The Legacy of Prospero's Island: Coleman, Chesnutt, and Discriminatory Discourse
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This paper was written for Dr. Brevik's Senior Thesis and Presentation course.

I. Introduction to Calibanic Discourse

One hundred years following the publication of Charles W. Chesnutt's The Marrow of Tradition, a scholar named James W. Coleman established his theory of Calibanic discourse in 2001 with a book titled Black Male Literature and the Legacy of Caliban. His work granted the scholarly world remarkable insight into a legacy of racial discourse in literature that has existed in perhaps its most complete form since the genesis of creature Caliban in Shakespeare's The Tempest. The legacy of Caliban is steeped in the tradition of “otherism,” as it details the cultural and literary treatment of African Americans throughout Western history. His treatment of this literary legacy, however, was aimed at postmodernist American works, such as those of Ralph Ellison, and he chose not to write on earlier black male fiction. Coleman admits to the possibility of greater application of his theory on Calibanisc discourse, and with this in mind I chose to follow in his footsteps and expand his discussion. In doing so, I have also ameliorated his theory to include the discourses through which Calibanisc discourse has been immortalized: the discourses of the white supremacist population that I have divided into two separate social groups. These two social strata, being the aristocratic white caste and the non-aristocratic white caste, form the society which enforces and controls the conceptions and ideals of Calibanic discourse. I refer to these two social strata, and the discourses which mark their legacy, with the names of two other characters from The Tempest: Prospero and Ariel. I find these titles to be particularly apt, as it is my belief that the social dynamic of the Island within Shakespeare's work is the guiding literary tradition behind the discourse of a Western Euro-centric view of white supremacy that found new roots in the history of the United States and its literature.

Coleman's theory is bound to Shakespeare's work The Tempest, and more specifically the literary treatment of the enslaved Caliban. Caliban, native to the Island, is forced into slavery by the magical Italian Prospero. Miranda, Prospero's daughter, attempts to teach Caliban the language spoken by herself and her father. "According to Miranda, Caliban was a 'savage' who did not 'Know [his] own meaning, but wouldst gabble like / A thing most brutish, I endowed [his] purposes / With words that made them known" (Coleman 2). This language, not being native to Caliban, forces both his identity and his voice into the terms seen by the Europeans. As Coleman writes, “Caliban / cannibal—the savage brute whose 'purpose' is enslavement. Caliban tries to use the language for his own benefit, but he cannot: ‘You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language” (Coleman 2). In this sense, and by Prospero's design, the language cannot profit the "savage" because it is not his own: “Prospero has too much control over [Caliban] and over the language" for Caliban to be able to "profit" from it" (Coleman 2). Instead, Caliban can only (re) inscribe his savage nature, as illustrated by Knight's statement: "He is uniquely at home with earth-nature. His curses are weighted with it, and even in his slavery he is imprisoned by Prospero 'in this hard rock" (I.ii.343, Knight 180). His nature is rooted in the earth, much like that of the Native American or tribal African; as such, it will always remain inferior to that of the conquering force of Western civilization. His curses, his acts of violence and sexuality, as well as his inability to profit from the language—all of these work to inscribe Caliban's inferiority by comparison to the dominant, aristocratic former duke, Prospero.

The effect of language had a similar control over American slavery as well. Coleman, in reminding us the words of John Edgar Wideman, writes: Tension and resistance characterize the practices of African-descended people have employed to keep their distance from imposed tongues, imposed disciplines. Generation after generation has been compelled to negotiate—for better or worse, and with self-determination and self-realization at stake—the quicksand of a foreign language that continues by its structure, vocabulary, its deployment of social interaction, its retention of racist assumptions, expressions and attitudes, its contamination by theories of racial hierarchy to recreate the scenario of master and slave... Uneasiness and a kind of disbelief of the incriminating language we’ve been forced to adopt never go away...Thus, the patriarchy controls the symbols of signification. (Coleman 2)

With Caliban, his status akin to that of the newly transported African slave in America, we can see the figure of a slave who can only use a learned language to re-infer the supposedly uncivilized nature imposed on him by Prosperian linguistics. Caliban is also forced to sound “vulgar and brutish” by this forced language, unable to use it “in a civilized fashion” (Coleman 3). By Shakespeare's treatment and Prospero's design, Caliban cannot rise above the status of brutal, bestial savage. It is in this legacy that we can see Calibanic discourse used in the treatment of the Afro-American in throughout our literary history; this is Caliban's legacy, as Coleman would hold it.

Coleman defines his term as follows: Calibanic discourse is the perceived history and story of the black male in Western culture that has its genesis and tradition in language and non-linguistic signs. It denotes slavery, proscribed freedom, proscribed sexuality, inferior character, and inferior voice. In summary, the black male is the slave or servant who is the antithesis of the reason, civilized development, entitlement, freedom, and power of white men, and he never learns the civilized use of language. His voice is unreliable; his words fail to signify his humanity. He also preys on civilization and represents bestial, contaminating sexuality. (3)
The continuing imposition of Calibanic discourse is forced unto the Afro-American. Like Caliban, Western Euro-Centric treatment holds him as the enemy of civility—the brutal savage who seeks to sexually contaminate the Western world with his inferiorly inscribed gene pool. He cannot signify himself positively, as the very language by which he is controlled comes to represent (re)inscription of Calibanic discourse. As Coleman writes: “[it is] the words Prospero imposed on Caliban that gave his ‘purpose’ ‘meaning.’ Its meaning is an integral part of the English language and of Western signs and symbols” (Coleman 3). This purpose and meaning, being defined by Western tradition, cannot be made to serve Caliban's purposes as his very humanity is determined by Prospero's language which inscribes inferiority upon him. Calibanic discourse can be seen in terms beyond language as well; as Coleman states, “physical signs” can be determining factors as well. For instance, black men are viewed to have physical markings of ‘criminality, danger, and inferiority, even by other black men” (Coleman 3). Under Western tradition, Caliban is seen as the precise opposite of civilized humanity—and Caliban has no means by which he can oppose his inscribed inferiority. “[The] black male's quest to speak in an empowering voice” is subject to the laws of inscription that is continued through the upholding of Calibanic discourse (Coleman 3).

