

Charles W. Chesnutt, Houghton Mifflin, and the Racial Paratext

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G rard Genette’s concept of the “paratext” has remarkable traction for the study of African American literature. Introduced to describe materials that frame the literary text—prefaces, title pages, book covers, and advertisements—the paratext, in Genette’s formulation, remains auxiliary. It is “always subordinate to ‘its’ text” (12). Yet for US writers of color, especially those hoping to influence a predominantly white audience, the paratext has often become a crucial point of tension. As Beth A. McCoy argues in a 2006 issue of *PMLA*, the paratext has functioned centrally for African American literature “as a zone transacting ever-changing modes of white domination and of resistance to that domination” (156). For example, one might consider the African American slave narrative, where frontispiece portraits and white-authored prefaces have served to authenticate the text for a mainstream audience, “white envelopes” for the “black message,” as John Sekora describes.¹ In a reversal that Genette did not anticipate, paratextual materials vie for status over and against the text itself.²

Critics of African American literature have at times been reluctant to focus on these bibliographic materials at the risk of further subordinating the text to its exterior. As Leon Jackson argues, “Scholars of slave culture and print culture have rarely shared agendas, nor have, more broadly, African American social, cultural, and literary historians, and those within the community of book historians” (252). Nevertheless, attention to the paratext reveals how this literature was framed and presented to its audience. Indeed, because the paratext is an especially fraught space for African American literature, these framing materials can point to important tensions and disconnections in what Robert Darnton calls the “communications circuit” between author, publisher, and reader (68). As book historians increasingly turn their attention to ethnic literatures, and as critics of US ethnic literature draw on the methods of critical bibliography,³ they consider what Jerome J. McGann calls the “bibliographic codes” and the “linguistic codes” of the text and the relationship between the two (13). This essay contributes to such scholarly developments by examining Charles W. Chesnutt’s interactions with his book publisher, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, and the production of materials that framed and marketed Chesnutt’s writing at the height of his literary career.

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Chesnutt's relationship to the publishing industry has been a common theme in his critical revival. William L. Andrews's 1980 biography, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*, pays significant attention both to Chesnutt's popular reception and to his correspondence with publishers. Andrews describes Chesnutt as "the first Afro-American writer to use the white-controlled mass media in the service of serious social fiction on behalf of the black community" (274). Richard H. Brodhead's work throughout the 1990s—in *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993) and as editor of Chesnutt's journals and conjure stories—not only places Chesnutt in the context of literary regionalism but also emphasizes the cross-racial production of *The Conjure Woman* (1899) as it was solicited by Houghton Mifflin editor Walter Hines Page. In these examinations and others, Chesnutt's literary career and his professional relationship with publishers have remained a central topic of discussion.⁴ Indeed, it is the support of this publishing apparatus that sets Chesnutt apart from predecessors such as Hannah Crafts, William Wells Brown, Harriet Wilson, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Paul Laurence Dunbar.⁵

Despite the attention given to Chesnutt's interaction with the mainstream publishing industry, few critics have examined the material traces of this relationship, which extend beyond the prestige of publication with Houghton Mifflin. In addition to securing this imprimatur, Chesnutt worked with Houghton Mifflin to negotiate how his work would be manufactured and advertised, where it would be distributed, and the extent to which his racial background would be known to readers. Chesnutt's literary career is remarkable not only for the extent that he allowed Houghton Mifflin to direct his own writing but also for the influence Chesnutt exerted on Houghton Mifflin. In the years that he attempted to launch a popular literary career from 1899 to 1901, taking time away from his stenography business, Chesnutt was exceedingly productive, in terms of both literary output and self-promotion. In letters from 11 October and 12 November 1899, Chesnutt requested and reviewed "circulars" from Houghton Mifflin so that he might distribute small advertisements to audiences of his readings ("To" 133, 137). In another letter written on 10 December 1899, when Houghton Mifflin reported on their advertising campaigns in Boston, Washington, New York, and several other cities, Chesnutt suggested they add Cincinnati, Chicago, and Detroit to their list (139-40). As Cécile Cottenet describes the relationship between ethnic authors and mainstream publishers, Chesnutt was temporarily "able to work from *within*, although [he] continued to embody 'otherness'" (9). While Chesnutt's letters to Houghton Mifflin are marked by concerns for these promotional aspects of the communications circuit, such materials have received little attention among scholars.

In examining these materials, a distinct progression emerges in terms of Chesnutt's authorial persona and representations of his racial identity, which profoundly influenced contemporary interpretations of his writing. As Chesnutt

initially achieved publication with Houghton Mifflin, fliers and advertisements for *The Conjure Woman* and the design of the book itself allowed the text to be read according to the norms of plantation fiction and even as a white-authored text. By the time *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899) was published, however, Houghton Mifflin had disclosed Chesnutt's mixed-race background, advertising him as a light-complexioned man of color and as the laureate of the color line. Chesnutt's racial ambiguity complemented the open-ended style of the stories themselves. While these marketing tactics were relatively successful within the popular literary marketplace, Houghton Mifflin's subsequent attempt to advertise Chesnutt as the champion of the black race proved a failure for *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). While the company expended substantial resources to promote the book as the successor to best-selling political novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Albion W. Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* (1879), its sales disappointed both the author and publisher.

Houghton Mifflin and Chesnutt thus collaborated in a surprisingly creative, yet commercially unsuccessful, experiment to pass African American fiction into genteel literary culture.⁶ Houghton Mifflin's support of this endeavor and its experimental nature is evidenced by the rapid adjustments the company made in its marketing campaign from one book to the next. In the span of two years, the publisher applied its substantial resources to market Chesnutt first as white, then as the laureate of the color line, and finally as a champion of the black race. These adjustments depended on Chesnutt's ability to pass as white. The evolution of this marketing campaign also aligned with the literary genres Chesnutt would use to subvert and oppose white supremacist ideologies—from plantation tales to realist stories of the color line and more openly political fiction. Yet, despite these efforts, which were particularly substantial for *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt's writing encountered dual attitudes of resistance and rejection that were deeply entrenched in the popular literary marketplace. On the one hand, when readers interpreted Chesnutt's satirical work in terms of the dominant genres, they tended to see it as reinforcing the racial stereotypes Chesnutt sought to subvert. On the other hand, when Chesnutt's work was understood as critical or political, it provoked a backlash among the vast majority of his white readers and was harshly rejected. Ultimately, Chesnutt's literary critique of the color line was more successful in gaining support from Houghton Mifflin than from a popular audience.

Passing through the Paratext

Chesnutt's conjure stories take on the style of popular plantation fiction as developed by Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page. While Harris had introduced Uncle Remus, the freedman narrator of the Br'er Rabbit folk tales, Chesnutt

introduced Uncle Julius, the freedman narrator of the conjure tales. Chesnutt's stories also follow the standard narrative pattern of local color plantation fiction. As Heather Tirado Gilligan describes them, "The 'Uncle Julius' tales conform to the formula of a white frame narrator who prompts an ex-slave for a story of the old plantation; the ex-slave then complies with a story told entirely in dialect; the tales conclude with the reflections of the frame narrator on the tale that he has just heard" (203). Thus, throughout *The Conjure Woman*, the white frame narrator, John, provokes Uncles Julius to tell dialect folk tales of the old plantation. Chesnutt's work differs from the genre established by Harris, however, in the complexity and intelligence of Uncle Julius and the stories he tells.⁷ Whereas Harris and Page make the freedman storyteller "testify to his love of the old days and his lack of desire for equal social rights" (Brodhead, Introduction 5), the conjure tales are haunted by the trauma of slavery. In "The Goophered Grapevine," for example, Uncle Julius tells the story of a slave named Henry, whose body begins to cycle with the seasons of the grape field he is forced to harvest; when the grape vine withers and perishes, Henry also dies. In "Po' Sandy," the title character is magically turned into a pine tree so that, rather than being sent from one family plantation to another as a house servant, he can remain close to his wife. Once transformed into a pine tree, however, Sandy is milled into lumber for the plantation's new kitchen. Uncle Julius tells his white auditors these stories so that they might better understand the traumatic history of the former slave plantation they have come to purchase.⁸

Recent critics have found these stories rich for interpretation, examining a range of topics from reconstruction justice (Hardwig), to environmental politics (Outka 103-26), to Chesnutt's use of classical metamorphosis (Barnard). Critics have been especially drawn to the way Chesnutt adapts the popular plantation genre for his own purposes. Eric J. Sundquist calls this adaptation Chesnutt's "cakewalk" (271-94), which mimics the dominant style. Kenneth M. Price similarly claims: "Because Chesnutt had to penetrate a type of unofficial censorship, he built a duality into his early tales that virtually asked that he be 'misunderstood' by some readers" (264). Even before these critics, David D. Britt had commented on this phenomenon in a 1972 article for *CLA Journal*, "What You See Is What You Get." Britt argues that the conjure stories are "deliberately structured to allow the reader to be deceived . . . if he chooses, or needs, to be deceived" (271).⁹ Of course, Chesnutt was intensely aware of this ambiguity when producing the conjure stories. In his journals, Chesnutt describes his approach to a white audience as aspiring to "lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling" (*Journals* 140).

