of sovereignty itself. In his essay, "Necropolitics," Achille Mbembe describes an important element of modern concepts of sovereignty as they developed out of the European system of colonialism into the modern polity, extending Michel Foucault's concept of "biopolitics." "Necropolitics," he writes, is the "perception of the existence of the Other as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security" (Mbembe 18). For Mbembe, following Paul Gilroy, this logic of sovereignty emerged in the European imaginary from its development as a colonial state. European colonies were "not organized in a state form" in that they did "not establish a distinction between combatants and non-combatants, or again between 'enemy' and 'criminal'" (Mbembe 24). Rather,

they were spaces outside of the state that functioned as "zones in which war and disorder, internal and external figures of the political, stand side by side or alternate with each other" (Mbembe 24). The "sovereign right to kill" was "not subject to any rule in the colonies" (Mbembe 25). With the practice of American lynching, however, this concept of the necropolitical space would operate within the nation itself, rather than as a space external to it. Additionally, rather than a definable territory, subject to rule by a colonial power at a distance, the railway provides for the quasi-spontaneous expansion within the state for necropolitical spaces to exist for more or less determinate periods of time. As Foucault put it, power "must . . . be analyzed as something that circulates, or rather as something that functions only when it is part of a chain" (Foucault 29). Within this chain, racism "is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die" (Foucault 254). As Johnson's scene toward the end of the *Autobiography* makes clear, the practice of lynching in the American South was exactly this kind of expression of power that maintained the necropolitical border between what must live and what must die by way of the circulation of power made possible by the railway.

The lynching scene at the end of the novel provides the terms by which the ex-colored man's decision is made and therefore reorganizes in retrospect the events of the novel that precedes it as well as the terms by which value is distributed. Whereas in Chesnutt's *Marrow of Tradition*, the railway played a primarily structural role, in Johnson's novel the railway has simultaneously become a dominant force in American social and political life while, at the same time, more obviously literal in the means by

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which power is circulated unevenly and along racial lines. These lynch mobs, as Chesnutt

had already noted, worked by suspending the typical "course of justice" in the face of

rationalized states of emergency, which came to characterize "race relations" in general.

As I've already argued about Charles Chesnutt's novel *The Marrow of Tradition*,

lynching was conceived of by white supremacists as an extra-legal act which, in

exceeding the law, grounded its efficacy in the same "will of the people" that Henry

Adams initially supposed to be a trans-historic constant in his journalistic days. Because

extra-legal, representing the violence of lynching has proved difficult. Although cloaked

in the language and logic of legality, these events exceeded the concepts that were used to

legitimize them to a white supremacist society. Rebeccah Bechtold has argued, the ex-

colored man's stammered speech whenever the subject of lynching is raised or depicted

in the novel, "represents the failure of the narrative to represent political violence,"

revealing the polyphonic subversion of romanticized Southern concepts of national

identity (Bechtold 34). Although the final scene of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored

Man* has been widely discussed in the criticism, one detail typically goes unanalyzed and

often unquoted – that the lynching occurs by means of the railway in two important

moments. Because existing within states of emergency, the typical time of justice was

suspended in spaces of lynching. The railway's speed allowed whites to assemble from

various counties to the critical mass of bodies that were required for an extra-legal

murder of a black man. This figure of the railway encompasses both the stable point of

the depot that connects the town to others and the speed of circulation, the combination of

which constitutes the new, "necropolitical" aspect of the total train system.

The scene of the lynching itself is a complicated one. It takes place toward the end

of the novel after the ex-colored man has returned to the United States from an extended

period in Europe with his "millionaire" patron. Enchanted with the ex-colored man's

musical abilities, the patron had taken the ex-colored man to Europe to avoid the

consequence of a bar fight in which a white woman had been killed. On his return to the

US, the narrator-protagonist attempts to fulfil what he had conceived of as the promise of

his life to fuse classical European music with the new ragtime music created by African-

Americans. In order to learn more of the African-American tradition and mine it for

material to put into Classical European terms, the ex-colored man travels to the American

South and finds himself at a Christian revival meeting. His experience at the "big

meeting" left the narrator "in that frame of mind which, in the artistic temperament,

amounts to inspiration" (*Autobiography* 86). A sense of personal ecstasy and possibility,

however, will quickly be reincorporated into structural circulations of power when a man

is lynched after the end of the meeting.

