*RSAJournal*
2025, vol. 36
ISSN: 1592-4467

DOI: 10.13135/1592-4467/12465
rsa.aisna.net

# Introduction to the Reader's Report of Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)

**Tess Chakkalakal**

*Bowdoin College*
ORCID: n.d.
Email: tchakkal@bowdoin.edu

## Abstract

Introduction to William Belmont Parker's Reader's Report of Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901).

## Keywords

Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, Reader's Report, William Belmont Parker, Harvard University's Special Collections, Houghton Mifflin Company Reports, Chakkalakal, A Matter of Complexion

The decade of the 1890s has been given many names by historians and literary critics. Some refer to it as "the mauve decade," an era defined by the scandals involving rich Americans, their decadence and personal affairs, which was the result of rapidly accumulated wealth after the abolition of slavery. But it is as the Gilded Age that most know the period. A term originally coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in 1873 focused our attention on the end of slavery and the rise of industry, a period when markets exploded with more goods and services than ever

before. But this was also a time when divisions between the rich and poor, black and white, became more severe. The 1890s had seen an avalanche of political and judicial defeats for black Americans. The defeat of Populism – a movement that had galvanized African American small farmers as well as agricultural, mining, and lumber laborers to ally with similarly situated whites to challenge white Democratic rule – had given rise to numerous reprisals throughout the southern region. Beginning in Mississippi in 1890, Southern Democrats systematically disfranchised black voters as well as large numbers of poor whites, drastically diminishing the political power of all blacks and working-class whites throughout the region. Achieved through legislative action, constitutional conventions, Supreme Court decisions, fraud, and manipulation and also, most dramatically, by physical intimidation, lynching, and mob action, disfranchisement further fueled the violence that had helped bring it about. With little likelihood of political, legal, or judicial reprisal, white Southern Democrats could act with virtual impunity to impose on African Americans the status of second-class citizenship that characterized what was to become, in Charles W. Chesnutt's lifetime (1858-1932), Jim Crow America – an era in which racial segregation restricted associations between individuals. Chesnutt's America was divided by a color line that separated its citizens into two distinct categories: black and white. Chesnutt resisted these distinctions by revealing the nonsensical nature of the categories through fictional stories about people struggling to make sense of them. Chesnutt's experience allowed him to question the logic of the categories, showing, ultimately, that they were limiting his experience and the experience of others who accepted their place within racial taxonomies thus allowing those categories to divide them from one another. Chesnutt set out to abolish such perceived differences so that those divided by them might live together in peace.

Between 1899 and 1905, Chesnutt published six books, including the first biography of Frederick Douglass. Perhaps no one knew the importance of speaking to both black and white audiences at once better than the great orator and slave-author. Douglass had died just four years earlier, on February 20, 1895, when Chesnutt published *Frederick Douglass* with the Boston firm of Small, Maynard & Company in 1899. It was a tiny book, small enough to fit inside the coat or pants pocket of a reader. A book that

you could carry with you, read on the train or on your lunch break. Despite its diminutive size, it was beautifully bound, with a black and white photo of Douglass as an elder, white hair and beard, swept back to reveal his proud, virile face. The photograph was given to Chesnutt to include in his biography by Douglass's family. It was protected by a thin onion skin sheet of paper that gave the book a certain sacred quality. Chesnutt revered Douglass as a great man and kept a framed photo of him in his study, where he composed his fiction and essays. He had, like so many African Americans of his generation, heard the great orator speak during one of Douglass's visits to Charlotte, NC, and never forgot the sound of his voice. It thrilled him to catch a glimpse of the man who had once been a slave and was now an American hero. Following his death, Chesnutt decided to break from his usual fiction-writing to tell the story of Douglass's life so that "the average American of to-day who sees, when his attention is called to it, and deplores, if he be a thoughtful and just man, the deep undertow of race prejudice that retards the progress of the colored people of our own generation" (viii). Chesnutt's books, like Douglass's speeches and life story, speak to the average American of today, regardless of color.

*A Matter of Complexion: The Life and Fictions of Charles W. Chesnutt* has a similar audience in mind, those of us in search of what we have in common, rather than what makes us different. Chesnutt entered the American literary scene around the time when Mark Twain had reached the peak of his celebrity with the publication of *Huckleberry Finn,* and Henry James had abandoned the United States for Europe. Falling somewhere between Twain's "Gilded Age" and James's "Awkward Age," Chesnutt presented another side of the American scene, one that borrowed from the insights of the literary giants of the time but forged a path of his own. Chesnutt's America is populated by mature, complex black and white characters engaged in intimate relationships, as friends, lovers, sisters, brothers, fathers and mothers, who struggle to overcome the racial identities thrust on them to live together and prosper. Learning of Chesnutt's life, through the books he read and wrote, alongside the relationships he forged, with his family, fellow writers, business associates, and friends, we can begin to imagine a new era in American history, one that we might call, having read Chesnutt: a "Future American" Age.