Yet this potential to be "misunderstood" according to the genre of plantation fiction also hinges on paratextual presentations of the book itself. Indeed, Houghton Mifflin and Chesnutt collaborated to advertise *The Conjure Woman* in the style of *Uncle Remus* plantation fiction and even, by omission, as a

white-authored text. Influenced by this marketing campaign, the vast majority of the book's reviewers resisted its subversive potential, interpreting the conjure stories as simply following the familiar conventions of plantation fiction. These reviews, in turn, were recycled back into the marketing campaign for the collection, reinforcing the book's meaning within the genre. In other words, efforts to market the book in terms of plantation fiction predisposed readers "to be deceived" (Britt 271) by the stories and to misunderstand them. Ultimately, Chesnutt's entry into the mainstream, in the era Kenneth W. Warren describes as the advent of African American literature (1-6), hinged on his ability to pass as white.

Houghton Mifflin's efforts to market *The Conjure Woman* in the style of plantation fiction are most evident in the design of the book itself, which displays the portrait of an elderly freedman flanked on both sides by rabbits (see fig. 1). Because Bre'r Rabbit was introduced through the *Uncle Remus* series, the cover sets *The Conjure Woman* firmly in the lineage of plantation literature. As Houston A. Baker, Jr., argues, the designers "outdid themselves in suggesting the link between Chesnutt's content and that of the ever popular Joel Chandler Harris's 'Uncle Remus'" (41). Jean Lee Cole analyzes the cover in comparison to book designs for Paul Laurence Dunbar and Winnifred Eaton / Onoto Watanna. She points out that publishers at this time would have asked designers to "conventionalize" book design, allowing texts "to be easily recognized by genre" (470). In fact, Houghton Mifflin was also the publisher of the *Uncle Remus* books, which sold consistently well from 1898-1907.¹⁰ Their 1892 *Uncle Remus and Friends* had a cover similar to *The Conjure Woman*, with a landscape image of rabbits and a close-up portrait of the freedman storyteller. Houghton Mifflin records show that Decorative Designers, a company that would become the most prolific designer of trade bindings in the early twentieth-century United States (Gullans and Espey 1), was hired for *The Conjure Woman* (Houghton Mifflin, "Book" 214). While Decorative Designers would not have produced the earlier *Uncle Remus* covers—the company was not established until 1895—they clearly drew on the plantation genre in their design for *The Conjure Woman*.

Like the text itself, it is possible to read this cover as subversive. Henry B. Wonham argues, for instance, that caricatures such as those on the cover of *The Conjure Woman* display not only a nativist impulse against the ethnic Other but also a "potential to instigate a radical decentering of identity" (39). The caricature, in other words, calls into question the very stereotype it inscribes. From this perspective, one can see that Houghton Mifflin was surprisingly deliberate in its manufacture of the book, producing a cover that mimics the dominant genre in the same way as the text itself. The portraits of the freedman and the rabbits seem to be smirking at the reader, trickster figures that transform into one another. Without looking at the reception history, however, it is difficult to say whether such an interpretation was, to borrow a term from Wolfgang

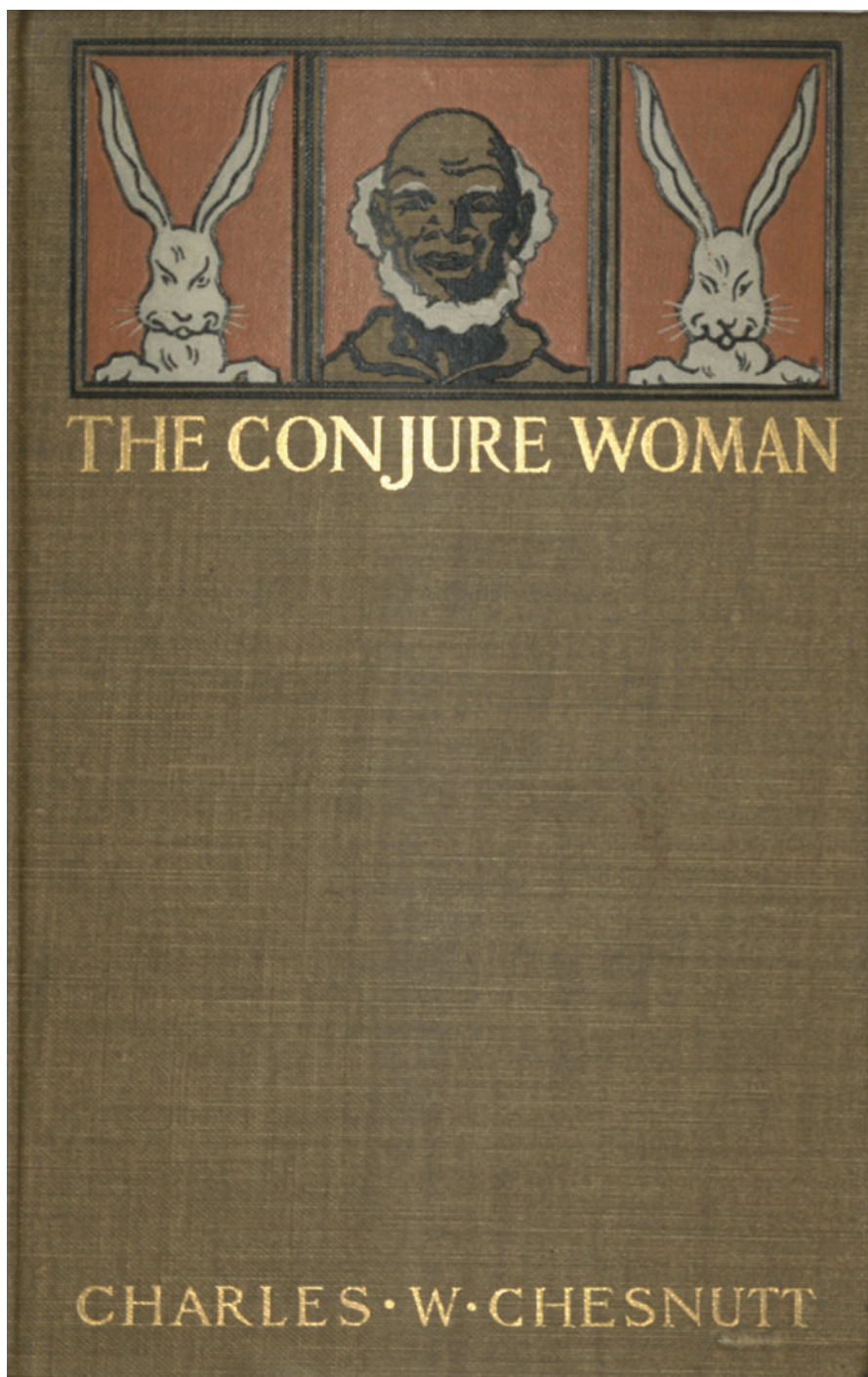


Figure 1. Cover. *The Conjure Woman*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library / Rare Books.

