

Rapid #: -18558130

CROSS REF ID: **6054157**

LENDER: **HUL :: HD**

BORROWER: **HUL :: Widener Library**

TYPE: Book Chapter

BOOK TITLE: Charles W. Chesnutt : essays and speeches /

USER BOOK TITLE: Charles W. Chesnutt : essays and speeches /

CHAPTER TITLE: "The Negro in Present Day Fiction"

BOOK AUTHOR: Chesnutt, Charles W. 1858-1932. (Charles Waddell),

EDITION:

VOLUME:

PUBLISHER: Stanford University Press,

YEAR: 1999

PAGES: ??

ISBN: 9780804735490

LCCN:

OCLC #:

PATRON NOTES: Table of Contents EndNotes Accompanying Images/Plates Title/Verso Page(s)

Processed by RapidX: 1/28/2022 3:22:29 PM

This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

23 Odyssey
Rapid #: -18558130 odyssey.rapid.exlibrisgroup.com/ILL



Status	Rapid Code	Branch Name	Start Date
New	HUL	Widener Library	01/26/2022 05:18 PM
Local Holding In	HUL	Widener Library	01/26/2022 05:18 PM
Pending	HUL	HD	01/26/2022 05:18 PM
Batch Not Printed	HUL	HD	01/27/2022 08:48 AM

CALL #: E185.61 .C548 1999
LOCATION: HUL :: HD :: 32044053377479



REQUEST TYPE: Book Chapter
USER BOOK TITLE: Charles W. Chesnutt : essays and speeches /
HUL CATALOG TITLE: Charles W. Chesnutt
CHAPTER TITLE: "The Negro in Present Day Fiction"
BOOK AUTHOR: Chesnutt, Charles W. 1858-1932. (Charles Waddell),
EDITION:
VOLUME:
PUBLISHER: Stanford University Press,
YEAR: 1999
PAGES: ??
ISBN: 9780804735490
LCCN:
OCLC #: HUL OCLC #: 39655123
CROSS REFERENCE ID: [TN:6054157][ODYSSEY:206.107.43.109/HUL]
VERIFIED:

BORROWER: HUL :: Widener Library

PATRON NOTES: Table of Contents EndNotes Accompanying Images/Plates Title/Verso Page(s)

ExLibris
RapidILL

This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)
1/27/2022 8:48:33 AM



HARVARD
LIBRARY

Scan&Deliver

hl_access_services@harvard.edu



☒ Best copy available

☐ Item has tight binding

☐ Bibliography exceeds page
scan limit

☐ No Table of Contents
available



☒ No accompanying notes
available



☒ No accompanying
images/plates

☐ Other:

Copyright statement: Consistent with copyright law, the purpose of the Scan & Deliver service is to provide a patron a copy of the requested material for ***private study, scholarship, or research.***

In providing the Scan & Deliver service, the Harvard Library responsibly administers Section 107 and Section 108 of Title 17, United States Code, and related subsections, including Sections 108(a), 108(d), and 108 (g).

The service applies only to the isolated and unrelated reproduction of a single copy of the same material on separate occasions. It does not apply to the related or concerted reproduction of multiple copies of the same material (whether made at one time or over a period of time, and whether for use by one person or multiple people). Nor does it apply to the systematic reproduction of single or multiple copies

It is the patron's obligation to determine if any further reproduction, distribution, or other use of this scan in excess of the copyright exceptions, including fair use, might require the copyright owner's permission.

Scanned by:

Date:

Chesnutt, Charles W. 1999

Charles W. Chesnutt

ESSAYS AND SPEECHES

Edited by

Joseph R. McElrath, Jr.

Robert C. Leitz, III

Jesse S. Crisler

1999
1999
1999
1999

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

1999

Stanford University Press

Stanford, California

© 1999 by the Board of Trustees of the

Leland Stanford Junior University

Printed in the United States of America

CIP data appear at the end of the book

Frontispiece: Charles W. Chesnutt in 1928,
photograph courtesy of the Western Reserve
Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Editorial Note</i>	xvii
<i>Introduction</i>	xxiii ✓

ESSAYS AND SPEECHES

Etiquette (1881)	i
The Advantages of a Well-Conducted Literary Society (1881)	13
The Future of the Negro (1882)	24 ✓
Self-Made Men (1882)	33
Methods of Teaching (1882)	40
Things To Be Thankful For (1886)	54
Advice to Young Men (1886)	55
An Inside View of the Negro Question (1889)	57 ✓
What Is a White Man? (1889)	68 ✓
Some Uses and Abuses of Shorthand (1889)	74
A Multitude of Counselors (1891)	78
Some Requisites of a Law Reporter (1891)	84
Resolutions Concerning Recent Southern Outrages (1892)	88
Competition (1892)	90
Why I Am a Republican (1892)	95
Liberty and the Franchise (1899)	101
Literature in Its Relation to Life (1899)	109 ✓
On the Future of His People (1900)	116
A Plea for the American Negro (1900)	118 ✓
The Future American: What the Race Is Likely to Become in the Process of Time (1900)	121 ✓
The Future American: A Stream of Dark Blood in the Veins of the Southern Whites (1900)	126 ✓