At the beginning of the scene, in an echo of the "riot" at the end of Chesnutt's

Marrow of Tradition, the railway provides the means by which overwhelming numbers

of white people can quickly congregate. After finding lodging for the evening, the ex-

colored man "became conscious of that sense of alarm which is always aroused by the

sound of hurrying footsteps on the silence of the night" and found it "impossible . . . to

remain in the house under such tense excitement" (*Autobiography* 87). Unlike Chesnutt's

Marrow of Tradition which spends much of its time detailing the various events prior to a

riot that directly and indirectly lead up to it, the narrator of the *Autobiography* finds

himself thrown into events *in media res*. From the point of view of the subject, the

conditions by which such lynch-mobs are formed cannot be directly experienced. Rather,

they are structural conditions of possibility that, from the individual's point of view, seem

to behave without any clear sense of cause and effect, simply as a "tense excitement."

Following "the drift," the ex-colored man goes out of the building and when he "reached

the railroad station" there "was gathered there a crowd of men, all white" while "others

were steadily arriving, seemingly from all the surrounding country" (*Autobiography* 87).

In *The Marrow of Tradition*, the railway acted as a structural threat of the accumulation

of white supremacists at any moment. In the *Autobiography*, however, that threat is

represented in its consolidation. The primary structuring principle, however, in this initial

section centers on the significance of silence. The crowd, rather than a collection of

individuals, are a series of repetitions of a "type" – "blond, tall, and lean, with ragged

mustache and beard, and glittering gray eyes" (*Autobiography* 87). The railway in this

instance, has not created a community in which individuals can exchange commodities or

even commodified ideas. Rather, the "type" of person for the expression of particular

kinds of power are themselves circulated to meet the demands of that power. The narrator

does not relate any conversations in the scene. Rather, the crowd itself is being spoken

through by the dominant structure of the total train system in silence. There "was no extra

noise or excitement, no loud talking, only swift sharp words of command given by those

who seemed to be accepted as leaders by mutual understanding" (*Autobiography* 87).

Despite the silence, there is communication. Everything was done in "an orderly manner"

because the organization was not that of discourse but of the material structure of the railway and the dominant power it was constructed to express (*Autobiography* 87).

As the scene plays out, the relationship between silence and action becomes even more complex. After the victim of the public murder was brought out to the gathering crowd the "men who at midnight had been stern and silent were now emitting that terror instilling sound known as the 'rebel yell'" and "from somewhere" came the call to "burn" the black man they had captured (*Autobiography* 88). The call "ran like an electric current" through the crowd, signaling the "transformation of human beings into savage beasts" (*Autobiography* 88). The metaphor of electric current here is significant in that it reveals more than simply a comparison between two unlike things. Rather, it reveals the logic at work in the organization of force of which the crowd is an expression. There is no public sphere in the Enlightenment sense. There is merely the expression of force whose path operates like a technology and whose mechanisms have been established prior to the event. In the actual murder of the black man, a "railroad tie was sunk into the ground, the rope was removed and a chain brought and securely coiled around the victim and the stake . . . Fuel was brought from everywhere, oil, the torch; the flames crouched for an instant as though to gather strength, then leaped up as high as their victim's head" (*Autobiography* 88). Within the silence, material structures form the narrative links that produce cause and effect, the materials of the railway providing the means and logic by which the murder occurs.

The railway, therefore, has a dual presence in the lynching scene from the *Autobiography*, both of which contribute to the structural role of silence in the passage.

Firstly, at the level of the narrative, it provides the raw materials, so to speak, for the violence of white supremacists. The "counties" from which the crowd apparently emanates are connected by the railway and the telegraph that it requires. As such, the logic of circulation along the railway creates the conditions for the mass movement required to murder, extra-legally, an American citizen. Secondly, at a slightly more metaphorical level, the railway anchors the expression of violence. Johnson, of course, literalizes this in having the railway tie anchor the apparatus constructed for the murder. The railway, then, in its structural articulation of the space and time of capitalist circulation created the conditions for another articulation of space and time that occurs with the lynching in which the narrator experiences a series of stammers and hesitations but the crowd that he experiences do not. Their decisiveness is noted at several points. They are silent because the process of decision making has become entirely "pre-judicial," in the sense I developed in my second chapter, and the space and time in which that decision can occur is created by the ideological and material structures of the railway.