Iser, “actualized” by a popular audience (xii). Seen as caricature, the cover more simply animalizes the black male figure, linking the freedman and rabbits in size, facial features, and hair color. The brown cloth cover of the book, which would have been chosen deliberately by Decorative Designers (Gullans and Espey 4), also serves as the color of the freedman’s skin. The book thus allows the reader to hold and examine the body of the folk storyteller in the style of plantation literature and ethnographic regionalism.¹¹

In October of 1899, Houghton Mifflin produced a promotional flier for *The Conjure Woman*, which similarly allowed the book to pass as a white-authored text. This was a small, folded leaflet, which could be sent to bookstores or handed out by Chesnutt at readings. In a fascinating maneuver, the pamphlet includes an image of Chesnutt himself (see fig. 2). The picture is a medium close-up of Chesnutt’s face and shoulders, set between the title of his book and the name of his publisher. Dressed in a suit and tie, Chesnutt’s light skin stands out against a dark background, and his wavy hair is parted at the side. Here, Chesnutt is in the position of John Walden / Warwick at the outset of *The House Behind the Cedars*; without being explicitly “outed” as African American, he appears as a white man by default. Moreover, Houghton Mifflin was clearly aware of the subtlety of this promotional flier since Chesnutt had introduced himself as African American in his earliest 1891 letter to the company (“To” 75). The leaflet thus indicates Houghton Mifflin’s collaboration with Chesnutt to manipulate the boundaries of the color line. Aware of Chesnutt’s African American background, the company was willing to play on its customers’ perception of race. And while Chesnutt did not choose to pass as white in his personal or professional life, he was nevertheless willing to allow *The Conjure Woman* to pass as a white-authored text.

Houghton Mifflin also produced a number of catalogs to sell its books, including a catalog of authors, which offered biographical information for each writer. In this paratext, the company discusses Chesnutt’s biography in more detail but nevertheless avoids explicit mention of his African American background. As with the promotional leaflet produced for *The Conjure Woman*, the mini-biography calls to mind all the complexities of racial passing. Rather than actively misinforming the reader, it allows Chesnutt to be seen as white through omission and genteel nondisclosure. The biography itself emphasizes Chesnutt’s professional accomplishments: a former principal and a law student “admitted to the bar,” Chesnutt “has made court-reporting his business” and “has traveled in Europe” (Houghton Mifflin, *Catalogue*). The description thus narrates Chesnutt’s migrations (from Cleveland to Fayetteville and back to Cleveland) without mentioning the race politics that guided those movements (from the Civil War through Reconstruction and into the post-Reconstruction era). It emphasizes Chesnutt’s performative identity and achievements so that readers would imagine Chesnutt as a well-traveled teacher, lawyer, and businessman.

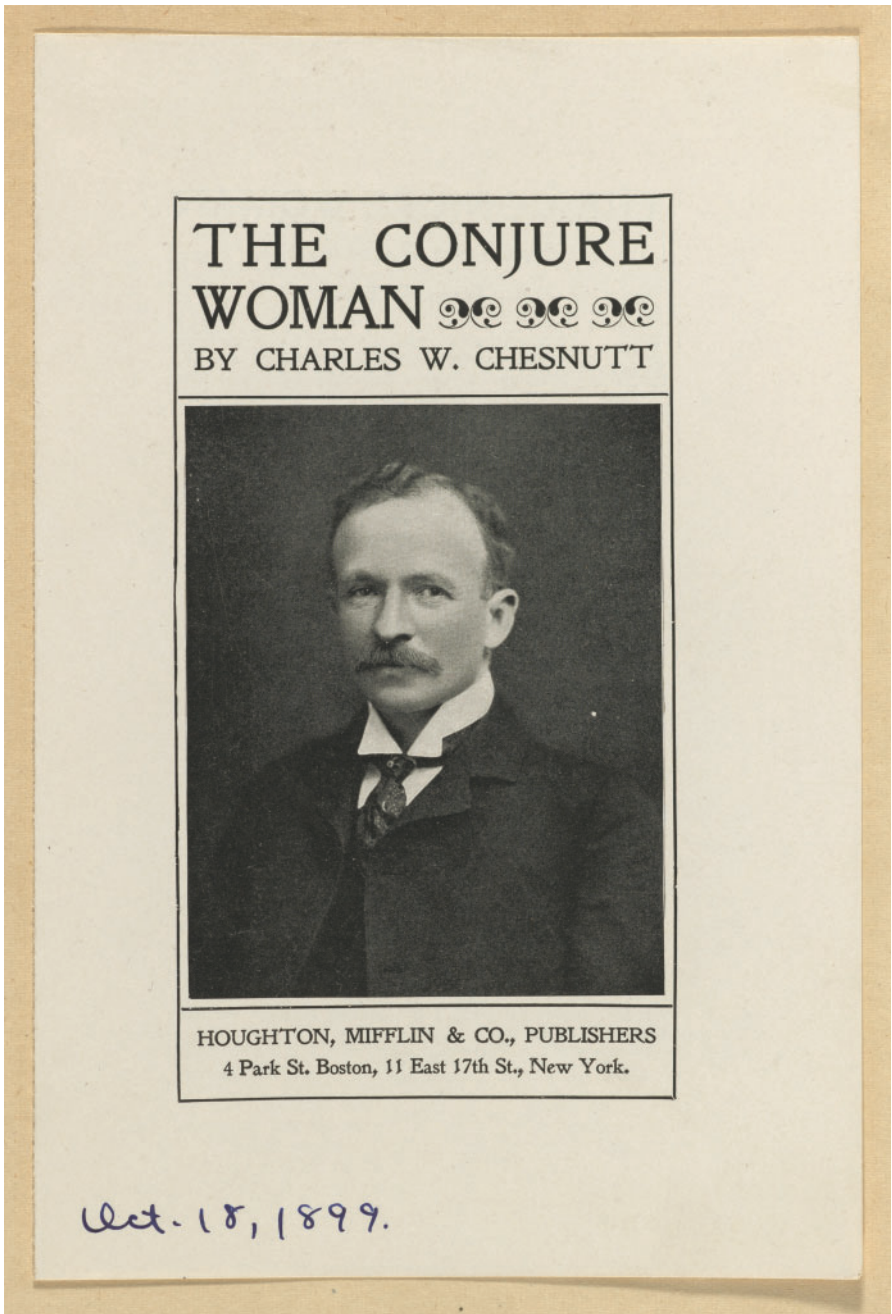


Figure 2. Houghton Mifflin Company. *The Conjure Woman*. Promotional flier. MS Am 2030: (244). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

The biography comes closest to mentioning Chesnutt's African American background when it describes him as the former principal of the "State Normal School at Fayetteville." This school, which remains a historically black university today, was founded by a group of African American men just after the Civil War and was erected by General Oliver O. Howard, commissioner of the Freedman's Bureau ("History"). Readers of the catalog familiar with the Normal School at Fayetteville could therefore deduce Chesnutt's racial background. Notably, however, the official title of the school at this time was the "State Colored Normal School," so the biographical description removes any explicit marker of Chesnutt's status as "colored."

The reception of *The Conjure Woman* provides further evidence that, among the vast majority of readers, the book was read in terms of white-authored plantation fiction.¹² These reviews considered the stories according to a variety of elements such as conjuration, dialect, and the character of Uncle Julius, with a tendency to reduce each category to forms of racial caricature. For example, critics at the turn of the century commonly, praised the stories for their accurate expression of African American spiritual beliefs. An anonymous reviewer in *The Philadelphia Times* summarizes the book as a series of stories "which tell, with delightful accuracy, some of the race superstitions of the negroes in North Carolina" ("New"). This reviewer sees Uncle Julius as a representative of black superstition and claims these stories are accurate reflections of voodoo beliefs. Contrary to this opinion, however, Chesnutt had invented the folk elements of these stories with only a loose connection to actual North Carolina conjuration. In a more outrageous response to the conjure stories, another reviewer argues that "Skepticism cannot rob one of the belief that this [conjuration] was the real religion of the old plantation; the goopher 'mixtry,' not the overseer's lash, the dreaded power" ("More"). Here, Chesnutt's satire of the plantation genre is entirely misunderstood. Whereas conjuration within the stories functions as a metaphor for the supernatural violence of slavery, this review sees it as the "real" history of the "old plantation." The reviewer explicitly blames conjuration and "goopher 'mixtry'" as the "power" behind slavery in place of the "overseer's lash."

Reviewers discussing other aspects of *The Conjure Woman* are similarly obtuse. Several reviewers emphasize the pleasure taken in Chesnutt's rendering of dialect. One reviewer for *The Springfield Sunday Republican* writes: "The collection of short stories . . . are really delightful bits of humor couched in a negro dialect as seductive as that of 'Uncle Remus' or Thomas Nelson Page" ("Recent"). Rather than noting any of the contrasts with Page or Harris, the reviewer places the conjure stories squarely within the genre. *The Sunday Republican* continues: "The stories are racy of the soil, and the dialect is rich and unctuous." Other reviewers conflate Chesnutt with the stories' narrator, John, claiming that the author himself has traveled to North Carolina to open a grape farm ("Conjure Woman, Etc."). Numerous reviewers, such as one in the *New York Times*,

describe the fiction as “quaint” and picturesque (“The Conjure Woman”). In other words, despite the complexities critics see in these stories today, popular reviews at the turn of the century provide little evidence that readers engaged the more subversive elements of *The Conjure Woman*. If reviewers did see these possibilities within the text, they did not speak of them within the popular literary marketplace. Much more often, they interpreted the tales as “delightful bits of humor” comparable to the Uncle Remus stories.

