"Ther's somethin' in blood, after all." Late Nineteenth Century Fiction and the Rhetoric of Race

I. Racisms

Abolitionist rhetoric before and during the Civil War denounced slavery as *the* 'national sin' and 'public guilt/ hence racist practice tended to be identified almost exclusively with the institution itself. Abolition was consequently stylized as a cathartic event to purify the national character once and for all. Of course, such a fundamental and general catharsis did never happen. With the demise of the institution of slavery the national problems were not solved but only transferred, as the ongoing debate about the true meaning and form of emancipation and equality in the wake of the Civil War shows. It is a truism to point out the persistence of racism after the War: In the late nineteenth century the situation of African Americans had changed, but was as dire as before. As Joel Williamson has pointed out "[i]t is a tremendous irony that the emancipation of Negroes entailed the emancipation of racism."[1]

I do not consider, however, the period during and after Reconstruction to be a mere perpetuation of Pre-Civil War conceptions of race and difference. The ideology of racism *had* changed, although racist behavior patterns had not and racist discourse—as always—denied any change, posing as monolithic, all-encompassing and transhistorical knowledge rather than limited theory. After all, Reconstruction brought about not only a political and social revision, but also a re-construction of ideological stances. In order to reflect upon the rhetoric of 'race' in late nineteenth-century fictional texts, it is of crucial importance to gauge the nature and impact of this re-construction of racism (and racialism) during and after the era of Reconstruction. An analysis of late nineteenth century historical constellations might lastly not only reveal the subtle changes within racialist discourse, but also point to the specific workings of racialist discourse within society. Conceiving of racism as of a "historical product" thus means, as the historian Barbara J. Fields has shown with re-

1 Joel Williamson, *New People. Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1980) 78.

spect to this period, to abandon the idea of a universal underlying 'structure' of racism and to accept the concept of 'racisms' instead:

> There is something profoundly unsettling in the contemplation of a change immense in scope and purchased at great cost, yet so ambiguous that it is impossible to say with full conviction whether it is a change for the better or for the worse. This probably accounts for historians' great reticence about recognizing that the abolition of slavery worked an important change in racialist ideology. Once recognized that a change took place, and the disheartening next step is to realize that what replaced the racialism of slave society was, in its different way, just as repulsive - perhaps more so. It may be marginally comforting to assume that racialist thinking must be one of those primordial flaws of the human psyche, a sort of background noise of the mind, against which even revolutionary upheavals may not prevail. The search for such slender refuge seems to be the unspoken basis of so many historians' slowness in seeing that although there was no appreciable decline or mitigation of racialist thinking, there was a decisive shift in its character.[2]

It is this shifting, heterogeneous, a-logical and historical structure of racist ideology that I want to approach here by way of a reading of fictional and non-fictional constructions of 'race' in the Gilded Age.

The disparate and a-logical nature of racism is conspicuous in fictional texts as these correlate the heterogeneous public discourses about race (medicine, legal theory, social science, etc.) and thus - intentionally or involuntarily - approximate the workings of racist and racialist discourses. As I will concentrate in the following on authors concerned with the project of a social re-organisation (rather than the radical or conservative project of restoration or restriction),3 i.e. Rebecca Harding Davis

2 Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," *Region, Race, and Reconstruction. Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser, James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford UP, 1982) 142-177, 154. See also: David Theo Goldberg, "The Social Formation of Racist Discourse," *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. D. T. Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 295-318; David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture. Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge, Ma.: Blackwell, 1993); Judith Stein, "Defining the Race, 1890-1930," *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. W. Sollors (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 77-104.

3 I adopt the categories of Joel Williamson who distinguished 'Liberal' 'Conservative' and 'Radical' 'mentalities' in order to sketch the intellectual and ideological climate in the South during the nineteenth century: "By mentality I mean something less perfectly formed than a philosophy. [...] On the other side, I use mentality to indicate something that includes but is more than 'notions/ 'opinions/ and 'attitudes,' all of which suggest vagueness, impermanence, individual thought rather than social thought, and thinking that does not compel action and is very often at variance with behavior." While roughly defined Liberalism "said [...] that it did not yet know the potential of the Negro [...] and [...] refused to close them out brusquely [...]" and Con-

and George Washington Cable, I will look at texts that always both subvert *and* reflect the contemporary racialist ideology, both criticize *and* affirm, and thus may serve as delineations of the limits and extension of the historical discourse of racism. Moreover, in their polarizing presentation of a cultural dilemma, the texts by Rebecca Harding Davis, George Washington Cable and Charles Chesnutt present an imaginary dialogue, which could be complemented with many other texts of the period and which ideally gains a momentum that leaves the individual stances behind and brings about a new perspective on 'race.'[4]

II. 'Race' and 'Class': Essence or Construction?

For the sciences of life, biology and medicine, the impact of Darwin's theory was revolutionary, for the discursive field of racism, however, its effects were far from truly unsettling. George Fredrickson has shown how even the radically anti-Darwinist scientific ideology of polygenism which assumed the human races to be derivatives of different, hierarchically organized species, easily fused with a kind of 'modified' Darwinism: "the essence of polygenist thinking about race was preserved in a Darwinian framework."[5] Basically the notion of race as demarcating a fundamental (and hierarchical) difference widely persisted and Darwin's assumption of an undirected and arbitrary process of evolution was

servatism "always began, proceeded, and ended upon the assumption of Negro inferiority [...] and sought to save him by defining and fixing his place in American society [...]," Radicalism "envisioned a 'new' Negro, freed from the necessarily very tight bonds of slavery and retrogressing rapidly toward his natural state of savagery and bestiality." Joel Williamson, *ARage for Order. Black/White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 70-71.