The lynching scene produces meaning structurally, in its conditions of possibility, rather than expressively, at the level of content, to the point that "before [the narrator] realized that time had elapsed" he "was looking at a scorched post, a smoldering fire, blackened bones, charred fragments sifting down through coils of chain" (*Autobiography* 88). The white people in the crowd had multiple reactions to the event. Some "of the crowd yelled and cheered, others seemed appalled at what they had done, and there were those who turned away sickened at the sight" (*Autobiography* 88). The movement of

power through the railway and the ideological mechanisms it served to support do not

even require a particular intention or reaction for its expression to occur. Its expression,

in fact, occurs at the level of structure, in excess of discursive meaning. It is, rather,

power expressing itself in silence. As James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an*

Ex-Colored Man demonstrates, in the United States under Jim Crow, the logic of

necropolitics was already at work within the state itself. More than this, the practice of

lynching made necropolitics a rapidly shifting category, inextricably tied with the

railway. The lynching scene is the moment of decision for the narrator. After that, the

"inspiration" that the narrator had felt just before does not so much disappear as become

recontextualized within the power structure expressed through the total train system.

"I Should Have Felt Relieved . . ."

Technologies such as the railway, then, did not create a new kind of political act

nor did they have an inherent political function. Rather, they were tools that became

imbricated into already existing political formations, particularly the nascent

"necropolitical" formations that already existed in de-centralized forms, which changed

the means by which politics were enforced, particularly in the South. Although these

tools could have been used for different ends, to the degree that they quickly came under

the control of dominant political structures, any possibilities for different political ends

were quickly stifled. Jacqueline Goldsby has argued that, far from being an aberration or

a series of singular and unpredictable outpourings of regrettable but inevitable public

rage, the American practice of lynching in order "to oppress African Americans was

intensified by its relations to cultural developments we ordinarily categorize as 'modern'"
(Goldsby 25). Although it is common to view American racism as a regrettable ghost
from the past which continues to haunt the present, I agree with Goldsby's point that
although a desire to move beyond "racism" is valuable, particular formations of racist
practice remain unequivocally modern. Viewing racism as a practice unequivocally tied
to the past hides some of its means of reproducing itself. Rather than a positive set of
principles that can be refuted, American racism also shapes knowledge as a negative,
structuring silence, allowing it to persist in ever more modern forms. Goldsby continues
that a "significant but untold dimension of lynching's force as a tactic of white
supremacy derives from its capacity not just to terrorize but to traumatize survivors into
silence, leaving gaps of knowledge in its wake" (Goldsby 35). Johnson's novel, in turn, is
particularly important to this historical moment in that it "locates lynching's deadly,
dominating impulses at the core of one of the central developments supposed to have
transformed the nation's life for the better – the consolidation of mass cultural production
in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America" (Goldsby 169). I would add,
however, that, as a part of the total train system, the modes of "cultural production" of
which lynching is an example were consolidated along lines that set the terms for the
material means of creating and distributing the violence that Johnson attempted to
represent in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

For his depiction of lynching, Johnson draws on a relationship inherent in the
structure of the total train system as it developed within American capitalism. The
railway, more than simply a tool, organized thought through its material modes of

relation. The ideological agreement that sanctioned the violence of lynching understood silence to ground the violence that was required within white supremacist thought for the state to guarantee its functioning. Critics have, however, tended to avoid discussing the silences of the novel with the important exception of Goldsby who, following DuBois, has called the silent violence of the novel Johnson's "terrible real" to distinguish it from the supposedly self-evident, quasi-empiricist realism of William Dean Howells. While I agree that Johnson holds music and its performance in particularly high regard, both as an example of black culture and a means of connecting black American culture with a broader, global community, Johnson is always careful to place that music within its American context, obviating any easy escape music might offer. Although music offers some kind of organization of sound that can be mobilized against the silence of American racism, that music is also, ultimately, commodified and placed within the unequal distributions of capitalism, fueled by the total train system.