At the same time, however, such readings were enabled by the decisions of Chesnutt and Houghton Mifflin regarding the book’s presentation and marketing. The conjure tales play on the generic expectations of plantation fiction, and there is, in a sense, much of the bourgeois Chesnutt in the white frame narrator, John. Moreover, Chesnutt and Houghton Mifflin went so far as to recycle such reviews back into their advertising campaign for the book. The flier with Chesnutt’s portrait on the front (see fig. 2), for example, is a folded leaflet that opens to reveal multiple quotations from contemporary reviews. Much like the reviews, this advertisement divides quotations into categories that reinforce similarities to plantation fiction, highlighting aspects such as “Humor” and “Dialect.” In the first section on “The Story Teller,” for example, in a quote from the *Portland Transcript*, Uncle Julius is praised for standing “shoulder to shoulder” with Uncle Remus (Houghton Mifflin, *Conjure*). The book has been designed and manufactured to invoke such comparisons, and the company recycles this popular reception of its own advertising campaign. Another quote included in the leaflet, from the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, commends Chesnutt’s use of dialect for showing “an intuitive understanding of the Ethiopian character, with its strange mixtures of American civilization, and barbaric instinct inherited from African ancestors.”

In his letter from 11 October 1899, just one week before the date listed on the archival leaflet, Chesnutt tells Houghton Mifflin: “I received the package of circulars you sent me, and used some of them for distribution at a reading I gave last night. I may ask you for more of them soon, as there are several ways in which I can use them to advantage” (“To” 133). Here, Chesnutt both approves the circular and actively requests more to be used for promotion of the book. These fliers, he says, are useful in “several ways.” And while “several ways” could refer to the logistics of marketing—distributing fliers to bookstores, readers, and friends—it seems Chesnutt is also describing the leaflet’s ambiguous visual rhetoric. The design of the flier, like that of *The Conjure Woman*, allows Chesnutt to pass as white and to be read in terms of popular plantation fiction.

“Laureate of the Color Line”

Because he was open about his mixed-race background in nearly all of his personal relationships, and because he did not actively commit to passing as white,

Chesnutt became increasingly well-known as a writer of color. In fact, even as Houghton Mifflin printed fliers and catalogs that allowed Chesnutt to pass as white, they had already experimented with advertising him as a mixed-race author in targeted locations. By the time Houghton Mifflin published *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* in 1899, the company had not only announced Chesnutt's African American background but also actively used it to promote the collection, aligning Chesnutt's mixed-race identity with the ambiguity of these stories. Whereas Chesnutt had passed as white in the marketing for *The Conjure Woman*, he became a liminal representative of the color line for these stories. Much like the character of Mr. Ryder in "The Wife of His Youth," Chesnutt's mixed-race identity was open to audience interpretation and criticism.

Chesnutt's mixed-race background was first mentioned publicly in August 1898, when an announcement was placed in *The Bookman*, saying, "Mr. Chesnutt . . . has proved himself not only the most cultivated but also the most philosophical story writer that his race has as yet produced; for, strange to relate, he is himself a coloured man of very light complexion" ("Chronicle" 452). Chesnutt was pleased with the way this announcement was handled, reflecting the language he would use to describe himself at this time, as a person of color. He wrote to his editor, Walter Hines Page, thanking him for "the graceful and tactful way of alluding to my connection with the colored race" ("To" 110). This initial announcement was made only briefly, however, and did not circulate widely among a popular audience. With a circulation of approximately fifteen thousand copies in 1899 (Mott 436), *The Bookman* attracted a specialized audience, and it seems Houghton Mifflin used the magazine as a form of niche marketing, or what might also be called narrow-casting. In other words, the announcement was made in such a way that it would circulate among a subset of book professionals and literati.

Chesnutt became even more well-known following the publication of "The Wife of His Youth," a story that was widely praised by critics. In an 1899 article, for example, *The Boston Evening Transcript* praised the piece as "one of the really fine short stories of last year" ("Literary"). The story considers a group of mixed-race socialites known as "The Blue Vein Society" since members of the club are all light-skinned. At the outset, a leading member of the Blue Veins, Mr. Ryder, anticipates proposing marriage to Mrs. Molly Dixon, a woman much younger and whiter than himself (*Wife* 5). Ryder intends to give a ball with the Blue Vein Society to make a formal proposal so that "marriage with Mrs. Dixon would help to further the upward process of absorption" (8). The plot is complicated, however, by the arrival of 'Liza Jane, a "very black" woman who "looked like a bit of the old plantation life" (10). 'Liza appears at Mr. Ryder's house the morning of the ball, seeking a man named Sam Taylor, her husband from more than twenty-five years ago in the antebellum era. She shows Mr. Ryder a daguerreotype of her former husband, and he looks at the portrait, agreeing to give the matter

some attention. In the final scene of the story, in the ballroom of the Blue Vein Society, Mr. Ryder is asked to give a toast, and it seems he is ready to propose marriage to Molly Dixon. Instead, however, he takes the floor and tells the story of 'Liza Jane, the faithful wife who has searched for her husband for so long. In a string of hypotheticals, Mr. Ryder asks how 'Liza Jane's husband should respond if he had tried to reconnect with 'Liza after the war but had no luck and continued on to a successful life. In rapt attention, Molly Dixon and the crowd answer that the husband "should have acknowledged" the old black woman (23). Mr. Ryder promptly thanks them for their response and announces himself as the husband. 'Liza Jane is the wife of his youth.

The story is often read by recent scholars in terms of Mr. Ryder's declaration of his African American identity, acknowledging his own Blackness in association with 'Liza Jane. In this interpretation, the mixed-race protagonist chooses to identify with his black history rather than assimilating into whiteness and convinces an entire mixed-race society to do the same. Indeed, Lorne Fienberg argues that the story can be read to affirm Chesnutt's "own process of creating a positive identity for himself as a black author" (219). As Mr. Ryder acknowledges the wife of his youth, Fienberg sees Chesnutt acknowledging his own African American identity. Anne Fleischmann interprets this acceptance of black identity with skepticism, as dramatizing the ideology of the one-drop rule in the era of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Fleischmann argues that "'The Wife of His Youth' is not so much a racial romance as it is an allegory for the disappearance of the biracial person as a social and legal entity during the darkest days of Jim Crow" (463). In other words, Mr. Ryder's acknowledgement of 'Liza Jane can be read as an acceptance of second-class African American citizenship, confirming and reifying the impenetrable boundary between black and white.

At the same time, however, the story can be read as even more ambiguous and open-ended than such criticism allows. For while Mr. Ryder ultimately acknowledges 'Liza Jane as the wife of his youth, the consequences of this decision are not disclosed. The story stops short of revealing the future of Mr. Ryder and 'Liza Jane or, for that matter, of Molly Dixon and the Blue Vein Society. Indeed, much like Chesnutt's own "connection with the colored race" (Chesnutt, "To" 110), it remains unclear whether Mr. Ryder's acknowledgement of 'Liza Jane entails his full identification as African American. The story simply allows its mixed-race protagonist to recognize his connection with 'Liza Jane, without revealing the outcome of this decision.

Among Chesnutt's contemporary audience, this ambiguous ending was recognized and widely praised as exemplary of literary realism. In May of 1900, for example, Chesnutt would win both the attention and the approval of William Dean Howells in a review for the *Atlantic Monthly*. Howells's article, "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories," praised *The Wife of his Youth* as "realistic fiction" and called Chesnutt a member of the "good school, the only school," alongside

“Maupassant, or Tourguénief, or Mr. James, or Miss Jewett” (700). Howells especially admired the ambiguity and impartiality of these stories, mentioning Chesnutt’s “artistic reticence” (699) and his “passionless handling of a phase of our common life which is tense with potential tragedy” (700). Indeed, both William L. Andrews (“William”) and Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. (“W. D.”) note that Howells’s positive review simultaneously served as a warning that Chesnutt should tread lightly with his popular audience, avoiding polemical fiction. The review opens by describing Chesnutt’s “self-restraint” (699) and concludes that he had “sounded a fresh note, boldly, *not blatantly*” (701, emphasis added). Howells’s initial praise thus depended on Chesnutt’s artistic distance and ambiguity, which aligned with Howells’s definition of literary realism. In June 1900, the *New York Times Review of Books* echoed this assessment, including *The Wife of His Youth* on a list of “A Year’s Best Books” and describing it as “Nine stories, all touching the color line. Situations forcefully put, without attempts at solution” (442). The ambiguity of the stories—“touching the color line” without attempting any solution—once again confirms their right to be placed among the “year’s best books.”