4 All three authors could be subsumed under the category of 'local color fiction' which has traditionally been often depreciated as an evasive, nostalgic and anachronous mode of writing. Richard Brodhead has, however, recently argued for a new approach to local color fiction or regionalism as a genre which "made the experience of the socially marginalized into a literary asset, and so made marginality itself a positive authorial advantage." "The Reading of Regions," *Cultures of Letters. Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1993) 107-141, 117. By dint of this understanding of local color fiction as a re-integrative effort, 'race' turns out to be a focal trope. After all 'race' figured as *the* disruptive force in modern society threatening national harmony, unity and destiny likewise and thus seemed to be exemplarily in need of a cultural project of homogenization like the one local color fiction promised to perform.

5 George Fredrickson, "The Vanishing Negro: Darwinism and the Conflict of the Races," *The Black Image in the White Mind. The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 228-255, 232.

twisted around so that it eventually presented itself as the process of a deterministic and teleological selection of the 'fittest.'

The foremost representative of this revision was of course Herbert Spencer, sociologist, anthropologist and 'scientific ideologist,'[6] who by analogizing social processes to 'biological law/ attempted to create a closed and universally applicable system of thought. Drawing largely on the outdated Lamarckian conception of a hereditary transmission of habits, attitudes and conventions by way of an heredity-determining human 'germ plasm/ Spencer presented social conditions as structures to be passed on just like biological features.[7] 'Race5consequently was conceived of as carried down through generations not only by way of physiological structures, but also by way of its 'cultural5manifestations such as folklore, ritual or custom. The impact of this thought of course was ambivalent: while it implied on the one hand a further level (and degree) of conditioning, on the other hand it did reveal a new perspective on 'race5which now could be considered a changeable feature rather than an essential precondition.[8] Just like class, race - at least in liberal interpretations of Spencer's Neo-Lamarckianism - became a condition that could be accessed and changed by way of education and cultural assimilation.[9]

6 Georges Canguilhem has called Spencer's theory a scientific ideology, as he drew upon biological principles in an inconsistent and selective way, solely to the purpose of rendering his social theory plausible (instead of explaining or specifying it). See: Georges Canguilhem, "What is a Scientific Ideology?" *Ideology and Rationality in the History of the Life Sciences*, tr. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1988) 38.

7 This preference of Lamarck over Cuvier places Spencer once again into the realm of scientific ideology rather than science. As Foucault has shown, Lamarck conceives of evolution as of an "ontological continuity," a "progressive levelling, an uninterrupted improvement," and thus radically diverges from modern scientific theory which after all insisted since Cuvier on the "radical discontinuity" of the process of hereditary transmission. See: Michel Foucault, *Die Ordnung der Dinge. Eine Archäologie der Humanwissenschaften*, tr. U. Koppen (1966, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1989) 336. (My translation)

8 On Darwinism and Spencer's Social Darwinism in the Nineteenth Century and its impact on racist discourse see apart from Fredrickson, Thomas F. Gossett, "Race and Social Darwinism," *Race. The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1963) 144-175; Richard Hofstadter, "Racism and Imperialism," *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1945) 147-173; John G. Burke, "The Wild Man's Pedigree: Scientific Method and Racial Anthropology," *The Wild Man Within. An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. E. Dudley, M. E. Novak (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1972) 259- 280.

9 This 'liberal' adaptation of Spencer's Neo-Lamarckianism comes to the fore especially in African-American writing of the period. During the period between 1860 to 1890

It is the latter interpretation that informs Rebecca Harding Davis's novel *Waiting for the Verdict* (1867). The "pioneer realist"[10] Davis questioned the early nineteenth-century notion of race as a quality inherent in 'the blood' and inscribed into the body, a notion which pervades sentimental abolitionist rhetoric. Let me briefly resume the sentimental understanding of race and class to put forth this difference: Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* enacts class as a category easily left behind (Fanny and Teddy Cripps, two lower class children, are elevated to a middle class standard just by reading the bible and demonstrating good conduct[11]), while race is depicted as an essential and unassailable category (the children's black servant, Uncle Tiff, is bound (and happy) to remain in his inferior position due to his 'racial' condition, "for that creature has n't one particle of selfishness in him. He just identifies himself with his mistress and her children."[12]).

authors as different as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. Du Bois drew on a Spencerian terminology of self-help and hereditarian improvement in order to emphasize the capability of black people to 'uplift' themselves. See: August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915. Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1963); on Frederick Douglass: Eric Sundquist, "Signs of Power: Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass," *To Wake the Nations. Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard UP, 1993) 27-134; on W. E. B. Du Bois, especially in light of his changing attitudes from the 1890s to 1950: Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race," *'Race,' Writing, and Difference*, ed. H. L. Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 21-37.