Sound has been taken in two aspects in the criticism of Johnson's novel. Firstly, it has been discussed as the enunciating sound of oratory and secondly as the sound of music that is so important to the narrator's journey. Katherine Biers, for example, has argued that Johnson's novel should be understood as developed along "the material logic of the phonograph" in which black "cultural practices are phonographic because, in reproducing themselves without writing, they emphasize the materiality of sound and therefore resist reduction to either side of the binary," between speech and writing (Biers 99). Thus, the phonographic voice creates "structural and political limitations to making black culture into 'American' culture" (Biers 101). Biers's perhaps distressingly literal

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reading of Jacques Derrida's critique of the philosophical tradition's lauding of speech over writing should always, however, be situated within the general movement of capital that the railway made possible and that conditions speech-acts in the novel. Speech, as a mode of communication, plays at times opposite roles for conveying meaning in the novel.

Prior to the famous lynching scene, the subject of lynching had come up once before in the novel, when the ex-colored man was experiencing the relative freedom of Europe. While staying in France, the ex-colored man was reminded of his home country, the only time he "had cause to blush for [his] American citizenship" (*Autobiography* 63). When asked by a "young man from Luxembourg" if "they really burned a man alive in the United States," the ex-colored man gives a strange response (*Autobiography* 63). The narrator "never knew what [he] stammered out to him as an answer" but "should have felt relieved if [he] could have said to him, 'Well, only one'" (*Autobiography* 63). For Bechtold, this moment in conjunction with the lynching scene, is an example of Johnson imitating "the aestheticiziation of lynching . . . if only to highlight the adverse effects it poses; for in neither case can the ex-colored man articulate an effective or politically powerful response" (Bechtold 33). And yet, one shouldn't be too hasty to dismiss the details of this passage as simply not "powerful" (Bechtold does not specify what a "powerful" reply might have been or why this lack of power is significant). Rather than a denial of its existence, the ex-colored man would apparently have been more relieved if there had been only one murder. Within this somewhat strange logic, lynching never having happened and it happening regularly are less appealing options that a truly unique

instance of it. As we've seen, however, this logic may be less strange than it first appears in that a unique, truly aberrant act would avoid commodification through capitalist circulation more certainly than either the plenitude that was the reality of lynching in the American South or the silent denial of its existence that grounded its institutionalization and the perpetuation of that institution. The stammering of the ex-colored man in this case reflects yet another impossible decision in attempting to articulate American violence, which is both silent and entirely expressive at the structural level.

The majority of the novel that leads up to the decisive lynching scene is taken up with the movement of the narrator through the United States and Europe, made possible by the ex-colored man's musical gifts. Although his musical gifts are, initially, what allows the ex-colored man his freedom to move throughout the country, it soon also becomes the means by which he is commodified and inextricably tied to the circulation of global capital. Born in the South to a black mother and a wealthy white father, the ex-colored man moves to the North to escape the more violent brand of American racism that would not accept him and his mother. After his mother's death and his aborted attempt to go to university, the ex-colored man then drifts about the country over the routes of the movement of capital to the resorts of Florida to be employed in a cigar factory. When that business closes, the narrator then continues on his tour of the movement of capital to its greatest location of concentration, New York City. There, the narrator dissipates his time in the favorite past-times of capital, gambling and the consumption of luxury goods. The ex-colored man in Johnson's novel does not travel to the unexploited resources of South America in the narrative but toward the concentrations

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of capital, both literal and social, in Europe. He does this through his association with a white "millionaire" whom he meets while working as a piano player in Harlem after leaving Florida.

The narrator's patron was an independently wealthy man who belonged to a class "who were ever expecting to find happiness in novelty, each day restlessly exploring and exhausting every resource of this great city[, New York,] that might possibly furnish a new sensation or awaken a fresh emotion, and who were always grateful to anyone who aided them in their quest" (*Autobiography* 55). The "millionaire" and his group, then, are themselves a product of the consumer capitalism that had emerged from the nineteenth century to become the dominant mode of identity formation in the twentieth. Culture, even by 1912, had already become a resource whose consumption was tied to the ability of consumers to have free cash to take out of capitalist circulation and spend on cultural pursuits, "new sensations" and "fresh emotions," which can be bought, if one only knows where to find them. New York City, the "most fatally fascinating thing in America," initially presents itself as an alternative to the rural stagnation the narrator experienced in the South (*Autobiography* 41).