Howells’s May 1900 review in the *Atlantic* is also notable because it announced Chesnutt’s mixed-race background for an even greater general audience. In doing so, Howells grapples with the proper language to describe Chesnutt, calling him a writer “of negro blood—diluted, indeed, in such measure that if he did not admit this descent few would imagine it, but still quite of that middle world which lies next, though wholly outside, our own” (699-700). The review thus places Chesnutt in a liminal position between pure African American blood and the white reader. Throughout the review, Howells also considers how Chesnutt’s mixed-race background affects the writing itself, describing Chesnutt’s “unerring knowledge” of the story’s “peculiar racial characteristics” (699). Howells’s review thus bolsters Chesnutt’s literary reputation while simultaneously revealing his racial background to a widespread audience. It praises Chesnutt for his ability to dwell in a “middle world” of literary and racial ambiguity.

Houghton Mifflin’s promotional fliers for *The Wife of His Youth* would function similarly, recognizing Chesnutt as a person of color without foreclosing possibilities of interpretation. In this way, readers could view Chesnutt’s mixed-race background according to their own politics and preconceptions. For example, the leaflet advertising *The Wife of His Youth* was structured much like that for *The Conjure Woman* (see fig. 2); it included the same image of Chesnutt on the front and incorporated quotations from popular reviews inside (Houghton Mifflin, *Wife*). In a crucial shift, however, the quoted reviews for *The Wife of His Youth* made frequent mention of Chesnutt’s mixed-race background. One review quoted from New York’s *The Mail and Express* calls Chesnutt “the Laureate of the Color Line.” Another review drawn from *The Watchman* notes that “The stories all have the trace and pathos of the ‘color line,’ and give one an insight into experiences

through some of which doubtless the author has passed.” Here, the advertisement complements the central theme of the book collection with a description of Chesnutt himself as having “passed” through different racial experiences, offering his readers a vicarious description of the complexities of the color line.¹³ Chesnutt is no longer passing in the style of Joel Chandler Harris but is instead a unique voice, “the Laureate of the Color Line.”

The extent to which Houghton Mifflin supported Chesnutt in this campaign is remarkable. As Chesnutt adapted his writing style, from white-authored plantation fiction to realist short stories, Houghton Mifflin likewise adjusted their advertising. This contrasts somewhat with the norms for marketing African American literature that would emerge in the early twentieth century. As John K. Young describes, the predominantly white US publishing industry would typically represent Blackness as “a one-dimensional cultural experience,” grafting “a mythologized version of the ‘black experience’ onto all works marked by race” (4). In Chesnutt’s case, however, Houghton Mifflin was surprisingly flexible in adapting its marketing from one title to the next, working collaboratively with Chesnutt to manipulate and respond to the color line. As the first work of African American literature published by the company, Chesnutt’s writing allowed Houghton Mifflin to experiment and test the marketability of various dimensions of the African American experience.

Revealing Chesnutt’s mixed-race identity also lent authenticity to Mr. Ryder’s dilemma. Representative of the problem of the color line, Chesnutt’s portrait served to make the writing itself more vivid and real. Augusta Rohrbach describes a similar dynamic regarding author portraiture in mid-nineteenth-century slave narratives. As Rohrbach points out, “Locating the author as a physical body helps foster the reader’s empathy. . . . In order to be successful, these texts must identify the author as a subject whose suffering is not just plausible (as in the fictional setting) but *real*” (31). The marketing leaflet for *The Wife of His Youth* functions along these lines, except with reference to the tragic mulatto figure. The flier establishes the realism of the text with reference to Chesnutt’s biographical experience. It appeals to the reader’s sympathies by describing Chesnutt as a mixed-race author who has endured the “trace and pathos” of the color line (Houghton Mifflin, *Wife*).

Critics reviewing “The Wife of His Youth” often expressed such feelings of empathy for the suffering of the story’s mixed-race protagonist. Indeed, Chesnutt points to an interpretation from Richard Watson Gilder, editor of the *Century*. In a letter to Walter Hines Page written on 27 September 1898, Chesnutt quotes Gilder as saying, “It seems as though that poor fellow [Mr. Ryder] was entitled to a compromise of some sort. I don’t know just what it would be, but the precise outcome hardly seems humanly right” (“*To*” 115). Here, Gilder resists the outcome of the story in which Mr. Ryder acknowledges the wife of his youth. In a way, Gilder recognizes the unjust force of race that pressures Mr.

Ryder to choose between social justice and economic opportunity. He reads with a sense of dismay for “that poor fellow” caught on the boundary of the color line with no recourse for compromise. Yet Gilder is not able to resolve the dilemma posed by the story; he neither condones Mr. Ryder’s acknowledgment of ’Liza Jane nor criticizes a system that values whiteness. Lamenting Mr. Ryder’s decision thus allows Gilder to express an emotional attachment to the mixed-race protagonist without responding to the force of white supremacy underlying the entire story.

Chesnutt’s letter immediately responds to Gilder’s interpretation by defending the rights of ’Liza Jane. As Chesnutt says, “It is surprising what a number of people . . . do not seem to imagine that the old woman was entitled to any consideration whatever, and yet I don’t know that it is so astonishing either, in the light of history” (“*To*” 115). In other words, Chesnutt views Gilder’s interpretation as part of a trend in the story’s popular reception whereby readers felt sympathetic toward Mr. Ryder while ignoring the figure of ’Liza Jane. Moreover, Chesnutt’s response ties this interpretation to a long-standing “history” of white supremacist attitudes. Chesnutt’s letter thus demonstrates that he intended his readers to give their “consideration” and sympathies to the story’s title character as much as its mixed-race protagonist. Gilder’s reading, on the contrary, focuses almost exclusively on Mr. Ryder. He is drawn to sympathize with the difficult situation of the light-skinned protagonist, who stands in for the author.

Among other critics, the story’s ambiguous ending was also open to the interpretation Fleischmann describes, in which Mr. Ryder does not make a difficult ethical decision to acknowledge ’Liza Jane but merely accepts second-class citizenship according to the one-drop rule. Indeed, a review written by Hamilton Wright Mabie for the *Outlook* offers precisely this interpretation, describing Mr. Ryder’s decision in terms of scientific racism. In the review, Mabie admires Chesnutt’s writing according to dominant patterns of reception: it offers a window into the tragic circumstances of the light-skinned mulatto author, without dictating how this situation should be interpreted. Mabie introduces the writing biographically, admiring Chesnutt’s “restraint and balance,” much in the same way as Howells. Mabie even describes “*The Wife of His Youth*” as one of the best short stories in American literature. However, the review offers Mabie’s interpretation of these ambiguous stories in terms of scientific racism. It argues that the tragedy of “*The Wife of His Youth*” is driven by a situation in which the African American must reach “a higher stage of evolution” and work on “his journey toward a higher self-development” (“*Two*” 441). Mabie thus reads Mr. Ryder’s acknowledgment of ’Liza Jane not as resistance to white supremacist norms but as a necessary step backward to advance the black race. His interpretation places the burden of social justice on African American “evolution” and “self-development.” Perhaps most importantly, Mabie’s interpretation shows how an aesthetic of literary realism could dovetail with explicitly white supremacist

attitudes. Mable reads the story as both a great work of American literature and a justification for the one-drop rule of racial segregation.

Overall, then, during this middle stage of his career with Houghton Mifflin, Chesnutt continued to manipulate his authorial identity to align with his literary strategies and style. He collaborated with his publishers to announce his mixed-race identity without proclaiming full identification as a black author. Much in the same way, *The Wife of His Youth* also straddled the boundary of the color line. For Howells and many other critics, this approach met the qualifications of realist fiction in the style of Guy de Maupassant, Henry James, and Sarah Orne Jewett. It was balanced and restrained and left the onus of interpretation on the reader. Yet even within the relatively sophisticated audience represented by the *Atlantic*, *Century*, and *Outlook*, few readers interpreted “The Wife of His Youth” as resistant to the forces of white supremacy. For a critic such as Gilder, the story represented the dilemma of the color line, a seemingly irresolvable conflict. Howells had expressed a similar view, saying that Chesnutt had acquainted his reader with “those regions where the paler shades dwell as hopelessly, with relation to ourselves, as the blackest negro” (400). Yet as Chesnutt’s response to Gilder demonstrates, the author did not view African Americans’ situation as irresolvable or hopeless but as a product of the history of white supremacy. As Chesnutt’s career continued, he would push beyond the elegant ambiguities and open-ended conclusions of literary realism. Openly invoking his identification as African American, he would offer an explicit critique of racial prejudice and a direct response to the supposedly hopeless tragedy of the color line.