10 Sharon M. Harris, *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991) 5. One can certainly find fault with Harris's pervasive categorization of Davis as a realist. However, while working with the repertoire of sentimental rhetoric, Davis's texts do indicate a turn to a realist concept of individuality as socially constructed and negotiated (and fictionally promoted) rather than essentially given and sentimentally exposed and affirmed. See Winfried Fluck's analysis of sentimental and realist strategies of representation for a clarification of the different approaches: "Der realistische Roman als kulturelle Strategie des *Gilded Age", Inszenierte Wirklichkeit. Der amerikanische Realismus, 1865-1900* (München: W. Fink, 1992) 46-87.

11 The heroine Nina Gordon's enthusiastic description of the social situation in New Hampshire clearly delineates the sentimental conception of class as a transcendable category, ideally absorbed in an all-pervading middle class: "There are no high and low *classes* there. Everybody works and everybody seems to have a good time. [...] Seems to me this is better than making slaves of all the working classes, or having any working classes at all." Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, v. 1. (1856, New York: AMS Press, 1970) 268.

12 *Dred*, 131. Karen Sanchez-Eppler has analogized this essentialist corporeal conception of race in sentimental fiction to the vision of gender and ultimately personhood. While clearly essentializing race and gender, sentimental texts for Sanchez-Eppler are always torn between this 'corporealization' of personhood and the attempt to 'obliterate'

In Davis's *Waiting for the Verdict* this essentialist conception of race (as opposed to class) is abandoned. Referring to Davis's earlier story, *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861), Amy Schrager Lang has shown that Davis represents man "as entirely the product of his circumstances [...]."[13] In *Waiting for the Verdict* the darkly deterministic implications of *Life in the Iron Mills* seem mellowed. In line with Neo-Lamarckian conceptions of heredity as "the transmission of acquired characteristics,"[14] Davis presents race as environmentally induced condition which according to her defies the ongoing denigration of 'other' races and serves to establish the ideal of universal equality. The distinctive marks of race and class are thus less deduced to the determining and hierarchizing quality of 'blood' than to the effects of social and cultural background, which shape, yet by no means determine personhood: "Blood don't weigh so much with me as with other folks - blood don't,"[15] declares the working class man Joe Burley right to the beginning of the novel. If to the end "defects inherent in the blood" (WV118) are attributed to black people and lower class people alike to set them off from the community of the white middle class, this belief is clearly depicted to be a dangerous public prejudice.

black bodies "as the only solution to the problem of slavery. [...] Antislavery writers' tendency to do away with bodies stands as a testimony to their terrified sense that the body is inescapable." "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition," *The New American Studies. Essays from* Representations, ed. R Fisher (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) 228-259, 250. See also: Philip Fisher, "Making a Thing into a Man," *Hard Facts. Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 87-127.

13 Amy Schrager Lang, "Class and the Strategies of Sympathy," *The Culture of Sentiment*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 128-142,139. Lang insists in her comparative reading of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Davis's novel on Davis's totalistic conception of class: "Class cannot be dismissed as obscuring a deeper 'human' reality, nor can it be dissolved into race or gender. Rather, class stands as irreducible to the end, and art - suspect from the first - emerges as the real subject of *Life in the Iron Mills."* (142) While I doubt whether this naturalistic conception of class really holds true for this earlier novel, it is certainly not appropriate for *Waiting for the Verdict* as I will show.

14 Gossett, "Race and Social Darwinism," 163.

15 Rebecca Harding Davis, *Waiting For the Verdict* (1867, Upper Saddle River: The Gregg Press, 1968) 14. Hereafter cited in the text as *WV*.
Doubtlessly in this novel, just like in sentimental fiction, the concept of blood as by no means inexorably conditioning power derives from the universal quality ascribed to the middle-class family, which Rosslyn and her father consequently manage to create somewhat miraculously out of their working class existence. Nevertheless, Davis's overall thematization of class as a conditioning force which might dangerously inscribe itself into the body, yet is a communal construct after all, anticipates realistic or naturalistic concepts of class.

This 'new' categorization of race as a consequence of social prejudice rather than biological difference, however, is not as unproblematic as it may seem at first glance. Let me briefly resume the plot of the novel in order to show the implications of a rhetoric which analogizes 'race' and 'class' only to emphasize their fundamental difference; a difference shown to be based on purely imaginative grounds, which, however, turn out to be just as committing and universal as 'real' biological differentiations used to be.