Coleman provides us with significant insight into the application of Calibanic discourse throughout his book. As he has provided such an in-depth commentary on how he views the application of the discourse, then it is only appropriate to include one of his assertions to provide us with an example of its usage. In discussing Ralph Ellison's invisible man, Coleman asserts that:

Generally, the text [Invisible Man] restricts the black male story of liberation because it shows that in its quest to portray black humanity and civilization, it cannot escape the white patriarchy’s imposition of bestiality and chaos, which white patriarchs such as Mr. Norton unconsciously fear are also white ‘male’ and universal. Implied in this also is the signification of texts of great white masters such as William Faulkner that produced similar black realities, which ‘distorted Negro humanity [and] seldom conceive[d] Negro characters possessing the full, complex ambiguity of the human.’ These constructed realities of blackness render all other black realities invisible... [furthermore, black characters] cannot counter-signify or constitute their humanity and visibility against the hegemony of the white patriarch. (131-2)

Within this passage, we are granted insight into how Calibanic discourse functions in a more precise manner. While Ellison may have been attempting to tell a story of liberation, he has instead either consciously or subconsciously created a character who cannot escape his own inscriptions of inferiority and those of the white patriarchy.

II. Introduction to Prosperian Discourse

As mentioned previously, it is by precise design that Prospero utilizes language as a means by which he can effectively control Caliban. More than this, he holds a clear magical prowess derived from the "liberal arts" that he utilizes to control his slave. As he utilizes the term “liberal arts,” we must be conscious of the connotative qualities held by this word: a civilized, even Eurocentric understanding of the world and the means by which it works—in this case, its magical qualities. In looking to the connotation of the term, we begin to see a connection between Prosperian control over the enslaved Caliban and the power held over newly freed blacks in the Reconstructed South: Eurocentric civilization as power through civilized tradition. This would be seen as the status of the Southern aristocrat; the guardian and sole keeper of America's tradition of Western civilization. He is the one who wields the force of tradition and Eurocentric superiority that must harness the bestial, savage nature of the Calibanic figure. Simply stated, a parallel exists between the nature of Prospero's control and the control utilized by white supremacy: magic and linguistic dominance versus inferior social caste and proscribed linguistics. It is through the social caste power of Eurocentric Americans, in combination with their control over linguistics, which derives the basis of Prosperian discourse. The two are inseparable, as the very language used by Prospero and aristocratic white supremacists is Eurocentric in nature—the registers and dialects with which these languages are spoken mark the level of social caste into which a person falls, as does the ability one has to inscribe equality to another social caste. Prospero's use of language as a demarcation of social caste inherently inscribes Western civility as being superior to all other social castes.

Prosperian discourse can be viewed as the opposing force to Calibanic discourse; it is the source of Calibanic discourse and provides the background for the nature of Coleman's theories. Prosperian discourse is the inference of white superiority through the denial of all things bestial and savage. It is the power and dominance of Euro-centric Western values and the means by which Southern white aristocracy was able to gain its strength. If white, by its definition and inherent inscription of superiority through its definition, comes to define the racial class of the white aristocrats, then we must compare its definition to black in an effort to better understand how the very language of the Western aristocracy comes to inscribe superiority. According to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, white can be seen as “free from color”—as in free from inscribed inferiority based on being colored—“the color of new snow,...from the former stereotypical association of good character with Northern European descent...free from moral impurity : innocent....as a symbol of purity.” The immediate associations of superiority are self-evident within its modern definition. Compare this with the same online dictionary's definition of the inscribed term black: “dirty, soiled...the absence of light...thoroughly sinister or evil : wicked...indicative of condemnation or discredit...connected with or invoking the supernatural and especially the devil...characterized by hostility or angry discontent.” These are the terms by which the Europeans conquered the savage land, and the Americans maintained the racial divides inherent in slavery—the stark discord between white and black. Perhaps this is what Charles Mills meant in his famous essay on European Spectres: “...the new system of ascriptive hierarchy
established by European expansionism: white supremacy” (133). With these inscriptions of utter superiority to the savage world, the Calibanic discourse then comes to be the polar opposite, even enemy, of the Prosperian trope.

Consider Prospero himself; his conquering of Caliban’s Island and bringer of European civilization to the savage land comes to represent precisely these terms. His disgust with Caliban—being his inferences of bestiality, savageness, sexual contamination, and utter ignorance—marks an inherent inscription of the Prosperian superiority, with Prospero's European nature being precisely the opposite of this foul creature. Prosperian discourse is defined as the reversal of Calibanic discourse. Prosperian discourse inscribes superiority based on Western civility, morals, reason, and the strength of Western Euro-centric values while denying the basic human qualities that involve savagery, bestiality, and sexuality. As the basis for his perceived superiority is the inscription of Western civilization as being superior to all other cultures and peoples, this essay will be replacing the term white supremacy in favor of western supremacy when discussing Prosperian discourse. This term more specifically infers the perception of superiority in the history and literature where-in we find Prosperian discourse and the inferred civility that it imposes.

Western civilization, through the tenets of western superiority, must be defended from the Calibanic figure; especially as the Calibanic figure is perceived as seeking to disturb the very fabric of Western civilization. As Coleman writes: “[Caliban] is antithetical to Prospero’s civilization and threatens to corrupt it with his bestiality and to destroy it with his sexual contamination” (3). As Western civilization is threatened, then as the defenders of civility, Prosperian discourse must entail a defense against the savage nature of Afro American humanity. “Clearly, Western culture must confine the black male to roles and places befitting his inferiority, and/or it must punish him, and even brutalize and kill him, for his criminality and reprobate character” (Coleman 3). Calibanic discourse, in its tradition and legacy within the United States, has been upheld by Prosperian discourse in its need to defend Western civility and deny power to the savage beasts of Afro American humanity who are perceived to threaten it. As Bentley and Gunning write, “Numerous books, tracts, treatises, and organizations devoted to eugenics revealed a white obsession with racial ‘purity,’ as Americans fretted about preserving the ‘best’ racial traits the nation had to offer” (250). As we can see, it is not solely the perception of an offending nature that imposes a negative force upon the white race, but it is also an imposition of racial miscegenation that Western society seeks to restrict.