Selling *The Marrow of Tradition*

By the time Chesnutt began outlining *The Marrow of Tradition*, his work was being actively solicited by competing publishers. Chesnutt had established himself as a leading author of literary fiction, prepared to write “a race problem novel of the present day” (“To” 152). Chesnutt anticipated *The Marrow of Tradition* as a novel that could propel him to wealth and renown. On 26 October 1901, he told Houghton Mifflin: “If *The Marrow of Tradition* can become lodged in the popular mind as the legitimate successor of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *A Fool’s Errand* as depicting an epoch in our national history, it will make the fortune of the book and incidentally of the author” (162). Here, Chesnutt envisions *The Marrow of Tradition* in the lineage of major nineteenth-century political fictions, as a novel that would confront racial prejudice directly to achieve mass popularity and sales. Whereas Stowe and Tourgée had depicted the “national history” of the antebellum and Reconstruction eras, *The Marrow of Tradition* would be the definitive representation of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* “epoch.” In fact, Chesnutt mentions *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in response to Houghton Mifflin’s marketing campaign, which

would not only advertise *The Marrow of Tradition* in newspapers but would also promote the book alongside theatrical adaptations of Stowe's novel.

It was within this lineage of best-selling political novels that Houghton Mifflin sought to market *The Marrow of Tradition*, ranking the book highly among their own catalog of fiction and expending significant effort to promote it. While critics have frequently commented on the commercial failure of the novel—which marked a turning point in Chesnutt's literary career—the failed campaign is especially significant as it gauges Houghton Mifflin's willingness to experiment with a more radical critique of race. Although the company predicted a large audience for this political fiction, investing substantial funding in the book, the campaign proved a commercial failure. With underperforming sales and harshly critical reviews, the company chose to de-emphasize the novel's anti-racist message and distance themselves from its author.

The Marrow of Tradition offers a fictionalized retelling of the Wilmington Insurrection of 1898, in which a group of Democratic white supremacists overthrew the legitimately elected, biracial government of Wilmington, North Carolina. White insurrectionists killed dozens of African Americans and destroyed black-owned neighborhoods and property, including the city's African American newspaper, the *Daily Record*. In the wake of the riots, thousands of African Americans fled Wilmington, turning it from a black-majority to a white-majority city. White supremacists thus succeeded in overthrowing the elected government, ushering in a violent era of segregationist politics. Chesnutt's fictionalized account of the insurrection, set in the town of "Wellington," interweaves several plot structures. As many critics have described it, the plot turns on issues of racial masquerade, property theft, and mob violence.¹⁴ Yet *The Marrow of Tradition* also centers on issues of family and domesticity, which Chesnutt would emphasize in his own 1901 description, saying the book considers "the fate of the child of a proud old family [Dodie] related by an unacknowledged tie to the family of a colored doctor [Dr. Miller]. The father of the child leads a reactionary political movement against the Negro, while the doctor is at the head of an enterprise for the education and uplifting of his people" ("Charles" 169). The story thus begins and ends by considering the fate of the child, Dodie, positioned between white supremacist parents and unacknowledged familial ties to the black doctor. It concludes with a scene of potential reconciliation, when Dr. Miller and his wife decide they will attempt to save the life of Dodie, despite the death of their own son during the insurrection. In this way, Chesnutt took a sentimental approach to the politics of racial injustice.

Chesnutt's correspondence with Houghton Mifflin indicates that he was satisfied with their efforts to sell the book and that he worked collaboratively with them to promote it. In the same 26 October 1901 letter discussing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Chesnutt tells Houghton Mifflin he is "very much pleased with the interest that has so far been manifested by the house and the enterprise displayed in the

preliminary advertising” (“*To*” 162). In a letter from 4 November 1901, he similarly points out: “I notice the book advertised much more extensively so far as I can see, than any of my former books” (165). Houghton Mifflin’s records confirm Chesnutt’s observation, showing that the company made significant investment to advertise the novel. Whereas they had spent \$386.50 advertising *The Wife of His Youth* (Houghton Mifflin, “Book” 162) and \$831.01 on *The House Behind the Cedars* (92)—Chesnutt’s 1900 novel dealing with “the tragedy of the color line” in a restrained style comparable to *The Wife of His Youth*—they spent \$1,466.13 advertising *The Marrow of Tradition* (68).

Initially, this campaign materialized in advertisements that emphasized the book as a forceful narrative comparable to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The promotional flier that Houghton Mifflin produced for *The Marrow of Tradition*, for instance, differs significantly from advertisements for Chesnutt’s previous work. Whereas previous advertisements were printed as folded leaflets with quotes from popular reviews inside, the flier for *The Marrow of Tradition* is not folded, devoting its entire recto to the new novel, with brief descriptions of previous books on the reverse (see fig. 3). This advertisement offers a synopsis of the novel, describing it as a story of “contemporary Southern life” and a “strong, virile, and exciting novel.” The flier openly describes the novel’s white supremacist characters as “a reactionary political movement” (the same language Chesnutt would use in his own summary of the novel) and claims that the primary facts of the story’s climactic riot are “true to recent history.” The flier closes by noting, “At many points the story will recall ‘*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,’ so great is its dramatic intensity and so strong its appeal to popular sympathies.” The advertisement, in other words, presents *The Marrow of Tradition* as a strong political novel based on the facts of the Wilmington insurrection. More than ever before, Houghton Mifflin lent its imprimatur to the more radical potential of the text. The flier itself is printed in green ink and framed with a border of leaves, creating a sort of laurel wreath that marks *The Marrow of Tradition* as both a classic and triumphant work of literature.

Advertisements in other venues also highlighted the comparison to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The December 1901 *Atlantic Monthly Advertiser*, a supplement to the magazine, contains two large advertisements for *The Marrow of Tradition*.¹⁵ The first of these advertises Chesnutt’s novel with Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Tory Lover* and Ellen Olney Kirk’s *Our Lady Vanity*, establishing a sentimental connection between the three novels (*Marrow* 56). The ad lists all books for sale at \$1.50. *The Marrow of Tradition* is given top billing, however, occupying the full upper half of the page while the other two books share the lower half. As with advertisements for *The Conjure Woman*, this announcement quotes from a number of popular reviews. The *N.Y. Commercial Advertiser* claims: “No novel since the days of ‘*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’ is more visibly the outburst of long pent-up feeling.” The *Chicago Record-Herald* praises *The Marrow of*