The plot focuses on two couples, both struggling with the consequences of public prejudice. On the one hand, Rosslyn Burley, being of working class origin, falls in love with Garrick Randolph, a proud member of the Southern gentry, and is afraid that her "tainted" (WV229) low class origin might frighten her lover away; and on the other hand the mulatto surgeon John Broderip, passing for white in pre-war Philadelphia, falls in love with the Northerner Margret Conrad and fears her being revolted by his "vulgar" *(WV*299) racial background. While Rosslyn and Garrick manage to overcome the class distinctions, Broderip and Margret do not come to grips with the specter of racial difference. Hearing about Broderip's racial origin, Margret breaks up the relationship, referring to the "prejudice against the black blood," "senseless" but uneradicable, "a thing which will exist while the two races endure" (WV310). While some critics have taken this ending to demonstrate Davis's final regression to a racist status quo, and others have insisted on her politically correct critique of the depicted prejudice,161 read the novel's pessimistic ending as a thorough, if helpless reflection of contemporary provisions and thus

16 Both James Kinney and Sharon Harris have read the novel almost exclusively as a thematization of the trope of the 'tragic mulatto,' concentrating on the aspect of miscegenation. While Kinney comes to the conclusion that Davis's novel replicated the trope completely - "there is no hope for mulattoes; the only solution lies in avoiding the miscegenation which produces them" -, Harris reads Davis as an early advocate of multiculturalism: "In *Waiting*, it is the sexual fears of Americans toward freed blacks that she questions, as she had in her earliest Civil War story, John Lamar; but now she is able to present the issue without the traces of her former discomfort. Broderip dies honorably, but Margaret faces a lingering, self-inflicted death of the spirit." James Kinney, *Amalgamation! Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985) 109; Sharon M. Harris, *Rebecca Harding Davis*, 135. I am less interested in the trope of the tragic mulatto or on the public debate about miscegenation (which doubtlessly did influence Davis), but mean to focus on the 'blackness' of the mulatto figure Broderip, his representative status for an African-American community "before the verdict." The problems he faces, the solutions he experiences and the suffering he undergoes, I argue, render him part of the 'Black race,' even if this classification is shown to be based on purely imaginative grounds.

neither as per se regressive nor progressive move. Incapable of dissolving or transcending the inconclusive and contradictory public discourses of race, Davis's novel does depict their alogical and chamaleon-like structure. The atmosphere of the 'dead end' pervading the novel delineates the conceptual and moral impasse of late nineteenth century culture.

A crucial conversation early in the novel may serve to highlight Davis's narrative strategies and their consequences. Talking to John Broderip, whom he takes to be white, Mr. Ottley, the prototype of a 'good-natured' dumb racist, sums up the race question: "'Well, the sum of the whole matter is, that there is no chance for the black man here. Never will be. Give him his liberty, enact what laws you please, you never can eradicate the caste prejudice: the instinct that separates the races.'" Broderip's reaction is significant: "Broderip rose hastily: 'Instinct? instinct? That is it [...]. I recognize the truth in that. You have touched the root of the mat- ter.'" (W 113-114)

While Ottley conceives of instinct as of a purely negative category, Broderip's future development will be determined by the notion of this 'instinct' as a positive impulse: "the mysterious instinct of his race" (WV295) is later on declared to be the reason for him to abandon his renowned position as surgeon in the North, to acknowledge his brother Nathan, a former slave, and to enlist in a black regiment. The distinction is crucial: As Ottley's belief in the determinacy of the "blood" is clearly ridiculed, 'the instinct' in its turn seems to originate from 'race prejudice' rather than 'blood' or 'biological race' itself and is thus shown to rest on purely imaginative grounds;[17] however, being as strong as it is, this imaginative notion of the 'race instinct' manages to completely take over the function of 'blood' as a differentiating quality. Whereas John Broderip's disgust for the "accursed old grandfather in [his] blood" (WV117) is shown to be as unfounded as Rosslyn's fear of her "tainted" class origin, his feeling of difference, other than Rosslyn's, appears very well justified. As a differentiating force, it seems, 'race instinct' is just as determining as 'blood' was believed to be. Broderip's and Margret's instinctive belief in the distinctive feature of race, as being manifest and inscribed in the body, suffices to establish a "gulf [...] which God never intended to be crossed." (WV310) This turn collapses the novel's moral argument, the Neo-La-

17 Margret's 'racialist' repulsion is described as an 'instinct,' too, yet an instinct that applies only after she *hears* about Broderip's racial origin, any earlier instinctive 'premonition' on her part is clearly denied. When Broderip asks her whether she avoids him "from instinct," Margret explains her reserve in a way which points to social, not racial provisions: "'You brought a strange world before me, Dr. Broderip; you made me feel all that I might have been, but am not." (WV120)

marckian idea of public prejudice and individual self-esteem as (hereditarily) conditioning forces renders race a reliable distinctive mark after all (and thus differentiates it once and for all from the concept of class). The shift of focus from the 'racial body' to the 'racialist mind,' from essentialist 'biological race' to 'race prejudice' does not efface but confirm racial difference. What old Joe Burley recognizes in the end in respect of Rosslyn and her father, may thus stand for the desperately tautological stance toward race which the novel exhibits: "Ther's somethin' in blood, after all." *(WV*344)