The city as a concept has been an important point of argument in criticism of Johnson's work. As Thomas L. Morgan has argued, *The Autobiography* and Paul Lawrence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* together created "a viable form of urban blackness in fiction" that had not previously existed in black American writing, having been to that point largely limited to attempting to change the stereotypical figure of rural blacks, as Charles Chesnutt had attempted (Morgan 214). Changing white stereotypical

thinking was certainly a part of Johnson's rhetorical strategy in fiction throughout his

career. In his pamphlet, *Negro Americans, What Now?*, written in the 1930s, for instance,

Johnson recommended setting up a publicity campaign through the NAACP, both

nationally and internationally, to gain public support for black artists who would, in turn,

provide alternate examples of black characters in art to change the dominant conception

of black citizens in the country. Although the city, prior to Dunbar's and Johnson's

novels, may have "existed primarily as an undifferentiated space indistinguishable from

the country," this does not necessarily imply the inherent distinction of the division

between city and country in the American context (Morgan 215). As we have seen with

the work of Henry Adams, the relationship between the city and the country should never

be seen as a strict dichotomy but an actively changing relationship in which the apparent

difference between the two environments is largely determined by its relationship to a

mutable, contingent capitalist concept of presence. Although Johnson certainly entertains

the possibility for a new kind of black subjectivity made possible by the space of the city,

like the commodities that circulate and regulate the difference between the city and the

country, the ex-colored man is brought face to face with the fundamentally ironic nature

of the total train system in a way that determines his fateful decision to pass for white.

Just as the "millionaire" and his group are intimate with different sections of New

York and the specific consumer experiences available in each, they are similarly world-

travelers. As within the separate areas of New York, the patron circulates within the

global lanes of capitalist exchange, different areas of New York being equivalent to

different countries in Europe, each individual part of it having lost any significance

except as exchange-value for him. After the "millionaire" has come to rely on the narrator to provide the ragtime music that is the latest novelty to be acquired, he takes the narrator to Europe to escape the consequences of the killing of a white woman to which the narrator was a witness. The narrator tells us that, following the tradition of slave narratives in which a relatively more racially tolerant Europe is contrasted with the United States, it was not "until the morning that [he and the "millionaire"] entered the harbor of Havre that [the narrator] was able to shake off the gloom" that he had been feeling since the violent episode that left a woman dead in New York (*Autobiography* 59). After landing in France, the narrator "grew so light-hearted that when [he] caught [his] first sight of the train which was to take [them] to Paris, [he] enjoyed a hearty laugh" at the "toy-looking engine, the stuffy little compartment cars with tiny, old-fashioned wheels" that "ran smoothly" (*Autobiography* 59). More than simply a different culture, one without the same kind of deeply ingrained racial prejudices of the United States, Europe offered a different kind of relationship to the power that was harnessed by the railway. The material objects that make up the railway system themselves have already become "old-fashioned" by 1912 and run "smoothly" as opposed to his trip in the porter's basket in the United States. At the center of European imperialism, capital is established enough to give one half of the double-effect of the railway Johnson noted so fascinated rural Southerners. Its regularity and efficiency were the most apparent feature within the space of its most extreme concentration and, at first, the ex-colored man begins to conceive of Europe as an alternative to the United States rather than a different modulation of the same processes of accumulated force.

Despite Europe's attraction and the patron's benevolence, the ex-colored man eventually becomes dissatisfied with both. The "millionaire" in the *Autobiography* could easily be a stand-in for Henry Adams himself, as the patron's character is revealed in the European section of the novel. Just as Henry Adams wrote to William James that he had "no use for time," the narrator becomes for the "millionaire" "the chief means of disposing of the thing which seemed to sum up all in life that he dreaded – Time" (qtd. in Montiero 158*, Autobiography* 66-7). The narrator furthermore comments that time was "what [the patron] was always endeavoring to escape, to bridge over, to blot out," by listening to the ex-colored man's ragtime performances (*Autobiography* 67). The patron was, to the narrator, a friend but, at the same time, "some grim, mute, but relentless tyrant, possessing over [the narrator] a super-natural power which he used to drive [the narrator] on mercilessly to exhaustion" (*Autobiography* 56). Although the "millionaire" treated the ex-colored man largely as a social equal, this did not extend to ragtime performances, which the patron would demand at strange hours of the night. When the narrator reveals to the "millionaire" that he wishes to return to the United States to develop his music amongst his own people, the "millionaire" describes his own theory of how politics functions in the US to dissuade the narrator from his chosen course of action, a theory similar (although in a less developed form) to Henry Adams's. "Evil," the patron claims, "is a force and, like the physical and chemical forces, we cannot annihilate it; we may only change its form" (*Autobiography* 68). The Civil War had not destroyed slavery. Rather, "we only changed it into hatred between sections of the country" and all he can offer is his own "philosophy of life": "make yourself as happy as

