

CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

and the “province of literature”

BY PAUL BAGGETT

“If in an audience of a thousand people there is one person who is not in sympathy with my views . . . I can pick him out. . . . I find that the most effective medicine for such individuals is administered at first in the form of a story.”

—Booker T. Washington,
Up From Slavery (160–61)



A few months before the 1901 release of *The Marrow of Tradition*, a cautiously optimistic Charles W. Chesnutt sent Booker T. Washington an advance copy with the following description:

It is by far the best thing I have done, and is a comprehensive study of racial conditions in the South, in the shape of what is said to be a very dramatic novel, which my publishers boldly compare with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for its “great dramatic intensity and its powerful appeal to popular sympathies.” It discusses, incidentally, miscegenation, lynching, disfranchisement, separate cars, and the struggle for professional and social progress in an unfriendly environment – and all this without at all interfering with the progress of an interesting plot with which they are all bound up. It is, in a word, our side of the Negro question, in popular form, as you have presented it in the more dignified garb of essay and biography.¹

One wonders what Chesnutt's publishers meant when complimenting *The Marrow of Tradition* for “its powerful appeal to popular sympathies.” One can safely assume that a novel sharply condemning the political and economic disparities between the races in the post-Reconstruction South – and more specifically, criticizing the institutional framework responsible for these disparities – could hardly do well in the segregated communities of the Southern states. And even in the North, Chesnutt's novel would have a difficult time capturing an audience as large as Harriet Beecher Stowe's. Published when blackface minstrelsy was the urban North's most popular source of entertainment, and just before Thomas Dixon Jr.'s racist Reconstruction trilogy – *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), *The Clansman* (1905), and *The Traitor* (1907) – made Dixon the nation's best-selling author, *The Marrow of Tradition* is more of a stringent attack upon “popular sympathies” than an appeal to them.²

One also has to question Chesnutt's thinking when he aligns himself with Washington on the same “side of the Negro question.” Washington's own *Up From Slavery* had been published earlier that same year, and while Washington's autobiography is also concerned

¹ Charles Chesnutt, “To Be an Author”: *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889–1905*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath and Robert C. Leitz, III (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997) 159–60; subsequently cited parenthetically.

² Chesnutt's novel failed to live up to both the publishers' and author's expectations: a meager 3,279 copies sold in its first year, paling beside the tens of thousands of copies of Washington's *Up From Slavery* sold the same year, and the 105,000 copies of Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* the following year (Chesnutt, “To Be an Author” 172).