With this novel, deliberately or not, Davis delineated the dilemma that was to involve American society in an all-encompassing debate about the social function of and possible moral justification for racial segregation. While I do not mean to gloss over the fact that a powerful strain of essentialist biological racism was still given (and probably dominant) in these days, I do consider the move towards a 'socialization' of race the most crucial aspect of the contemporary debate. Leaving the awkward essentialisms of an earlier period behind and maintaining nevertheless the idea of a meaningful framework linking individual and (socio-biological) group, sociological theories turned away from biological race only to concentrate the better on biological racialism. In the 1880's the tautological conclusion already apparent in Davis's novel has become a central tenement of racist rhetoric: "The greater their personal success may be," remarks Senator John T. Morgan in 1884 in reference to African Ameri- cans, "the more they will feel the pressure of caste, and their advancement in enterprises which may bring them personal honor and wealth will be checked by the jealousy of caste, so that race prejudice will forever remain as an incubus on all their individual or aggregated efforts."[18] In this interpretation, public feelings and prejudices eventually come to function as powerful justifications for a racist status quo.

Just as Davis's attempt to turn away from the body as a sign of racial origin ended up in an affirmation of the mind as an equally determining instance of racial differentiation, her attempt to analogize 'race' and 'class' collapsed as she refrained from abandoning the category of race as a meaningful social distinction. The same move takes place time and again in late nineteenth century culture, yet by the 1880's it has become apparent that the turn from the palpable physiological body to the cultural manifestations of race does not have liberating consequences per se. The

18 John T. Morgan, "The Future of the Negro," *North American Review* 139 (July 1884) 83-84, quoted in: George F. Fredrickson, "The Vanishing Negro: Darwinism and the Conflict of the Races," 228.

notion of a 'floating' and constructed nature of race need not deny the totalitarian claims of racism, as Henry Cabot Lodge's Congress speech in 1896, defending his proposed bill for immigration restrictions, will show:

> We all know it instinctively, although it is so impalpable that we can scarcely define it, and yet it is so deeply marked that even the physiological differences between the Negro, the Mongol, and the Caucasian are not more persistent or more obvious. When we speak of race, then, we [...] mean the moral and intellectual character[istic]s which in their association make the soul of a race, and which represent the product of all its past, the inheritance of all its ancestors, and the motives of all its conduct. The men of each race possess an indestructible stock of ideas, traditions, sentiments, modes of thought, an unconscious inheritance from their ancestors, upon which argument has no effect. What makes a race are their mental and, above all, their moral characteristics, the slow growth and accumulation of centuries of toil and conflict. These are the qualities which determine their social efficacy as a people […].[19]

In this speech, the "unconscious" and "indestructible" nature of race renders it an affair of the 'soul' rather than of the body and thus evokes the myth of the transhistorical and essential quality if not of race then of racism.[20] While in Davis's text the "mysterious instinct of race" had led to Broderip's self-realization (if at the cost of his career, social reputation and personal happiness), in this instance the 'race instinct' functions as purely negative force, separating ethnic groups rigidly and preventing once and for all a vision of a dehierarchized and desegregated society. Lodge just like Morgan depicts race as a petrifying and consolidating force grounded upon an irrational, deep-set and a-logical *feeling* which invariably renders the concept of 'race instinct' or 'prejudice' unapproachable by way of legislative or political measures. "[There is] an instinct, ineradicable and positive, that will keep the races apart, that would keep the races apart if the problem were transferred to Illinois or Maine, and that will resist every effort of appeal, argument, or force to bring them together,"[21]

19 Quoted in: Charles A. Lofgren, *The Plessy Case. A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 98-99.

20 Walter Benn Michaels has consequently correlated the tendency of a 'socialization' of race to the ideological move of a 'spiritualization' of race in the early twentieth century: "The Souls of White Folks," *Literature and the Body. Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. E. Scarry (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 185-209. While the decline of a 'biological' racism is evident in the twentieth century and might be very well put into the context of late nineteenth century revisions of race, I do not agree to Michaels' monolithic concept of twentieth century racism as a uniformly organized and motivated body of thought from the beginning of the century to the present.

21 Henry W. Grady, "In Plain Black and White: A Reply to Mr. Cable," *Century Magazine* (1885), quoted in: Charles A. Lofgren, *The Plessy Case*, 97.

wrote Henry W. Grady in 1885 in a direct response to an article written by George Washington Cable in the *Century Magazine*, "The Freed- man's Case in Equity" (1885). In this article Cable had pointed out the absurdity of a theoretical framework which insisted on the consolidating function of 'instinct' without really having tried to give 'education' and 'emancipation' a chance: "if there is such an instinct, so far from excusing the malignant indignities practiced in its name, it furnishes their final condemnation; for it stands to reason that just in degree as it is a real thing it will take care of itself."[22]

In Cable's novel *The Grandissimes* (1880) the negative and petrifying effects of this allegedly omnipresent 'race instinct' are conspicuous. Rather than focusing on the question of race and class, Cable concentrates on "caste" as the intricate link between these two concepts. According to politicians like Morgan, caste demarcates both the consciousness of a social *and* a racial identity and hierarchy, a belief that for Cable was as socially counterproductive as it was illusory. A short reading of the novel should evince how Cable tried to come to grips with the issue of 'race instinct' here just as in his political pamphlets, yet presented a much more complicated argument which again points to the cultural inconclusivities repressed in the political and social debates.