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possible, and try to make those happy whose lives come into touch with yours" (*Autobiography* 68). Of course, the "millionaire" is only eventually able to settle his own account with time, escaping it "some years" after enunciating his philosophy, "forever, by leaping into eternity" (*Autobiography* 67). Thus, the stakes for one's relationship to the creation of time through music are quite high in the novel to the point of staking death itself.

I agree with Bruce Barnhart that what he, following Johannes Fabian, calls "chronopolitics" is an essential aspect of the *Autobiography*, particularly concerning the relationship between the narrator as his patron and the system of global capital that guides his actions and valuations. As Barnhart points out, the "narrator's time is at the service of the patron" who, through his patronage, requires the narrator to play piano whenever the patron desires it and only for the patron, except when he "loans" the narrator out to friends (Barnhart 551, *Autobiography* 56). Furthermore, the "patron attempts to use [the narrator's ragtime] to escape the force of time, and sounding in the narrator's ragtime is a form of time cunningly aware of the patron's power and predicament, and slyly resistant to both" (Barnhart 551). Ragtime and classical European symphonic music, in the novel, appear "not as detached aesthetic practices but as technologies of temporal and subjective shaping that are heavily invested in the struggle over the proper shape of American culture and not without their own relationship to political and institutional power" (Barnhart 553). Ultimately, the "witnessing of the lynching puts a violent end to the narrator's symphonic project, but there is a violence implicit in the symphonic project before the lynching aborts it" (Barnhart 559). Although

Barnhart does not develop the interesting comment that music is a "technology" that is subject to institutional power, I would agree with this claim. Yet, I would add that as a technology, music must be placed within the wider frame of the politics of technology that the United States had been imbricated in through the railway. While the lynching at the end of the novel does, indeed, abort the narrator's symphonic project, it does not do so randomly or haphazardly. Music as a technology was also subject to the total train system in which the concept of technology as such was linked with other systems of technology, all within the overarching theme of white supremacist history.

I would extend this insight to the material structures of regimented time as they are nationally instantiated in the railway. Like Henry Adams had done in the 1880s after the suicide of his wife and the failure of his hopes for political reform, the "millionaire" attempts to supplement his struggle with time through not simply music, as Barnhart rightly points out, but travel as well. As we have seen with Adams, travel becomes a supplement for the lack of perceived immediacy of obvious synchronic meaning that was brought about by the railway system. Importantly, like the reactions of the white crowd at the lynching, the circulation of power through the technologies of the train system and music are not necessarily subject to intention. Provided that human relationships are submitted to the subjectification of capitalist circulation, the patron treats the narrator respectfully. What is oppressive about the relationship and ultimately violent in the lynching scene at the end of the novel is the relationship between political space and technology as it was formed in the late 19th Century.

Johnson would pick up the theme of the relationship between the formation of individuals and the system of global capitalism in his political pamphlet, *Negro Americans, What Now?* Written roughly two decades after Johnson's novel. In that pamphlet, as opposed to the implicitly white audience for the *Autobiography*, Johnson writes directly to his "fellows," arguing that the political solutions of Frederick Douglass's generation would no longer work in the 1930s (*What Now?* v). He describes the world as being in a state of political "semi-chaos" the only solution to which would be an "evolutionary process" by which the black community develops its own resources, while simultaneously attempting to change the "national attitude" (*What Now?* 3, 10). These resources Johnson attributes to black Americans' "numerical strength," whose subsequent force he divides into particular institutions for the development and directing of that force: the church, the press, and organizations for the development of the race. This, according to Johnson had to be done in the United States, in a counterargument to the then popular idea that black Americans should return to Africa. Johnson knew that this would be an impractical idea because this would not be an escape from the forces of American influence. Rather, since there were "vacant" places in the world, it would simply forestall the now global conflict of the power of American racial thinking, made global through the channels of international capitalism. Space, as a potential category for political difference had been eliminated by the total train system. As Johnson's experience in Corinto had demonstrated, however, the only remaining category for resistance to the Capitalist circulation of violence of which lynching was the most devastating category would be the creation of time in-between attacks.