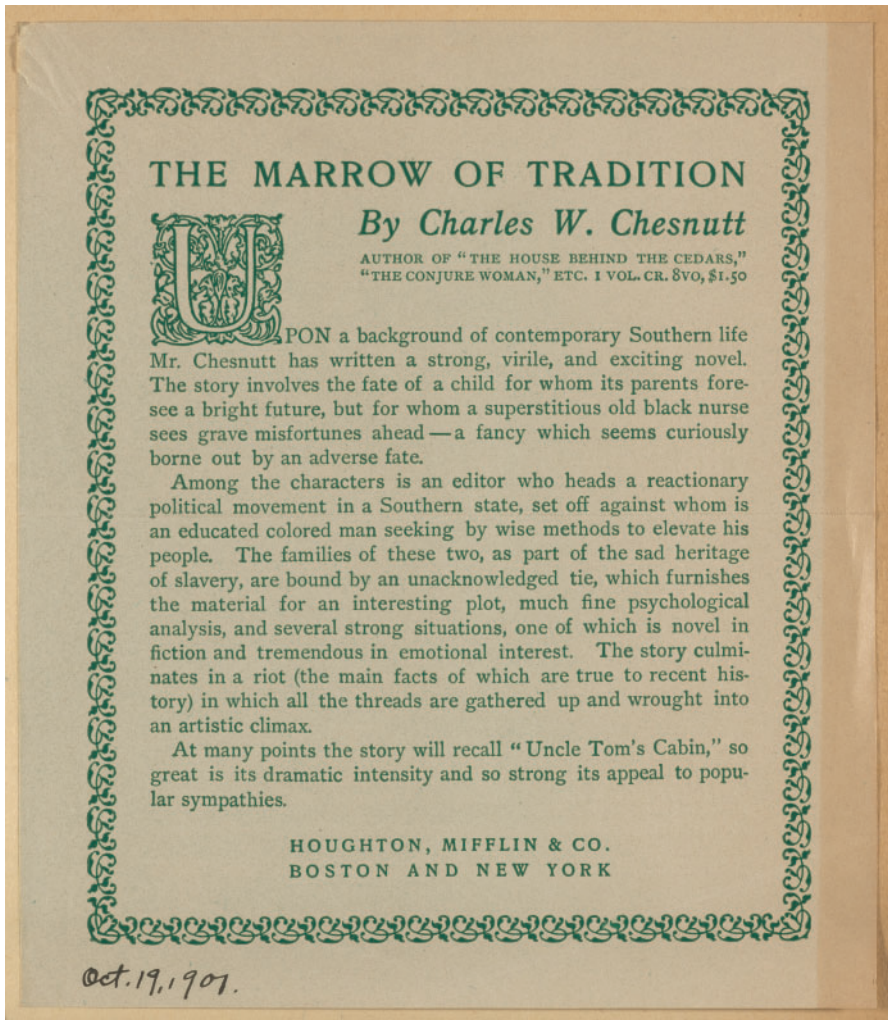


Figure 3. Houghton Mifflin Company. *The Marrow of Tradition*. Promotional Flier. MS Am 2030: (245). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Tradition as "ably told, without exaggeration, it is a strong, convincing, and convicting picture of negro wrongs." The *Boston Herald* claims: "The colored race is to be congratulated on having found so able a champion as Mr. Chesnutt." In these descriptions, Chesnutt is depicted neither as an unmarked white man nor as a mixed-race figure who can navigate both sides of the color line but as the champion of the black race. In other words, Houghton Mifflin more explicitly advertises *The Marrow of Tradition* as African American fiction, invoking the type of "black literature" that would, as George Hutchinson describes, become increasingly marketable throughout the course of the twentieth century (40).

Yet even while these December advertisements hailed Chesnutt as a “champion” of the black race, they also took steps away from the strong language of the October flier. The second announcement in this *Atlantic Monthly Advertiser*, for example, sets *The Marrow of Tradition* within a list of Houghton Mifflin’s holiday books and offers a paragraph-length summary of the novel. The advertisement draws on the language of the leaf-bordered flier and concludes with the same sentence, comparing *The Marrow of Tradition* to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in its “dramatic intensity” (*Marrow* 86). In comparison to the October flier, however, this later advertisement de-emphasizes the political nature of the book. It opens by saying explicitly: “This is a novel of character rather than of politics.” The synopsis then goes on to say that the novel is set “in a Southern City” during “the exciting movement for negro disfranchisement.” Here, Houghton Mifflin further distances the novel from its political critique of the white supremacist movement. Where the flier for the novel had described the insurrection as a “reactionary political movement,” the *Atlantic* advertisement denies the political nature of the book and refers ambiguously to the “exciting movement for negro disfranchisement” (*Marrow* 86). By December of 1901, then, Houghton Mifflin already sensed the potential controversy the book would cause among its white readership and hedged its marketing strategy accordingly. They sought to represent the book as *both* the successor to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and as moderately apolitical.

Not surprisingly, numerous critics reviewed the novel in terms of its white comparator text. *The Argonaut* describes the book quite favorably in terms of Stowe’s novel, claiming *The Marrow of Tradition* will be “a great revelation of conditions existing as was ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ at the time that was written” (“Marrow”). In *World’s Work*, the book is called “a contemporary ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin.’” The review criticizes the book, however, saying it is “palpably a tract” and that the book is not convincing because the African Americans are all “blameless” and the whites are “unrelievedly bad” (“Short” 1788). Mabie’s review in *The Outlook* counters this opinion, noting that “good and evil are recognized on both sides of the color line.” It then compares the novel to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, saying: “It is less exuberant, less overflowing with vitality, than the earlier novel; but it is more thoroughly balanced, more carefully constructed, more condensed and restrained” (“Books” 683). Chesnutt initially looked on these reviews favorably, considering a polarized reception of the book advantageous. In an earlier letter to Houghton Mifflin, from 10 December 1899, Chesnutt notes: “I anticipated such criticism and imagine it is a healthy sign. . . . It is quite likely that people will buy a book they disapprove of, if the disapproval is strong enough” (“*To*” 139).

In general, however, reviews of *The Marrow of Tradition* were less than favorable, impacting sales negatively. *The Independent*, a magazine which Chesnutt admired, reviewed the novel as “vindictive to a remarkable degree[,] . . .

indignant . . . and rash” (“Literature”). Of course, the most significant negative response came from William Dean Howells, who in the December 1901 *North American Review* reversed his previously favorable assessment of Chesnutt’s work. Howells opens this review claiming that Chesnutt is better than the average novelist but quickly goes on to criticize the novel, calling it “bitter, bitter” (“Psychological” 882).¹⁶ Chesnutt’s writing style had moved beyond the “self-restraint” that Howells had advised him to maintain in the earlier 1900 review in the *Atlantic* (“Mr.” 699). Rather than maintaining artistic distance and the ambiguous style of literary realism, Chesnutt had turned to more explicitly political fiction. Despite Chesnutt’s efforts to temper *The Marrow of Tradition* with sentimental reconciliation, offering a hopeful prospect for cross-racial recognition, Howells could only read the book as a doubly “bitter” response to the problem of the color line.

By December 1901, just two months after the book was published, Chesnutt began to recognize the relative failure and declining sales of *The Marrow of Tradition*. On 30 December, he wrote to Houghton Mifflin asking about his chances of producing a book on the subject of the color line, which might sell “20,000-30,000 copies.” Chesnutt goes on to lament: “I am beginning to suspect that the public as a rule does not care for books in which the principal characters are colored people, or with a striking sympathy with that race as contrasted with the white race” (“To” 171). While Chesnutt had been optimistic to produce a popularly successful novel, writing and promoting his work at a frenetic pace from 1899-1901, this letter marked a turning point, as his hopes for *The Marrow of Tradition* were not realized.

Houghton Mifflin’s records indicate that the company was also expecting stronger sales from *The Marrow of Tradition*. Their publishing costs show three initial printings in October 1901, for a total of 4,500 copies (Houghton Mifflin, “Book” 68). While this is not an extraordinary number of copies, it is two to three times the volume they had printed for any of Chesnutt’s previous books. Similarly, while the company had given out 256 editorial copies of *The Conjure Woman* (214) and 299 copies of *The House Behind the Cedars* (92), they distributed 421 editorial copies of *The Marrow of Tradition* (68). These levels of production and distribution indicate that Houghton Mifflin imagined the book as the culmination and high point of Chesnutt’s career. They hoped the novel might build from the moderate success of the earlier books and propel *The Marrow of Tradition* toward higher sales and status.

On the contrary, Houghton’s records of book sales detail the novel’s poor performance, which follows a sharply downward trajectory. While the book sold 3,276 copies in November and December of 1901, it sold only 111 copies in all of the following year (Houghton Mifflin, “Record”). This sudden drop in sales aligns with patterns in the book’s reception: *The Marrow of Tradition* was marketed as a major novel from a “champion” of the black race but was widely

reviewed as a vilification of white America. By the new year, such an interpretation became dominant, and sales of the book ceased abruptly. In fact, in January of 1902, 173 copies of the book were returned to Houghton Mifflin by booksellers. While the company had initially paid Chesnutt for the sale of 3,335 copies of the book, they charged back his royalties for these copies (Houghton Mifflin, "Book" 68). In the next three years, the novel actually sold no copies until Houghton Mifflin put the book on clearance in 1906, so the company had difficulty selling even the initial print run. Comparatively, *The House Behind the Cedars* was a much more consistent title. After selling 2,994 copies in its first two years, the book sold 140 copies in 1902 and continued to sell between forty and seventy copies annually through 1907 (Houghton Mifflin, "Record").¹⁷ In other words, as Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein argue, "Economic circulation . . . is an aspect of social circulation in print culture, rather than the other way around" (14). The social circulation of *The Marrow of Tradition* had foreclosed its economic viability.