As Coleman writes in reference to Ellison’s Invisible Man, “It is the disorder, intractability, and bestiality in human nature that white men deny and impose on the black humanity that they have also denied and made invisible” (Coleman 132). This inference of superiority—and inherent denial of Calibanic discourse—is the specific trope that is inherent in the literary discourse of Prospero. Ania Loomba writes similarly, stating her feelings of the Prospero complex is derived from a denial of savagery in human nature: “[the] Prospero complex [is] based on the notion of racism as a pseudo-rational construct used to rationalize feelings of sexual guilt” (Loomba 326). In plain terms, Prosperian discourse civility upon the Western gentleman—keeper of sacred civilization and the purity of the white female—as the denial of basic human desire, needs, and savage origins within the white, aristocratic, European-descended humanity. In order to deny this within themselves, then savagery and proscribed sexuality must be inscribed unto the black population:

An article written in 1892, which later became what Griffith calls ‘a standard defence of Caliban,’ speaks of the rape as ‘an offence, an unpardonable offence, but one that he was fated to commit’ and goes on to see Caliban as unfortunate, oppressed, but ‘like all these lower people, easily misled.’ This implies that sexual violence is part of the black man’s inferior nature, a view that amalgamates racist common-sense notions about black sexuality and animalism. (Loomba 325)

Loomba, in calling attention to the racist views that were contemporary to Chesnutt’s own time, has allowed us insight into the minds of those who upheld Prosperian discourse—one which immediately infers proscribed sexuality, bestiality, and inferiority to all of black humanity while upholding the moral superiority inherent in the tenets of western supremacy.

III. Introduction to Arielic Discourse

Arielic discourse, similarly, attempts to define a social strata of the white population as superior to the Afro American population, however, the non-aristocratic social class that this discourse has been applied to must always be inscribed as simultaneously inferior to the socially dominant aristocratic defenders of Eurocentric civilization. Arielic discourse is the inscription of inferiority to the aristocratic class based on an inherent lack of civility, an inferior education, and a desire of ascension to a higher caste that is hampered by a lack of birthright, wealth, and the two aforementioned qualities. It infers white supremacy based on brutal dominance and tradition, while simultaneously denying the potential existence of Calibanic savagery, brutality, and a lack of innate civility within the Arielic figure. Since the inscription of superiority is more inherently tied to traditional views of superiority based on race, the term white supremacy becomes the more accurate term when describing the tenets of Arielic discourse. As with Calibanic discourse, the inscriptions of inferiority are maintained by the upper class elite, while the inscription of superiority to the Afro American class comes from the innate desire for upward mobility, tradition, ignorance, and the re-inscription of both Prosperian and Calibanic discourses. While Prosperian discourse infers the grandeur of Western civilization, Arielic discourse follows that superiority is established from pure racial dominance that has been in place since the genesis of slavery in the United States—at least for how it can be applied to American literature, as European literature would hold more to a Marxist relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. While this European variation is quite similar, the relationship in the United States is based more
significantly around an originally agricultural community that interwove a caste structure of slavery into the fabric of social class relationships.

In utilizing Ariel as the etymological root of this term, it is necessary to briefly explain Ariel's application to this discourse. Remembering that within the United States, slavery was the basis for a significant determination for social class, it is integral to understand how Ariel fits into Prospero's social structure. Ariel is a slave solely by an agreement to Prospero, as he was saved by the former duke's magical powers when trapped by the witch Sycorax. He is made, however, to detest the very nature of Caliban and his savagery—through his previous enslavement and torment at the hands of the bestial witch and her devil-spawn Caliban. As stated within The Tempest, Ariel was made “to act her earthy...commands,” clearly identifying her demands had an uncivilized inclination to them (I.ii.273). Moreover, “she did confine [Ariel]....into a cloven pine” when he refused her orders, further signifying her nature as Calibanic (I.ii.274-7). Ariel is made to hate the bestial savagery of both Caliban and his mother; thereby hating them as a form of humanity. With this hatred, Ariel continues to inscribe Calibanic discourse upon the native race to Island.

Ariel is not a slave in the traditional sense; on the Island he was assigned tasks to fulfill, but his end goal was to earn his freedom from Prospero—hopefully becoming a social equal to Prospero upon receiving emancipation if Prospero were to remain as a figure upon the Island. With emancipation looming, and the dominant force of Ariel's magic, Ariel is made to control Caliban—much like that of the slave overseer in the field. His station is not one of glory, civility, or morality; rather it is based on a definite superiority to the social caste of Caliban, and as such his disgust with Caliban and desire to torment, brutalize, and control Caliban work to inscribe his own superiority. Since he is always acting on the orders of Prospero, this dominance of Caliban works to re-inscribe Prospero's superiority upon both Caliban and himself. Moreover, with the knowledge of freedom always hovering above his head, this acts as motivation for Ariel to carry out the wishes of his dominant master; such desire can be read in the Marxist sense as the desire to escape the lower social caste in pursuit of the higher, further liberated social caste.

Of course, the Arielic figure cannot even achieve equality within his own lifetime to that of the Prosperian figure—Prospero is a duke, and as such it is his birthright, power over magic, and education within the liberal arts that will always retain Prospero's position as the paramount figure of Western civility upon the Island. Ariel may be a spirit, but his own birthright is rather menial by comparison—a fact which he can never escape, and any attempters of social climbing could protest to. Ariel cannot inscribe himself with equality to Prospero; he can only re-inscribe the Prosperian doctrine of Calibanic discourse. Consider the moment when Ariel seeks to gain his emancipation from the bonded class of servitude before Prospero has deemed it acceptable. In an attempt to inscribe the completion of servitude—once again, in the Marxist sense, his desire to escape his own social caste—Ariel “demand[...his] liberty” (I.ii.244-5). Immediately following this demand, Prospero reminds him of his station in life and the superiority of Prospero's position to Ariel: “Dost thou forget from what / a torment I did free thee? / ...Thou dost; / and think'st it much / to tread the ooze / of the salt deep, / to run upon the sharp / wind of the north, / to do me business / in the veins o' the' earth / when it is bak'd with frost” (I.ii.250-6). While he is reminding Ariel of the tortments of Sycorax from which Prospero liberated him, the message is quite clear: Ariel finds himself remaining in the lower social station because Prospero deems it necessary to retain his superiority over him. As Prospero requires to remind him of his social station, we can see the inscription of superiority on the part of Prospero and the failure of Ariel's voice to inscribe equality and power upon himself to one of a higher social caste.