This novel, set in the Louisiana of 1803, one year after the Louisiana Purchase, is concerned with cultural difference on several levels: there is the American system which the Louisiana Creoles are slow to accept, the intricate caste system of the Creole society, setting related families fiercely against each other and finally the caste system rigidly separating former slaves and their Creole neighbors.[23] The social debate at the turn of the century is related by way of the perspective of an outsider, the German immigrant Joseph Frowenfeld, and clearly paralleled to the social dilemma of the 1880's.

Cable describes a dominant Creole family, the Grandissimes, as a monolithic block of people with outdated aristocratic aspirations, incapable in their nostalgic relish of past glory to live up to current social

22 "The Freedman's Case in Equity," (1885) *The Negro Question. A Selection of Writings on Civil Rights in the South by George Washington Cable*, ed. A. Turner (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958) 49-74, 72. See also: Arlin Turner, *George W. Cable. A Biography* (Durham: Duke UP, 1956) 194-207.

23 Talking of 'race' in *The Grandissimes*, I refer to the African-American 'race,' leaving aside the categorizations of a Creole 'race' throughout the novel. As Virginia R. Dominguez has shown, Cable's description of Creole laziness and indifference did raise many objections in the 1880s and after. V. R. Dominguez. "Racial Polarization." *White By Definition. Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986) 133-148.

needs and expectations. Only Honoré Grandissime, one of the sons, faces the need to accommodate to the present and acts it out by ending the long-time quarrel with the estranged family of the De Grapions as well as by acknowledging his mulatto (half-)brother, ironically called Honoré Grandissime as well, as equal partner into business. Two women, Aurore De Grapion, a beautiful Creole, loved by Honoré Grandissime, and Palmyre, a fascinating former slave, loved by the second, 'black' Honoré Grandissime, complete the picture.

If Honoré Grandissime I is credited with the insight that defies the universal quality of 'caste' and questions the commonality of 'race in- stinct,' his project of social reform is depicted by no means as an autonomous or heroic act. To the contrary, the repudiation of the concept of 'caste instinct' is in turn described as the effect of an instinctive impulse: "[Honoré Grandissime] had felt himself thrown here and there, wrenched, torn, gasping for moral breath, speaking the right word as in delirium, doing the right deed as if by helpless instinct [...]."[24] This pattern of explanation, declaring seemingly autonomous choice to derive in fact from involuntary, 'unconscious' sources, is referred to throughout the novel whenever crucial decisions are due. In an attempt to describe the social situation, the spectator figure Joseph Frowenfeld once invokes a "conventionality" which is "stronger than government." (G229) Customs, conventions and traditions, it seems, are the strongest forces in the Southern society, and feelings, sentiments, affections are shown to be conventions all the same, carried down through generations, to shape and condition the Southern Creoles in a subtle and unconscious way: "we get them as we get our old swords and gems and laces [...] Refined they are, after centuries of refining." The culture of the African Americans, in opposition, is based on a similarly strong, yet much cruder and 'unrefined' tradition, as is shown in a reflection upon Clemence, a former slave:

> [...] the feelings handed down to Clemence had come through ages of African savagery; through fires that do not refine, but that blunt and blast and blaken and char; starvation, gluttony, drunkenness, thirst, drowning, nakedness, dirt fetichism, debauchery, slaughter, pestilence and the rest - she was their heiress; they left her the cinder of human feelings. (G251)

Centuries of misery and degradation have influenced African Americans, we learn, just as the Creoles have been conditioned by their 'refined' and

24 George Washington Cable, *The Grandissimes. A Story of Creole Life* (1880, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988) 278. Hereafter cited in the text as *G*.

overbred culture. Yet while the Creoles are deeply entrenched in an intricate, if outdated and widely defunct social system, their African-American counterparts have no similarly encompassing common ground to draw upon. Isolated and fragmented beings in a hostile society, they have only their hate to refer to: "To Clemence the order of society was nothing. No upheaval could reach to the depth to which she was sunk." (G251)

In view of the idea of society as the ultimate symbolical framework, the point of reference for every individual being, the fatalistic ending of the novel is not surprising. While the dilemma of social caste can be solved (Honoré I going into business and marrying his former antagonist Aurore De Grapion), the dilemma of racial caste in view of the former slaves remains pending. Both Palmyre and Honoré II refuse to take part in the new society, they leave the country, Palmyre dedicated to her hatred of white society, Honoré II completely absorbed in his unhappy love life, castigated by his lack of will power and apathy.