On December 22, 1900, just a few days before celebrating its 50th anniversary, *The New York Times* book review section, known then as "The Saturday Review," included a half-page advertisement for "One of the Books of the Season." The ad was paid for by Houghton, Mifflin and Company, the preeminent literary publishing house in the United States at the time. For the first time in its history, the firm was publishing a novel by a black author. Chesnutt had already published two collections of short stories with Houghton the previous year. *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* collected several of Chesnutt's stories that had appeared in such illustrious forums as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Century Magazine*, both considered to be the pinnacle of literary success, in which the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Edith Wharton regularly appeared. But the publication of his first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars* in 1900, was a major literary event. It was a new kind of novel, one that directly challenged the landmark 1896 US Supreme Court decision that upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation under the "separate but equal" doctrine. Like Homer Plessy, who was the plaintiff in the case, Charles Chesnutt was born to a family of mixed racial heritage. His parents were from North Carolina but had fled for Ohio when their freedoms were being curtailed by North Carolina's pro-slavery political forces. Several members of his family looked white but were considered "free people of color," or just "free blacks": these were the sons and daughters, granddaughters and grandsons, of illicit unions between white slave owners and black slaves who, over time, had been given the name of free people of color to denote their questionable ancestry. Chesnutt took after his free black parents, Ann Marie Sampson and Andrew Jackson Chesnutt. According to census reports taken before the war, the Chesnutts were known as "mulatto" and much later, as an adult, Chesnutt's 1895 passport application describes his complexion as "ruddy," his eyes "greyish," and his hair "dark brown."

Of course, these colors and categories reveal little about who Chesnutt was, but they do help us to see the importance of color and birth in determining what *kind* of a writer he was. Setting aside Chesnutt's racial categorization and affiliation, leaves us with what Chesnutt accomplished. According to his publisher, Charles Chesnutt's distinction derived not

from the fact that he was a black author but rather because "he is one of the first to write sympathetically and comprehensively from both viewpoints." By "both" they meant that Chesnutt presented in his fiction the black and white viewpoints simultaneously, at a time when the division between these points of view was deep and unbridgeable. Charles Chesnutt was most likely the first American author with crossover appeal. He worked with George Washington Cable and Booker T. Washington, T. Thomas Fortune and Albion W. Tourgée. Chesnutt served as a conduit, bringing these disparate literary and political voices together, to constitute a singular movement in American cultural history that has for too long been sidelined by those who saw the United States from a single point of view, that of the ivy-league educated, Northern, wealthy American. Those who Henry James called – with both affection and scorn – *The Bostonians*.

Chesnutt's second and perhaps most important novel was published just a year after *The House Behind the Cedars*. Taking its title from a poem by the Victorian poet and essayist Charles Lamb, *The Marrow of Tradition* is about the 1898 Wilmington massacre and presents its incidents with alarming clarity. The Democratic counterrevolution in Wilmington was one of the more deadly of the period, leaving at least twenty-five, and possibly more than one hundred, African Americans dead in its wake and virtually ending black political participation in the city. Chesnutt read the news about these deadly events and was dismayed by the reports in the newspapers. They were lopsided and biased. Chesnutt decided to tell his own story about the massacre, but in the form of fiction. It was in this form, ironically, that Chesnutt believed he could not only reveal the truth about the massacre that had occurred so close to where he had grown up but also offer a solution to the ongoing racial violence of the time. Given the success of his previous novel, the editorial staff at Houghton Mifflin & Company were eager to publish the novel. They expected it, as the press's primary reader William Belmont Parker wrote in his report on it, to be "capable of wide popular success." And so, it was published, just a few months after Chesnutt submitted it to Houghton Mifflin, in the fall of 1901.