In accordance with his dominance over Caliban, and re-inscription of Caliban's inferiority, this inability of voice to inscribe equality and power becomes the root of Arielic discourse. As he cannot inscribe equality, then he must seek to re-inscribe the perceived inferiority of black humanity. The Negro caste was traditionally perceived as lower than the poor, white caste. Upon the emancipation of slavery, the Negro caste was granted the opportunity to educate themselves and prosper. When faced with a growing middle class of black humanity, the white middle caste must re-inscribe the tenets of Calibanic discourse in order to preserve their higher social post. As Bentley and Gunning write, “white supremacists were fearful of blacks invading their social space” (250). This fear was a tool for the aristocracy who sought to inscribe their own superiority and retain their social value in the American South. Thomas Watson illustrates this principle for us in his essay on Reconstruction-era race relations.

You might beseech a Southern white tenant to listen to you upon questions of finance, taxation, and transportation; you might demonstrate with mathematical precision that herein lay his way out of poverty in comfort; you might have him ‘almost persuaded’ to the truth, but if the merchant who furnished his farm supplies....or the town politician...came along and cried ‘Negro rule!’ the entire fabric of reason and common sense which had patiently constructed would fall, and the poor tenant would joyously hug the chains of an actual wretchedness rather than do any experimenting on a question of mere sentiment. (263-4)

It is interesting to note that not only does this aristocratic power serve to enrage the lower white caste into a political force, but it also re-inscribes their inferiority as the tenant farmers Watson speak of can never rise above their financial condition so long as they are continuously focused on problems of race.

IV. Calibanic Discourse and Chesnutt's Marrow of Tradition

Coleman asserts that Calibanic discourse is either subconsciously or consciously rebelled against within black male literature. While Coleman sought the legacy of Caliban through post-modern works, it seems to me that if we are seeking to define Caliban’s literary legacy in black male literature, then it is imperative that we include America's First Great Black
Novelist, as Heermance would have it, Charles Waddell Chesnutt. This becomes especially apt with his work The Marrow of Tradition, as Chesnutt was specifically interested in the paradigm of racially based discrimination and the legacy of that tradition during his time. Chesnutt writes, in his essay on The Marrow of Tradition, that he believes “Tradition made the white people masters, rulers, who absorbed all the power, the wealth, the honors of the community, and jealously guarded this monopoly, with which they claimed to be divinely endowed, by denying to those who were not of their caste the opportunity to acquire any of these desirable things” (872). I believe this to be a direct inscription of Prosperian discourse. Chesnutt continues, “Tradition, on the other hand, made the Negro a slave, an underling, existing by favor and not by right, his place the lowest in the social scale, to which, by the same divine warrant, he was hopelessly confined” (872). This passage allows us an understanding of Chesnutt’s philosophy that guided the production of The Marrow of Tradition. He calls immediate attention to the class structure that envelopes the South as he has perceived it—with social and economic superiority being dominated by the white population, while the Afro American population is doomed to its lower strata.

The inscription of black inferiority based on the Calibanic threat to civilization is established in Chesnutt’s work from three sources. In its primary form, the Calibanic discourse of Marrow is inscribed from the Prosperian figures of Major Carteret and General Belmont, as their very language and philosophies seek to mark the black humanity as savage, amoral brutes who require the moral influence of the white aristocracy. While they seek to uphold the tenets of Calibanic discourse, these views also lend themselves as re-inscriptions of Prosperian discourse and as such their perceptions of black humanity will be presented within the portion of this essay dedicated to their own discourse. Following the direct inscriptions of the dominant class, it can be seen in the inscriptions and (re)inscriptions of Calibanic identity and inability to confront oppression on the part of the Calibanic figures in the Afro American populace. Within my essay, the Calibanic figures have been branched into two groups: those who submit to the perceptions and traditions of Calibanic discourse willingly and those who resist it, but ultimately cannot triumph over it. The submissive figures can be best seen in Mammy Jane, her grandson Jerry, and Sandy, while those who seek to liberate themselves in a quest to end their oppressed status can best be seen in the progressive figure of Dr. Miller and the revolutionary figure of Josh Green.

Within the very beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Mammy Jane. When reading this opening chapter, one’s attention is immediately drawn to her voice as a means of separation between herself and the whites around her. Her very first lines, in response to a question of how her mistress fell victim to nervous shock, draw immediate attention to her uncivilized language: “Now look a-hyuh Doctuh Price...you don’ wanter come talkin’ no foolishness ‘bout my not takin’ keer er Mis’ Livy” (45). Furthermore, the description of her appearance denotes the qualities of an “other,” by calling attention to her turban. She has no basic knowledge of Europe, the cradle of Western society, as she notes with her line “Dey went off ter Europe, or Irope, er Orpe, er somewhere er ‘nother” (48). She holds foolish notions of voodoo and other mystical Africana religious beliefs, including taking a child’s bath water in a vial and burying it in the back yard to ward off demons after convening with a “black woman...versed in witchcraft and conjuration” (50). This is remarkably similar to Caliban’s own fear of spirits in thunder, and the witch is reminiscent of his mother Sycorax. All of these qualities paint her as the other—the one who is clearly outside of Western civility and reason as she is unable to utilize language despite exposure to standard English. Moreover, her religious beliefs fall outside the realm of Western reason and theology. While these are all demarcations of Calibanic discourse, it is her re-inscription of Calibanic discourse in her social class that cements her submission to the perceived legacy of inferiority.

Upon meeting an Afro American nurse, trained under Dr. Miller, we see an immediate friction between the traditional “mammy” figure and the progressive, seeker of self-improvement Calibanic figure. We are allowed a glimpse of the nurse’s opinion of Mammy Jane, and it denotes that Mammy Jane seeks to submit herself to white authority and further paint herself in the trope of Calibanic discourse in order to benefit from white gratitude. “These old time negroes, she said to herself, made her sick with their slavering over white folks, who, she supposed, favor them and made much of them because they had once belonged to them” (70). The nurse may be correct in her assertion that Mammy Jane receives better treatment because she was once a slave, but Major Carteret’s views would state that Mammy is favored because she knows her place in the social strata and does not try to behave like a white, or Prosperian figure, as a means to progress herself—we will get to this in a moment. Mammy Jane combats the nurse’s view with a continued assertion of Carteret’s views. Following the nurse’s departure, Mammy Jane exclaims “Well, I nevuh! Dese yer young niggers ain’ got de manners dey waz bawned wid! I don’ know w’at dey ‘re comin’ to...” (70). Carteret himself provides his own commentary immediately following this comment, as a means to console Mammy Jane and reassert the notion that she understands her place. “The negroes are too self-assertive. Education is spoiling them, Jane; they have been badly taught” (70-1). Mammy Jane’s very relationship to the white’s she serves and submits to re-inscribes Calibanic discourse. The aristocrats she serves demand that she maintain a specific place in the social strata, and a specific behavior. Her submission to this and her taking offense to the progressive negro figure work to prove the very tenets of Calibanic discourse, as her voice, behavior, and thoughts betray an uncivilized, ignorant reminder of the savage nature inscribed to the black humanity. We must remember not to blame Mammy Jane for re-inscribing Calibanic discourse upon her own race; after all, she was trained to be this way.