In this novel again the diatribes of an essentialist biological racism are countered by a concept of race as socialized behavior, and again, the transformation of race concepts invokes a new, no less problematic in- stance of differentiation. Rejecting both the sentimental notion of the determining individual body and Davis's notion of the determining individual consciousness, George Washington Cable conceives of individuality as being determined (and shaped) by its social environment. Consequently, the only solution to the problem of caste he can envision consists in a general social reform, as his political writings maintain.[25] In his fiction, however, he depicts African-American race as an a-social entity, as a purely negative template of the dominant system, and thus as virtually unapproachable by way of social reform or social theory. African Americans are stylized as individuals outside society, given alternati-

25 In his follow-up to "The Freedman's Case," "The Silent South," Cable differentiates much more explicitly than before between 'social' and 'civil equality,' maintaining the African Americans' right to the latter, yet defying their claim to social equality. With this differentiation, he concedes to public fears about an all-pervading 'racial intermixture,' picturing the act of equalization as a purely negative act of liberation without any social consequences as the "two races [...] really have no social affinity at all." George Washington Cable, "The Silent South," (1885) *The Negro Question*, 75-118, 84. In view of the alleged a-social and fragmented structure of the African-American community, however, this pragmatist definition of equalization does imply the paradoxical conclusion that African Americans will remain eternally outside the established order of society and nevertheless be 'contained' by it. The implications of this paradox, which are repressed in the political text, come to the fore in the literary adaptation.

vely to resigned apathy or to pure negativity, which renders the idea of an integrated society paradoxical, "a fool's dream" indeed.[26]

III. Beyond Construction?

In his admirable reading of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Brook Thomas has speculated about Mark Twain's novel having been "produced by an autonomous writing machine": "No free agents controlling the terms of the action, Twain and Pudd'nhead serve as agents through which a mechanistic fate accomplishes its dirty work of perpetuating a cultural tragedy." This imagery strikes me as appropriate for Davis's and Cable's novels just as well, which were equally entangled in a public discourse which "linked, rather than opposed, environmental training and hereditary transmission"[27] and thus came to conceive of cultural conventions and social provisions as of 'essential' categories after all. Just as Mark Twain's novel, *Waiting for the Verdict* and *The Grandissimes* along with other contemporary 'race' fictions expose rather than explain cultural inconsistencies, displaying rather than dissolving the problematic instance of racial discrimination. It is no accident that almost all the novels written between the late 1860's and 1890's, concerned with getting a grasp on the 'race problem,' end in the same fatal impasse, the stance of the "waiting for the verdict" or underneath "the shadow of the Ethiopian" which "rhetahds and poisons everhy industrhy we got!" (G156).

The maintenance of 'race' as a distinctive and normative mark within nineteenth century racialist discourse did affect fictional texts of the day, however concerned they might have been with questioning contemporary 'essentialist' positions, and the recognition of this affection will

26 "Social equality is a fool's dream." "The Silent South," 83. This dilemma shows in social science of the day just as well, as especially liberal social scientists such as Lester F. Ward, Charles H. Cooley, E. A. Ross and John R. Commons who rejected Spencerism and conceived of social class as of a superficial structure to be very well affected by way of reformative measures, tended to depict race as an a-social and conditioning force much harder (if at all) to assail by way of political programs or jurisdiction. See: Thomas Gossett, "Race and Social Darwinism," pp. 160; David W. Marcell, "The Evolutionary Dialogue," *Progress and Pragmatism. James, Dewey, Beard, and the American Idea of Progress* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1974) 93-145; Thomas L. Haskell, "Interdependence and the Rise of Professional Social Science," *The Emergence of Professional Social Science. The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977) 24-47.

27 Brook Thomas, "Tragedies of Race, Training, Birth, and Communities of Competent Pudd'nheads," *American Literary History* 1:4 (Winter 1989) 754-785, 780, 763.

inevitably complicate the reading of these texts. However, this recognition can also disclose a new perspective on the workings of racism and anti-racism as intricately linked rhetorical and conceptual structures. Whereas late nineteenth-century fictions such as *Waiting for the Verdict, The Grandissimes, Pudd'nhead Wilson* and many others, do not dissolve the cultural dilemma, they do introduce a transformative move which will eventually serve as a point of reference for fundamtental efforts at cultural renewal and ethnic revision. Henry Louis Gates has pointed out the aspect of a cultural re-construction informing the African-American stylization of the 'New Negro' in the late nineteenth century. If Gates rightfully stresses the African-American thrust *against* established cultural stereotypes like "'Zip Coon/ 'Sambo/ and 'Mammy'"[28] I would like to read this African-American re-construction *within* the larger context of a pervasive preoccupation with 'race' as a constructed, yet nevertheless valid distinctive mark, a preoccupation voiced exemplarily by fictional texts of the day.[29] I believe that the literary 're-construction' of cultural stereotypes is motivated by an intertextual communication: a constant adaptation and transformation (or at least translation) of racialist cultural stances which very often affects ideological positions by 'merely' reading them literally or against the grain. The same potential which renders literary texts "autonomous writing machines" which disturbingly (if involuntarily) point to ideological inconsistencies and contradictions, without necessarily transcending these ideological stances, renders them points of reference for cultural revisions and historical reflections, which try to make sense of and grasp these inconclusivities instead of just glossing them over.

Let me finish with a brief reflection upon a novel, which I regard as an exemplary instance of a re-constructive move based on a 'constructive' discourse. In Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) a white

28 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *The New American Studies*, 319-345, 330.