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Conclusion

Mysterious Power! Gentle Friend!
Despotic Master! Tireless Force!
You and We are near the End.
        Henry Adams, "Prayer to the Dynamo"

Throughout the 1920s, James Weldon Johnson worked from within his increasingly powerful position within the NAACP to promote federal anti-lynching legislation. As Jacqueline Goldsby put it, the "work that freed Johnson from his 'horror complex'" that resulted from his own experience with lynching "was the lobbying drive he led to introduce the NAACP-backed Dyer Federal Anti-Lynching Bill to Congress in 1921 and 1922" (Goldsby 172). That bill, however, did not pass Congress and the federal government, in fact, never passed any legislation to deal specifically with the violence of lynching in the American South. My dissertation, to the best of my ability, attempted to keep in mind that the movement of history in the United States must be understood within the dialectic between the ideological and the material could have at any point turned out other than it did. At the same time, I also attempted to keep in mind that it did not turn out any other way than it did. Perhaps, had the United States government against all odds taken William Tecumseh Sherman's and Edwin M. Stanton's lead in 1865 and, by any means necessary and to any significant degree, imbricated the recently freed slaves more fully into the invisible threads of capital relations as owners of capital, the course of events in the Reconstruction period and after could easily have had a different trajectory. Although the gambit of Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15 is a particularly famous moment in American history, there are an infinite number of other moments in

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which, similarly, something different might have happened. And yet, as Althusser put it, one does not get to choose one's beginnings.

It is possible that we have not yet, as Lacan suggestively described it, entirely learned how to understand the double-trap of the "history of a life lived as history" that Henry Adams struggled with in the writing of his own *Education* (*Écrits* 366). As hopefully this dissertation began to argue, history is not automatic, despite the efforts of ever more complex "generations" of technology, as they're called in "these swift modern days," to convince us otherwise. The total train system would, in the Twentieth Century with its ability to realize a fully "World War," play a perhaps even more ominous role than it had for Howells's Marches as they attempted to reconstruct American history from within the safety of a railway car on their honeymoon. From within a world war, to be loaded onto a train no longer held a sense of wonder except, perhaps, as a kind of traumatic mathematical sublime or the kind of abjection described by Giorgio Agamben. As Charles Francis Adams and his brother Henry had already speculated, it is perhaps long past the time to be shocked by the development of technologies or to believe them to contain the secret for political problems. At the very least, it may be time to wonder if this constantly renewed shock is somehow considered to be preferable by some people to another option. The writing of this dissertation also saw this shock occur surrounding the events in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 on the part of those who seemed to think for some mysterious reason what had happed in Los Angeles in 1992 was the last word on the subject.

Of course, the trajectory of these influences within the American context that were only beginning to be described by William Dean Howells, Charles W. Chesnutt, Henry Adams, and James Weldon Johnson would take on new forms in the Twentieth Century that, like their rapid change in the Nineteenth, would both be grounded in the past of Reconstruction and yet wholly new. Strangely enough, each of the writers I discussed in this dissertation, one way or another, in their after-lives as studied objects have had to deal with the accusation of "failure." William Dean Howells, despite his artistic and financial success, was forgotten and derided in his own lifetime. Charles Chesnutt and Henry Adams both, toward the end of their lives, described their artistic efforts as failures. James Weldon Johnson did not live to see the anti-lynching legislation he worked so hard for come into existence. And yet, as I have hopefully argued, any definition of success that takes as one of its criteria the "stability" of instituting a universal aesthetic principle, as some perhaps incautious critics have attempted to do with the Modernism that in one way or another each of these authors apparently missed, should be viewed with the same suspicion as the association of technological advancement and the advancement of a "civilization" that takes that technology as its horizon of possibility. To fully deal with this history of the United States, one first has to remember it as both a material and ideological, dialectic relation to the present and hope that "one remembers because one gets better" (*Écrits* 521).

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