Jerry, grandson to Mammy Jane, has also been trained into understanding his inferiority, and as such must continuously re-inscribe Calibanic discourse through his behavior, language, and beliefs. Unlike Jane, however, it seems that Jerry understands how his inferior caste has ensured his inability to rise beyond his social caste. Jerry proclaims “I wush ter Gawd I wuz white,” as an example of how he understands the benefits of being in the superior caste (66). Moreover, he even tries to bleach his skin and hair in an attempt to resemble the dominant race. His denunciations of his own race work
to inscribe the superiority of both dominant classes, and the act of bleaching his skin invokes the ultimate pitfall of Calibanic discourse: Jerry cannot signify the worth of himself nor his race, as the act of bleaching his skin is so strongly denounced by the western supremacists that he reaffirms his inability to utilize western significations of class—in this case, skin color. Carteret naturally chastised him, citing “the word ‘negro’ means ‘black.’ The best negro is a black negro, of the pure type, as it came from the hand of God. If you wish to get along with the whites...[then] the blacker you are, the better” (195). Skin color becomes a means of signification here as a means to distinguish between the classes. As mentioned previously, the term black inherently signifies inferiority. Jerry’s attempt to change his skin color is against the will of God, as Carteret holds it, and therefore against God’s perceived will to maintain Western superiority. Chesnutt noted this perceived divine right in his essay mentioned previously. As Jerry cannot signify himself as white by shedding his blackness, then the only means by which he can gain favor from the western supremacists he serves is by continuously re-inscribing Calibanic inferiority upon both himself and black humanity. This re-inscription can be exemplified within Sandy’s near escape of lynching, and the role Jerry played in causing Sandy’s downfall.

From the very beginning of the novel, Sandy is depicted as theprime exemplar of conduct to all of black humanity. His very image grants him an “an air of sobriety,” as he wears pre-used aristocratic clothing that work to signify his inability to transcend his class; a fact noted by Tom Delamere when remarking that Sandy looks upon Sandy “as a very comical darky” (51, 58). His conduct and appearance of seemingly capable civility, while in the occupation of a servant, signify him to the western supremacists as a well-trained, well-influenced, submissive member of black humanity. At the same time, while Mr. Delamere protests to his character as being indicative of “a gentleman in ebony,” Carteret still refuses to acknowledge his ability to transcend the implications of Calibanic discourse: “Sandy is an exceptional negro...and we know that he is a faithful servant—and he might well be, for he has had the benefit of your example all his life” (59). Implicit in Carteret’s statement is that Sandy has only achieved his exceptionally submissive conduct through the influence of Mr. Delamere’s Western supremacy. Carteret’s assertions are temporarily proved when the Major leads a movement against Sandy’s alleged murder of Mrs. Ochiltree.

Despite Mr. Delamere’s belief that Sandy could not commit any crime of such magnitude, Major Carteret immediately jumps to the conclusion that Sandy’s bestial and savage nature has re-surfaced in the act of murder. After arriving at his conclusion, Carteret argues against with Mr. Delamere to prove that Sandy was capable of committing the crime—despite Delamere’s continued assertions of Sandy’s positive character: “what is the improbability of an illiterate negro’s being at least capable of crime” (175)? As a matter of honor, Carteret allows Delamere the attempt to discover an alibi for Sandy, though he does not believe that Delamere could ever be successful in this endeavor: “without some positive proof the negro would surely die,—as he well deserved to die” (176). The nature of this crime, to Carteret, is exceptionally offensive as it encroaches upon a paramount symbol of Western supremacy with Mrs. Ochiltree: “[Sandy’s crime] is a murderous and fatal assault upon a woman of our race,—upon our race in the person of its womanhood, its crown, its flower” (156). Sandy’s situation is quite dire, as under the tenets of Western supremacy, this symbol of Western womanhood is one of the icons of Western civility that must be defended to the point of murdering the inferior savages who stand to defile her. The only suitable punishment for these supposed defiling savages would be death. Rebecca Latimer Felton, in her editorial to the AJC, writes “if it takes lynching to protect women’s dearest possessions from drunken, raving human beasts—then I say Lynch a thousand a week if it becomes necessary” (411). Sandy is in mortal peril, from those who hold to the opinions of Mrs. Felton.

If it were not for the intervention of Delamere and Ellis, then Sandy could never speak to defend himself in both the literal sense and in the inscriptions of Calibanic discourse that Sandy finds himself subject to. Literally, Sandy would not speak against Tom Delamere: “Nothing could shake Sandy’s determination...Sandy would not speak” (171). Had he spoken in his defense by providing his own alibi, however, it would not have been believed by the aristocratic populace outside of Mr. Delamere. It is significant that Mr. Ellis—a white, semi-aristocratic male—is the one who provides this alibi; his word can be believed not only by Mr. Delamere, but by Carteret as well who would undoubtedly choose not to believe Sandy’s own word. Mrs. Ochiltree, in her statement to Julia, reinforces the idea that only the word of the white race is to be considered honest and trustworthy: “My word is worth yours a hundred times over, for I am a lady, and you are—what” (130)? Julia, being the Afro American servant and lover to Mr. Merkell, comes to recognize that, like Sandy, her word is meaningless compared to a member of the white populace. According to Calibanic discourse, her bestial, overt sexuality marks her as savage and unworthy of trust. Similarly, the inscriptions of inferiority would mark Sandy as untrustworthy as well and Carteret would never support his release, despite old Mr. Delamere’s beliefs in the honor of his servant.