29 Kenneth W. Warren has argued in a similar vein when he read African-American history not exclusively as a conscious effort at emancipation and independence from dominant cultural paradigms, but also as (often unconscious) response to the racialist discourses of the Gilded Age: "The point is not to construct a racially integrated literary utopia but to highlight the intellectual and cultural anxieties that have made separation and discrimination in a variety of forms seem viable solutions to the social problem of a supposedly democratic society." Kenneth Warren, *Black and White Strangers. Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) 10. Judith Stern has likewise pointed out the intricate link between African-American and Euro-American historical constellations which often outweighs reference to ethnic traditions in forming ethnic identities: "Defining the Race, 1890-1930."

surgeon, Dr. Price, ponders the position of a black surgeon, Dr. Adam Miller, in a racist Southern society:

> There was something melancholy, to a cultivated mind, about a sensitive, educated man who happened to be off color. Such a person was a sort of social misfit, an odd quantity, educated out of his own class, with no possible hope of entrance into that above it. [...] [Dr. Price's] claim of superiority to the colored doctor rested fundamentally upon the fact that he was white and Miller was not; and yet this superiority, for which he could claim no credit, since he had not made it himself, was the very breath of his nostrils, - he would not have changed places with the other for wealth untold [...].[30]

Inextricably linked with the conception of class, race is shown to constitute both an imaginary distinction (as it is transcendable by way of education) *and* a most consequential determination (as it cannot to be left behind). Yet where Davis and Cable have been concerned with the power of the latter concept to embezzle the former awareness, i.e. with the conditioning impact of 'race prejudice' which always threatens to reenforce the status of 'race' as ultimate distinctive mark, Chesnutt's novel further complicates the matter, as instead of focusing on the question of the status (and reality) of 'race' it concentrates on the function (and reality) of 'racism/ While radical racism and radical black rebellion "cancel each other out in *The Marrow of Tradition*" as William L. Andrews has demonstrated,[31] the true conflict is deduced to the public's conformity with an outdated value system, which is upheld despite (and in full knowledge of) its being a mere convention and meaningless tradition. Listen to Dr. Price's explanation for racial discrimination as performed by his friend, Major Carteret:

> 'He has certain principles, - call them prejudices, if you like, - certain inflexible rules of conduct by which he regulates his life. One of these, which he shares with us all in some degree, forbids the recognition of the negro as a social equal. [...] This is not [...] an unimportant matter, or a mere question of

30 Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition,* (1901) *Three Classic African-American Novels,* ed. H. L. Gates, Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 529. Hereafter cited in the text as MT.

31 William L. Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980) 200. In his recent analysis of the novel, Eric Sundquist too has epitomized the pivotal function of this constellation. Josh Green, the radical black rebel, and Captain McBane, the radical racist, thus come to function as broken reflections of the protagonist, Miller, and his position between African-American tradition and Anglo-American career: "Miller is scarcely more like Josh than he is like McBane; both inhabit a moral and personal geography that is unfamiliar and repulsive to him." Eric Sundquist, "Charles Chestnutt s Cakewalk," *To Wake the Nations,* 271-454, 440.

> prejudice, or even of personal taste. It is a sacred principle, lying at the very root of our social order, involving the purity and prestige of our race.' (*MT*526)

This vague justification for the maintenance of the status quo echoes the tautological conclusion of Davis's *Waiting for the Verdict*, that "ther's somethin' in blood, after all," yet in contrast to Davis Chesnutt does not displace the tautology but renders it the pivot of the narrative dilemma. Even if later on "for a moment the veil of race prejudice is rent in twain" (*MT*240) for Carteret, this revelation is not enacted as a cathartic turn, but merely underlines the insignificance of the individual consciousness in view of an autonomous and self-perpetuating racist social discourse.

Whereas for Cable the a-social and fragmented nature of African-American individuality presented an insurmountable obstacle to the project of social reform, for Chesnutt it is the arbitrary and fragmented construct of a 'white' tradition which efficiently prevents black emancipation and development. The only escape from this pessimistic outlook will consist in a revision of the 'white' tradition and the construction of an alternative African-American framework.[32] But *this* construction, this excavation of African-American and reevalution of Euro-American traditions, belongs to another story, the story of the Harlem Renaissance and its public reception, with its own backlashes and tautologies, to be told at another occasion.

32 Susan Gillman has shown how the alleged re-construction (which is always necessarily a construction in the first place) of an ethnic tradition is enacted in African-American novels at the turn of the century. Gillman conceives of Frances Harper's, Pauline Hopkins' and eventually W. E. B. Du Bois's writings as of texts intricately linked with *and* opposed to the tradition of the "race tragedy," converting it from the tragic to the romance mode and thus accommodating "communal rather than individualistic conceptions of race." S. Gillman, "The Mulatto, Tragic or Triumphant?" *The Culture of Sentiment* 221-243, 242. Although she does not mention Charles Chesnutt, his constant (and often criticized) oscillation between melodrama and realism, between romance and novel, points to his immersion in this context. It is the very generical 'unreliability' of his writing, however, his intermediate position between the sentimental tradition of African-American writing and the liberal realistic tradition of 'race fiction,' that renders Chesnutt's work focal to the contemporary literary enactment of race, "[embracing] the entire history of nineteenth-century African American life." E. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 270.

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