As I show in my new biography of Chesnutt, *A Matter of Complexion: The Life and Fictions of Charles W. Chesnutt* (St. Martin's, 2025), the story of the

publication *of The Marrow of Tradition* is almost as fascinating as the novel itself. With a population of roughly twenty-five thousand, Wilmington was then the largest city in North Carolina. Chesnutt still had family there. During his years in North Carolina, he would make frequent trips to Wilmington along North Carolina's southeastern coastline. His wife, Susan, shortly after the birth of their first child, had spent a month in Wilmington, while he was busy in Fayetteville with work. She, perhaps more than her husband, loved the town. Situated on the lower Cape Fear River, it offered Susan a much-needed break from Fayetteville's sandhills. She felt comfortable there, enjoyed frequenting the shops and restaurants along the boardwalk with her friends and family. But all that changed on November 10, 1898, when a mob mainly of white men armed with rifles took to the streets of Wilmington, burning black-owned businesses, including the office of *The Daily Record*, North Carolina's most widely circulated black newspaper. Its editor, Alexander Lightfoot Manly, fled the city after being threatened by the mob for printing an editorial that acknowledged consensual sexual relations between white women and black men. For Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* was a way, he said, of overcoming his feeling of despair and reaffirming his "belief that the forces of progress will in the end prevail" (see Chakkalakal, *A Matter of Complexion*). Chesnutt started his second novel in September 1900.

The novel's plot is complex. There are several subplots, the timeline moves seamlessly between the past and present. This is not exactly historical fiction. Rather, it is a history of the present. The events and characters it presents had not yet become history; the novel writes them into history. This history begins with a familiar scene of a woman in labor, with her worried husband by her side, hoping for the best but expecting the worst. The urgency of the present moment is emphasized by the lush description of the setting. "The night was hot and sultry. Though the windows of the chamber were wide open, and the muslin curtains looped back, not a breath of air was stirring" (1). We know we are in the deep south by the "stifling heat," "the shrill chirp of the cicada and the muffled croaking of the frogs in some distant marsh" and the "heavy scent of magnolias" (1). To release us from the oppressive present, we are taken into the not-so-distant-past, when our characters were younger, without the burden of

their present situation weighing them down. In the past we meet a young Major Carteret, returning home from Appomattox "to find his family, one of the oldest and proudest in the state, hopelessly impoverished by war" (1). But amidst the ruins, Carteret finds love and a source of income from his wife Olivia Merkell. With her money, he started a newspaper, which he "had made the leading organ of his party and the most influential paper in the State" (2). We are back in the present. In Olivia and Philip's home. Dr. Price and Mammy Jane, Olivia's childhood nurse, join them. All four anticipate the birth of the Cartarets' first child, a boy who will inherit the legacy of his parents and grandparents. The conjunction between childbirth and the founding of a newspaper is hardly a coincidence. Olivia is the source of the state's future generations and its news. Though her husband functions as father and editor, without her wealth and body, Major Carteret would be nothing more than the victim of a lost cause.

By the time Chesnutt started writing his novel, the mixture of politics and nuptial relations had become a regular feature of American novels. Likely, Chesnutt had the novels of William Dean Howells on his mind, particularly his 1889 novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, that similarly wove together a real-life outbreak of political violence, a story of marriage and family, with the work of a magazine editor. Howells would pen one of the early reviews on Chesnutt's novel that, according to several later critics, adversely affected both the novel's sales and his literary career. More recent critics, namely Sydney Bufkin in her excellent reassessment of the novel's critical reception, have complicated the role Howells's review played in determining the fate of *The Marrow of Tradition*. In her words,

> Viewing Howells as a stand-in for *The Marrow of Tradition's* white readers results in a significantly flattened picture of the novel's reception, one that accords Howells a taste-making power he did not necessarily have. Howells certainly had a great deal of influence in his position as editor and critic at the *Atlantic* and *Harper's*, and as scholars have demonstrated he often used his position to promote little-known authors, including Chesnutt, whose aesthetic aims seemed in sympathy with his own. But that influence was also limited to an elite circle of literary magazines and, as critics have shown, often in tension with popular taste. *The Marrow of Tradition*, though, was reviewed in a wide

> range of newspapers and magazines, ranging from elite magazines like the *Atlantic* and *Outlook* to daily papers, religious journals, and hobby magazines. Because the influence of monthlies like the *North American Review* was limited, we cannot necessarily expect all or even most of Chesnutt's reviewers either to have been familiar with Howells' review or to have necessarily been in sympathy with his opinion [...] Howells' notice was, in fact, highly atypical when compared to other reviews of the novel. (231-32)

Despite the critical praise he received, Chesnutt's novel did not become the popular success Parker and George Mifflin predicted for it. But it did make a great impact on the American cultural scene and – as the number of critical articles on the novel published in the last couple of decades suggests – continues to do so. Reading Parker's initial response to *The Marrow of Tradition* over a century later reveals a great deal about its critical reception and singular formal features.