The two figures, who understand the nature of Calibanic discourse and attempt to rise above its proscriptions of humanity, are Dr. Miller and Josh Green. By any account outside of race and the tenets of Calibanic discourse, Dr. Miller could otherwise be seen as an aristocratic figure; he is well-educated, wealthy, and well-spoken. Josh Green, on the other hand, is the precise opposite of Dr. Miller’s nature: he is violent, uneducated, and speaks in a colloquial manner that displays the previous two qualities. Arguably, both of these figures are as dissimilar as Martin Luther King Jr. and pre-pilgrimage Malcolm X respectively, but they both also recognize the nature of Western supremacy. This can be seen in Miller’s assertions that the “brutal drawing of the color line was a veritable bed of Procrustes, this standard with which the whites had set for the negroes. Those who grew above it must...be forced back to the level assigned to their race” (82). Similarly, Green remarks: “De niggers is be’n train’ ter forgiveniss...If a nigger gits a’ office, er de race ‘pears to be prosperin’ too much, de w’ite folks up an’ kills a few, so dat de res’ kin keep on forgivin” (115). Despite their somewhat conscious
knowledge of Calibanic discourse, neither can signify their own humanity or civility to those outside of their racial caste.

While Miller can be seen as a pillar of intellectuality and civility amongst his own Afro American humanity, he can never be viewed as such by white humanity. Although he tries to utilize language in order to grant his words true purpose and meaning, his significations will always fail to inscribe humanity to him and those he attempts to infer it upon. Consider his involvement in the attempted lynching of Sandy. While attempting to signify innocence upon Sandy, he comes to realize that his innocence can only ever be signified by the white population—the same population that will revert to upholding Calibanic discourse before assisting in the causes of black humanity. “[The white population’s] friendship for us...dries up entirely when it strikes their prejudices. There is seemingly not one white man in Wellington who will speak a word for law, order, decency, or humanity” (163). The irony here is not lost: those who are subject to Calibanic discourse are attempting to speak for law, order, decency, and humanity, however their voices fail to signify these qualities unto Sandy and the cause to save him from an unjustifiable end. In the same scenario, neither Green’s violent past nor can his words signify the truth in Sandy’s innocence—despite his legitimate ability to make a witness statement. “Josh, the white people would believe you were trying to shield Sandy, and you would probably be arrested as an accomplice” (160). These two characters, despite their knowledge of Calibanic discourse, can never utilize language to signify their own humanity, civility, or honesty, and as they cannot proscribe Calibanic discourse, then they fall victim to it.

V. Prosperian Discourse and Chesnutt’s Marrow of Tradition

As mentioned previously, the two primary examples of Prosperian discourse within Chesnutt’s novel are Major Carteret and General Belmont. These two figures have an inherent ability to utilize language to further inscribe Calibanic discourse upon black humanity, while simultaneously signifying the superiority of their own caste of humanity. The reason they choose to signify the inferiority of black humanity is that it is a tenet of Prosperian discourse. Western supremacists inherently signify black humanity with the terms of Calibanic discourse, as it asserts their own superiority and, inherently, the superiority of Western civilisation. As the tenets of Prosperian discourse hold that Calibanic humanity—in this case Afro American humanity—is the natural enemy to civilization, then Western aristocracy must defend against “the comingling of blood” and the perceived socially devastating effects that savage, bestial humanity would have upon American society. It is only through the traditional use of Calibanic discourse, the social powers inherent to the aristocratic class, and upholding Prosperian discourse that the aristocracy can effectively defend their society from the perceived threat of black humanity.

In stating that all peoples “must be convinced that [Western supremacists] have right upon our side,” Belmont is asserting that the cause of Western supremacy is pure and noble: “We are conscious of the purity of our motives, but we should avoid even the appearance of evil” (95). The cause that Belmont and Carteret promote is the cause to prevent the supposedly savage black race from ascending to political power within the state. This is only sensible for them, considering their offensive opinion of black humanity. As Carteret proposes:

Taking for his theme the unfitness of the negro to participate in government,—an unfitness due to his limited education, his lack of experience, his criminal tendencies, and more especially to his hopeless mental and physical inferiority to the white race,—the major had demonstrated, it seemed to him clearly enough, that the ballot in the hands of the negro was a menace to the commonwealth. (62)

Under Prosperian discourse, and inherently its re-inscriptions of Calibanic discourse, the Negro is the inferior savage with a criminal mind and bestial instincts. It is only through the example, training, and education of the Euro-American traditions that the Afro Americans can be a positive benefit to Western society—so long as they understand their inferiority and behave accordingly. When pondering the moral capabilities of Sandy following his alleged murder, Carteret holds: “Under Mr. Delamere’s thumb this Sandy had been a model servant,—faithful, docile, respectful, and self-respecting” (156). Carteret believes that with the positive training of Delamere, Sandy could function as a contributing member to society, not to mention one who accepts his inferior status and behaves accordingly.

Carteret also surmises that the reasons for Sandy’s lapse of conduct are the failure of the elderly gentleman to continue his positive influence, and that Sandy must have relapsed into his genetically natural behaviors. “But Mr. Delamere had grown old, and had probably lost in a measure his moral influence over his servant. Left to his own degraded ancestral instincts, Sandy had begun to deteriorate” (156). Clearly, the presumption of those who subscribe to Prosperian discourse is that under the tenets of Calibanic discourse, Afro American humanity is untrustworthy to be left to their own devices—“like sheep without a shepherd”—and as such require the diligent guidance of the morally superior Western humanity. We can see this philosophy in Carteret’s desire to defend white women—the paramount symbols of Western civilization—from the perceived savage force of this inferior humanity. Just as he fears the comingling of blood, Carteret fears that Afro American society cannot control their sexual nature. His re-inscriptions of Calibanic discourse entail that without the protections of white men, then white women would be raped, brutalized, and destroyed by the imposing black man. The alleged murder of Mrs. Ochiltree at the hands of Sandy served to prove, to all of those who re-inscribed Calibanic discourse, “that drastic efforts were necessary to protect the white women of the South against brutal, lascivious, and murderous assaults at the hands of negro men” (158). As we can see, Prosperian discourse—within Chesnutt’s novel—asserts the traditional views that as defenders of Western civilisation, the white population must protect itself from the perceived tenets of Calibanic discourse by controlling and dominating Afro American humanity.