These marketing and sales figures can be compared to texts outside Chesnutt's oeuvre. For example, in 1898 Houghton Mifflin published *Caleb West: Master Diver*, a romance novel by Francis Hopkinson Smith centered on the construction of a New England lighthouse. While the company spent only \$1,188.91 advertising the book (Houghton Mifflin, "Book" 75)—nearly \$300 less than they had spent promoting *The Marrow of Tradition*—Smith's novel sold 23,632 copies in its first year and 5,324 copies in its second. *Caleb West* thus falls into the range of sales that Chesnutt had described as a popular success. Yet even this volume of sale is not extraordinary. In 1900, Houghton Mifflin produced the best-selling book of the year with Mary Johnston's *To Have and To Hold*, a romance novel that sold 258,684 copies (Houghton Mifflin, "Record"). To give another sense of the popular market, the first novel in Thomas Dixon's Ku Klux Klan trilogy, *The Leopard's Spots*, sold over 100,000 copies in 1902 and was succeeded by his even more popular *The Clansman* in 1905 (Gunning 30). Meanwhile, as Claire Parfait observes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was printed by numerous publishers with introductions that generally recontextualized the novel, "without paying particular attention to the present conditions of African Americans" (158).

In light of these examples, what Rayford Whittingham Logan refers to as the "nadir" of US race relations becomes strikingly apparent. For while Tourgée had nearly replicated Stowe's success during Reconstruction, there simply was not a popular market for such writing at the turn of the century. As the tide of popular reception turned against Chesnutt and *The Marrow of Tradition*, sales of the book came to an abrupt halt. Responsive to this market, Houghton Mifflin adjusted their campaign to advertise *The Marrow of Tradition* as a "novel of character rather than politics" and to emphasize the book's portrayal of the "exciting movement for negro disfranchisement" (*Marrow* 86). With the failure of *The Marrow of Tradition*, Houghton Mifflin came to recognize that their investment in Chesnutt

offered modest returns and may actually become a liability for their reputation among white readers. Chesnutt's next novel manuscript, *Evelyn's Husband*, was rejected by the company in October of 1903 and would not be published in his lifetime. Another novel manuscript, *The Colonel's Dream*, would eventually be published by Doubleday, Page & Co. but only after it was rejected by Houghton Mifflin.

The Racial Paratext and the Literary Marketplace

Looking at Houghton Mifflin's catalogs, advertisements, cost books, and sales figures, it becomes clear that the company invested substantial time and resources to support Chesnutt's literary career. The company developed a surprisingly creative marketing campaign that was sensitive to Chesnutt's writing strategies: *The Conjure Woman* passed as plantation fiction; *The Wife of His Youth* depicted the problem of the color line ambiguously; and *The Marrow of Tradition* aimed to build on the success of explicitly political novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These rapid adjustments, made from 1899 to 1901, indicate the experimental nature of the collaboration between Chesnutt and Houghton Mifflin as they sought to produce a literature that was both genteel and critical of US racial injustice. Indeed, Houghton Mifflin's substantial investment in *The Marrow of Tradition* demonstrates the company's belief that African American literature might find a wide audience. Perhaps, as Mr. Ryder had won over the Blue Vein Society, Chesnutt could convince his white readers to acknowledge the rights of their black counterparts. On the contrary, however, the vast majority of these readers were not persuaded but incensed by Chesnutt's critique of white supremacy, in *The Marrow of Tradition*. As this critique became more explicit, both in Chesnutt's fiction and in the marketing of the author himself, the dominant reaction was to denounce Chesnutt's work as bitter and vindictive. Ultimately, Houghton Mifflin bowed to this audience's judgment. True to their motto, "Tout bien ou rien," the company had marketed Chesnutt to the best of its ability, then ceased publication of his work entirely.

Notes

I would like to thank Sarah Way Sherman, Christopher P. Wilson, and the anonymous readers at MELUS for their thoughtful comments as I wrote and revised this article. I am also grateful for fellowship support from the University of New Hampshire Graduate School.

1. For discussion of author portraiture and the slave narrative, see Lynn A. Casmier-Paz and Augusta Rohrbach (29-50).
2. In contrast to the example of the slave narrative, Gérard Genette writes: "I know of only one case . . . in which the author feels the need to assert in a preface that

- he is the author of the text, but this case is obviously playful. It is the preface to *Jean Sbogar* by Nodier” (184).
3. For recent scholarship on ethnic print cultures, see Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, Raúl Coronado, Cécile Cottonet, Johanna Drucker, Frances Smith Foster (“Narrative”), George Hutchinson and John K. Young, Elizabeth McHenry, Joycelyn Moody and Howard Rambsy II, and Philip Round.
 4. In addition to the critics mentioned in this paragraph, see Helen M. Chesnutt, Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. (“Collaborative”), Kenneth M. Price, and Elizabeth Hewitt.
 5. Gregg Hecimovich has recently identified Hannah Crafts as a pseudonym for the escaped slave Hannah Bond, arguing that the 1850s manuscript of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is autobiographical fiction (Bosman). Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* was printed by Rand, Avery and Company in 1859; however, it seems the book was never publicized but was given to Wilson for self-promotion (Gardner 230-34). William Wells Brown’s *Clotel; or, the President’s Daughter* (1853) was the first African American novel to be both formally published and distributed. It was produced by a London Company in 1853 before being published three times in the United States. Christopher Mulvey’s recent digital edition allows users to navigate between all four iterations of the text. Frances Harper’s 1892 *Iola Leroy*, Paul Laurence Dunbar’s 1898 *The Uncalled*, Sutton E. Griggs’s 1899 *Imperium In Imperio*, and Pauline E. Hopkins’s 1900 *Contending Forces* constitute a wave of late nineteenth-century African American novels alongside Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). As Richard Yarborough notes in his introduction to *Contending Forces*, the book received “little fanfare and apparently no comment from the white mainstream literary community” (xliv). *Iola Leroy*, on the other hand, underwent five printings in its first year and was quite popular (Foster xxvii). Nevertheless, none of these publications rises in literary prestige to the level of Chesnutt’s publication with Houghton Mifflin.
 6. Here, I am drawing on Kenneth W. Warren’s claims regarding the periodization of African American literature (1-6) and Cohen and Stein’s introduction to *Early African American Print Culture* (2012) (4-6).
 7. Indeed, Chesnutt insisted that he was compelled to write in opposition to the plantation tradition of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page (“To” 167-68). Likewise, in his essay “Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem” (1931), Chesnutt says: “The name of the storyteller, ‘Uncle’ Julius, and the locale of the stories and the cover design were suggestive of Mr. Harris’s Uncle Remus, but the tales were entirely different” (544).
 8. Paul Petrie argues that the conjure tales use John and Annie to convey different modes of reading, with Annie offering a more sympathetic interpretation of the stories (190-93).

9. For additional interpretations of Chesnutt and the plantation tradition, see Tynes Cowan and Robert C. Nowatzki.
10. *Uncle Remus* sold between 1246 and 2050 copies per year from 1898 to 1907 (Houghton Mifflin, "Record").
11. For more on the "body-as-book trope," see Leon Jackson (265).
12. The *Charles Chesnutt Digital Archive*, maintained and developed by Stephanie P. Browner at Berea College, has an excellent collection of reviews of Chesnutt's work. For portions of this essay focused on reception, I have used the digital collection as a reference. Whenever possible, I have verified the primary source and cited it directly. Reviews accessed only through the *Digital Archive* are cited as such.
13. As Jean Lee Cole points out, the cover design for *The Wife Of His Youth* featured an abstract interwoven line, reiterating the book's "color line" theme (484-85).
14. On racial masquerade, see Eric Sundquist. On racial violence, see Andrew Hebard and Bryan Wagner. On the novel's discourse of whiteness, see Stephen P. Knadler.
15. As Ellen Gruber Garvey points out, "Until the 1900s and later, class and ten-cent magazines [such as the *Atlantic*] genteelly segregated ads from what was known as reading matter, placing the ads in separate sections in the front and back of the magazines, thus making it easy to remove them." (85). Due in part to this separation, advertisements from turn-of-the-century magazines are often missing from library collections. The *Atlantic Monthly Advertiser* discussed here is the copy scanned to HathiTrust from the University of Michigan.
16. A promotional leaflet for *The House Behind the Cedars* had hedged against such an interpretation, describing the novel as having "no touch of bitterness" (Houghton Mifflin, *House*).
17. Indeed, throughout his later life, Chesnutt would describe *The House Behind the Cedars* as his most popular work. As William L. Andrews notes, Oscar Micheaux bought the rights to produce a movie version of the story in 1921, and the novel was republished serially by the *Chicago Defender* in 1922 (Foreword xx-xxi).

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