Parker was a relatively new literary advisor at the press when Chesnutt's manuscript was placed on his desk by his boss, George H. Mifflin. Parker, like most at the press, was a graduate of Harvard University and well-versed in English literature. He would go on to write books of his own about Ralph Waldo Emerson and Sir Philip Sidney. The subject of Chesnutt's novel was new to this young editor, but the report reveals considerable sympathy with its themes. He opens the report by calling it "a novel on the color line into which [Chesnutt] has put unusual strength of feeling." That opening line tells us much about Parker's sense of literature. Chesnutt's novel was indeed "unusual" for the time. It took up the lives of people and events that were not usually the subject of literature. Parker offers an interesting plot summary of the novel in his report, though he gets a few details wrong. For starters, the novel is set in "Wellington, NC", intended to evoke recent events in Wilmington, not "Charleston, SC" But this is a minor mistake, though it does reveal a certain ignorance of contemporary events that most Americans at the time would have known. The report also reveals a curious contradiction worth noting. Parker starts out by insisting "it is not a novel with a hero, but a novel of a group of people whose lives were interwoven." He reverses this claim a few paragraphs later when he writes, "The real hero of the book is a negro doctor named Miller." The

shift from the novel's emphasis on group identity to the elevation of a single character who is a doctor *and* negro is certainly "unusual."

Dr. William Miller was a new kind of character in the world of American fiction. Not introduced until the novel's fifth chapter, Dr. William Miller appears on a southbound train next to his friend and colleague, Dr. Burns. The allusions to the recent *Plessy v. Ferguson* case are unmistakable. Chesnutt introduced Miller in relation to Burns to manifest their perceived racial difference only "dispose of this difference" almost immediately after pointing it out. As Chesnutt put it in his characteristic ironic tone:

> Looking at these two men with the American eye, the differences would perhaps be the more striking, or at least the more immediately apparent for the first was white and the second black, or, more correctly speaking, brown; it was even a light brown, but both his swarthy complexion and his curly hair revealed what has been described in the laws of some of our states as a "visible admixture" of African blood. (49)

We learn more about Dr. Miller's backstory in the chapter. Insofar as he is the novel's hero it is because he occupies an entirely impossible situation. He is a doctor who has devoted his life to uplifting his race. In witnessing Miller's situation, readers sympathize with him and even see themselves as partially responsible for the tragic events that befall him. Dr. Miller is a good man who finds himself in a bad situation that neither his intelligence nor industry can remedy. Reading the novel leaves readers with the responsibility to avert the tragedy that befalls the good doctor. It is a responsibility that, for most of us, is too great a burden to bear.

When reading Parker's report on the novel, we should keep its form in mind. It is a reader report, written hastily. For this reason, I have retained the words Parker crossed out, indicating them with the strike through line. These crossed out lines give readers a better sense of Parker as a *reader* and reveal some of his confusion with the novel's plot and the way race operates in the novel. Men like Parker produced thousands of such reports while employed by the firm. These reports were presented at weekly 'pow-wow' meetings of the editors and advisors; the report determined whether the press would publish or pass on the manuscript. The press's decision to

publish *The Marrow of Tradition* was based on Parker's report. Fortunately for readers of Chesnutt's novels and stories, Harvard University's Special Collections has preserved these reports in their archives under the general heading "Houghton Mifflin Company Reports" and filed them by author and year so that we can still access them today. The reader's reports on all of Chesnutt's submissions proved especially useful to the story of Charles Chesnutt's life and work that I tell. I am especially grateful to Sydney Bufkin for sharing her copies of the report with me over a decade ago when I embarked on the writing of Chesnutt's life, and to Harvard University's Houghton Library.

## AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Tess Chakkakal is Professor of Africana Studies and English. She is the author of *A Matter of Complexion: The Life and Fictions of Charles W. Chesnutt* (St. Martin's, 2025) and *Novel Bondage: Slavery, Marriage, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Illinois Press, 2012) and co-editor of *Imperium in Imperio: A Critical Edition* (West Virginia University Press, 2022) and *Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs* (University of Georgia Press, 2013).

## WORKS CITED

Bufkin, Sydney. "Beyond 'Bitter': Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition.*" *American Literary Realism* 46 (2014): 230-50.

Chakkalakal, Tess. *A Matter of Complexion: The Life and Fictions of Charles W. Chesnutt* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2025.

Chesnutt, Charles W. *Frederick Douglass.* Small, Maynard and Company, 1899.

—. *The Marrow of Tradition.* 1901. University of Michigan Press, 1969.