From their socially superior positions, these men can utilize language—in the most literal sense—to promote the traditional tenets of Prosperian discourse and provide the basis for their defense. Carteret is the editor of a racist news paper
that seeks to promote a western supremacist agenda and reclaim the state of North Carolina for the Prosperian Dixiecrats. Carteret's newspaper seeks to "confine the negro to that inferior condition for which nature had evidently designed him" (94). Similarly, Belmont works both within the newspaper and around the state to promote his ideals of Western supremacy. “General Belmont...lost no opportunity to get the ear of lawmakers, editors, and other leaders of national opinion, and to impress upon them, with persuasive eloquence, the impossibility of maintaining existing conditions [of racial emancipation]" (101). With the allegiance of Captain McBane, an Arielic figure who rouses sentiment in the lower caste ranks, these white aristocrats form an organized front in favor of Western/white supremacy. Their power lies in their voice, and the ability to inscribe the superior Prosperian discourse unto their intended audience. As Belmont notes, you, Carteret, represent the Associated Press. Through your hands passes all the news of the state. What more powerful medium for propagating an idea? The man who would govern a nation by writing its songs was a blethering idiot beside the fellow who can edit its newspaper dispatches. (96)

While Calibanic discourse entails that Afro American humanity cannot utilize language to signify his humanity, it is clear that Prosperian discourse grants the power of language to the aristocratic class in a direct sense. Under the tenets of Prosperian discourse, at least in how it applies to American society, aristocratic use of language does not end here. It can also be seen in his power over law.

Clearly, the end goal of the newspaper was to promote the supremacist democratic party within the state of North Carolina. To this effect, journalism has been consistently regarded as a means for strong political leaders to convey their message to the public—an inherent trait of Prosperian discourse, that his words can even impart political meaning. In his use of language, too, we can see the power of laws that were created by supremacist politicians and their effects on the Afro American population. Chesnutt's use of supposed separate-but-equal legislation in Miller's frustrations with the train car exemplifies how the law becomes a tool for the Prosperian population. Upon being told that Miller, as a black man, cannot ride in the train car delegated to whites, we are given a glimpse into how the law is applied. “The law will be enforced. The beauty of the system lies in its strict impartiality—it applies to both races alike” (78). White humanity is not allowed to be seated with black humanity, thereby ensuring that no comingling could occur between the races. Retreating to the colored train car, Miller immediately sees how the law has re-inscribed the inferiority designated to his race. “The car was conspicuously labeled at either end with large cards....that...bore the word ‘Colored’ in black letters upon a white background” (79). Miller sees the brilliance of this scheme, as the very term colored—in all its negative connotation—is presented as a constant reminder of inferiority. “The author of this piece of legislation had contrived...that not merely should the passengers be separated by the color line, but that the reason for that division should be kept constantly in mind” (79). The law has essentially become a tool to simultaneously proclaim the superiority of whiteness, while condemning blackness. With this proclamation, it has become a tool for the continuation of Prosperian discourse.

Chesnutt does not forget to include the most integral aspect of Prosperian discourse, beyond simply the continuation of inscribing Calibanic discourse, within this novel. Carteret rarely fails to consider the beauty of Western civility and the grandeur that is implicated within his birthright to that class who seek to defend civilization. He inscribes himself, and aristocratic white humanity, with the values inherent to the social, cultural, and historical tradition of Prosperian discourse; e.g. the perceived values of Western Euro-American civilization. Carteret directly states some of these values: “The major was kind, and, talked in a fatherly way about the danger of extremes, the beauty of moderation, and the value of discretion as a rule of conduct” (102). His perceived superiority of these values is nothing short of ignorance: these values are universal tenets of morality that appear in, some form or another, in all of the world’s major religions. It is his mistaken beliefs in Prosperian discourse that presume Western civilization was the sole society to uphold these values. This presumption can be seen in his belief that the aristocracy carries on these values, such as when he speaks of the Delamere’s “honor of a fine old family” (102). Most importantly, however, the white aristocracy believes themselves to be God’s chosen race of superiority: “…white men, the most favored of races, the heirs of civilization, the conservators of liberty” (173). Their belief in the divine right of white humanity is the backbone of Prosperian discourse. This idea inscribes utter superiority, based on presumptions of God’s will and the perceived superiority of Western civilization.

VI. Arielic Discourse and Chesnutt's Marrow of Tradition

As mentioned previously, Arielic discourse entails that the non-aristocratic figures of the white populations are inscribed as inferior as they are uncivilized, undereducated, and lack the birthright of the aristocratic class. While this caste represents a larger portion of the population, Chesnutt really only employs this figure in a significant usage through the character of Captain McBane—though arguably Ellis can be considered as a member of this social group as well. “While McBane and Ellis are privileged because of their racial status as white men, their class origins mark them as inferior in the eyes of the novel's blue-blooded Carterets and Delameres” (Bentley, Gunning 249). Captain McBane desires to be considered one of the aristocratic elite, but is unable to signify himself in the tenets of Prosperian discourse—he can only inscribe and re-inscribe himself in the mode of Arielic discourse. His own imposed inferiority can be seen in two distinct manners: his re-inscriptions of inferiority to the aristocratic class and his inscriptions of Calibanic discourse upon black humanity. This second matter further inscribes Arielic discourse upon him as his racist views are not in keeping with those of Prosperian discourse, or Western supremacy. Rather, they hold to the tenets of white supremacy: a philosophy of racial division that brutally and violently seeks to retain black humanity in its inferior status by simultaneously portraying Afro Americans as brutal, violent, savage non-humanity—an irony that has plagued American race relations for centuries. While
Western supremacists believe in defending Western civilization from the perceived enemy of the supposedly inhumane, savage nature of the Negro, white supremacy seeks to restrict the influence, social ascension, and power of the negro through terror, fear, and violence. While Western supremacists will occasionally cross the violence boundary in their desire to defend Western civilization, the members of this social strata view white supremacists as crude, uncivilized, and unscrupulous.

Contrary to his title, Captain McBane is no captain at all; it is a self-imposed title that he has presumably granted to himself during his ascension to prosperity. As Chesnutt writes, his “captaincy, by the way, was merely a polite fiction” (65). McBane had, in fact, “sprung from the poor-white class, to which, even more than to the slaves, the abolition of slavery had opened the door of opportunity” (64). He made his fortune through the normal channels of social ascension, as was customary for one of the poor-white class who sought “their reward at first in minor offices,—for which men of gentler breeding did not care,—until their ambition began to reach out for higher honors” (64-5). Despite his fortuitous rise to wealth, McBane could not be seen as equal to that of the aristocracy, as he lacks the required birthright: “he could not be expected to have as much pride as one of the best ‘quality,’ whose families had possessed land and negroes for time out of mind” (61). Even the Calibanic Jerry recognizes his inferiority to the aristocracy: “His daddy wuz a’ overseer befo’ ‘im, an’ it come nachul fer him ter be a nigger-driver...He ain’ nothin’ but po’ w’ite trash nohow” (66). Those of the aristocratic class cannot accept him, and McBane’s desire to ascend to social equality with other members of this rank only further inscribe his inferiority to their social supremacy.

In the town of Wellington, North Carolina, there is one grand social tradition that asserts the superiority of the aristocratic class: membership in the Clarendon Club. As such, McBane desires to assert his own supposed superiority through gaining membership in this social society. “Membership in the Clarendon was the sine qua non of high social standing, and was conditional upon two of three things,—birth, wealth, and breeding. Breeding was the prime essential, but...must be backed by either birth or money” (140). McBane clearly has no birthright to the Clarendon club, and although he does hold wealth, he was bred to be a member of the poor-white caste. Regardless, McBane “had failed to see that he fell beneath it” (140). His attempt to gain access to the ivory tower of social standing can solely signify the failed efforts of a wealthy lower class member to seek the signification of aristocracy. McBane utilizes his skills of card playing to essentially blackmail Tom Delamere into proposing his candidacy—a notably uncivilized course of action.

[Tom Delamere’s] gorse rose at the presumption of this son of an overseer and ex-driver of convicts. McBane was good enough to win money from, or even to lose money to, but not good enough to be recognized as a social equal. He would instinctively have blackballed McBane had he been proposed by someone else; with what grace could he put himself forward as the sponsor for this impossible social aspirant? Moreover, it was clearly a vulgar, cold-blooded attempt on McBane’s part to use his power over him for a personal advantage. (142)

In utilizing the sole power that he could hold over a member, blackmail, McBane has only re-inscribed his uncivilized nature. In a statement remarkably similar to the inscriptions of Calibanic discourse, Delamere notes that there “was a sneering savagery about” the whole event. McBane never gains entrance to the Clarendon Club—rather he merely asserts his own inferiority to a member of the aristocratic class. Only his vulgarity can be witnessed in his attempt to signify his own perceived superiority. This marks the failure of the Arielic figure, and a tenet of Arielic discourse: like Calibanic, Arielic discourse entails that the inferior class cannot signify their own humanity due to the uncivilized nature of the lower castes. We see this, too, in his brutal, violent, and vulgar form of racism: white supremacy.

As mentioned previously, white supremacy is considered uncivilized to those who subscribe to Western supremacy—though granted both should appear vulgar to any person holding legitimate faculties of reason and humanity. In essence, while his caste has traditionally been viewed as inherently superior to the Afro American caste—on the basis of slavery and the traditional upholding of Calibanic discourse—McBane’s Arielic caste becomes suddenly threatened by the rise of the black middle class. Wealthy, educated black males like Dr. Miller can speak with a greater level of civility than McBane; though they do remain subject to the imposing force of Calibanic discourse that is continuously inscribed from both castes of white humanity. The Arielic caste, feeling threatened, must adopt a more aggressive form of white supremacy upon the emancipation of the slaves—no longer are they overseers who can physically abuse slaves to promote their dominance. Now they must take similar measures to the aforementioned physical dominance upon citizens—not slaves—in order to promote their views of white supremacy. This is their tradition, and it becomes the tradition of the klan and other white supremacist groups. Western supremacists, being of the plantation owning variety and have not traditionally used violence to abuse Afro American humanity into submission, see this as tasteless. The aristocrats did not beat their own slaves, generally, nor did they personally oversee the workers in their fields. It is not their tradition to brutalize black humanity into inferiority—rather they use their voice, through the means mentioned in section five, to uphold Prosperian discourse and their views of Western supremacy.

During the meetings of “The Big Three,” when discussing the means by which they seek to promote Western supremacy, we can see a distinct distaste for McBane’s inferior character on the part of General Belmont and Major Carteret. To these members of the gentry, McBane appears to represent “the aggressive, offensive elements among the white people of the New South” (79). When Chesnutt introduces the readers to McBane, we are made to see their distaste in the very greeting that Carteret offers McBane. Carteret greets him with “an unconscious but quite perceptible diminution of warmth with which he had welcomed the other” (61). Almost immediately, the difference between the register and civility with which the two classes speak promotes the gap between the two.
While Belmont seems to be utilizing an amalgamation between the two classes preferred terms of bigotry, it is clear from this passage that McBane uses a far less civilized, brutal term to refer to the perceived inferior race. The distinction between the language of the two classes can also be seen in the discussion on public relations between The Big Three. McBane holds that “a nigger more or less wouldn’t be missed,” and it is of no concern if murder is utilized as a means to control black humanity. He states that he had done so in the past, and it was of no moral consequence to him: “I don’t like smart niggers. I’ve had to shoot several in the past” (199). His distaste for intellectual black men is relatively clear: they threaten his own assertions of superiority to all of black humanity. Carteret begins to feel uneasy with the “brutal characterization of their motives” as “it robbed the enterprise of all its poetry, and put a solemn act of revolution upon the plane of a more vulgar theft of power” (199). Moreover, we learn from Josh Green that McBane had led a group of Klansmen to murder black individuals. The Ku Klux Klan was already established at this point as an inherently uncivilized group that must inherently uphold Arielic discourse. Miller acknowledges this, in his assertion that “the Ku-Klux movement...was merely an ebullition of boyish spirits, begun to amuse young white men by playing upon the fears and superstitions of ignorant negroes” (114). As shown, McBane’s racism takes its form in solely violent manners. If Western supremacy is to be viewed, as mentioned in Carteret’s previous statement, in poetic terms of revolution, then it must only see these acts of brutal violence in Arielic terms. It is beneath the gentry to engage in such uncivilized acts, as they impart brutality and impose the bestial nature of Calibanic discourse upon those who seek to use these methods. It is counter to Prosperian discourse—which must deny such bestial savagery within those who uphold it—to engage in behavior and modes of conduct that are antithetical to the views of the gentleman. By choosing to promote violence as a means of maintaining supremacy, McBane only re-inscribes his own inferiority by signifying his uncivilized nature to the aristocracy.

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