The Future American: A Complete Race-Amalgamation Likely to Occur (1900)	131 ✓
Introduction to Temple Course Reading (1900)	136
The White and the Black (1901)	139 ✓
A Visit to Tuskegee (1901)	145
A Defamer of His Race (1901)	152 ✓
Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South (1901)	155
The Negro's Franchise (1901)	161
Charles W. Chesnutt's Own View of His New Story, <i>The Marrow of Tradition</i> (1901)	169 ✓
Obliterating the Color Line (1901)	170 ✓
<i>Pussy Meow: The Autobiography of a Cat</i> , by S. L. Patteson (1901)	172
The Free Colored People of North Carolina (1902)	173
The Disfranchisement of the Negro (1903)	179 ✓
The Race Problem (1904)	196 ✓
Peonage, or the New Slavery (1904)	205 ✓
For Roosevelt (1904)	209
The Literary Outlook (1905)	211
Race Prejudice: Its Causes and Its Cures (1905)	214 ✓
Age of Problems (1906)	238
Rights and Duties (1908)	252 ✓
The Courts and the Negro (1908)	262
Lincoln's Courtships (1909)	271 ✓
The Right to Jury Service (1910)	274
Who and Why Was Samuel Johnson? (1911)	281 ✓
Abraham Lincoln (1912)	299 ✓
The Status of the Negro in the United States (1912)	302 ✓
Address to the Medina Coterie (1913)	308
Perry Centennial (1913)	322
Race Ideals and Examples (1913)	331
Abraham Lincoln: An Appreciation (1913)	349 ✓
Alexander Dumas (1914)	353
The Ideal Nurse (1914)	371
Women's Rights (1915)	383
A Solution for the Race Problem (1916)	384
George Meredith (1916)	402
Social Discrimination (1916)	423 ✓
The Negro in Books (1916)	426 ✓
Introduction to a Reading from an Unpublished Story (1916)	441
The Will of John Randolph (1917)	442
Address to Colored Soldiers at Grays Armory (1917)	449
Negro Authors (1918)	458 ✓
The Mission of the Drama (1920)	461

Resolutions Concerning the Recent Election (1920)	464	
The Autobiography of Edward, Baron Herbert of Cherbury (1921)	468	
Remarks of Charles W. Chesnutt Before Cleveland Chamber of Commerce Committee on Negro Migration and Its Effects (1926)	480	
The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed? (1926)	490	✓
Address Before Ohio State Night School (1928)	494	
Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass (1928)	503	✓
Remarks of Charles Waddell Chesnutt, of Cleveland, in Accepting the Spingarn Medal at Los Angeles (1928)	510	✓
The Negro in Present Day Fiction (1929)	516	✓
Advice for Businessmen (1930)	530	
The Negro in Cleveland (1930)	535	
Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem (1931)	543	
The Writing of a Novel (undated, after 1899)	549	
Why Do We Live? (undated)	553	
Joseph C. Price, Orator and Educator: An Appreciation (undated, after 2 August 1923)	554	
The Term Negro (undated, before 2 June 1928)	565	✓
<i>Index</i>	569	

The Negro in Present Day Fiction

Speech delivered in Oberlin, O., c. 1929

Mr. (Miss) Chairman and members of the Dunbar Forum, I regard it as a high privilege to appear before a group of students of literature in this old and historic institution of learning with its glorious tradition of human equality and equal opportunity for all.¹ I was an infant in this town when the classic antislavery incident, the rescue of "Jerry" an escaped slave took place at Wellington.² My father was among those arrested and indicted for violation of the fugitive slave law. That was one law of which the sacredness was not recognized by the descendants of the stern New Englanders who had settled the Western Reserve.³ Incidentally, the warrant against my father was nolle⁴ because one of the "t's" in his name was put in the middle instead of with the other at the end, thus constituting what the judge, who was unfriendly to the law, construed as a misnomer. I have been mildly amused during my life at the different spellings of my name, but this was one instance where it saved my male progenitor from a sojourn in jail.

When I began to write books about life along the color line and amongst the colored people, there were not a great many such books. Mrs. Stowe had written the epoch-making *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and her other books along the same line. Judge Albion W. Tourgée had written *The Fool's Errand*—probably the first of what we call nowadays "best sellers,"—*Bricks Without Straw*, and several other novels about the freed slaves, Reconstruction and the old Ku Klux Klan.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was looming above the horizon as a poet—I think his one or two novels were written after I began to write.⁵ The Rev. Thomas Dixon was spawning his libels on the Negro in the guise of fiction. But the modern novel, depicting the different types of colored people with their emotions, their aspirations, their love affairs, in fact, all the complications and involvements of modern life, was not in evidence, and for a very good reason—there were no modern Negroes. Most of them were absorbed in the struggle for bare existence, and the difficult effort to adjust themselves to new conditions.

The novel, even more than sculpture or painting, is the flower of culture. Poets are said to be born. The greatest of epic poets, Homer, was in a sense a primitive, at least he led the great procession of poets which has flowed down the stream of time. The *Iliad* was simple poetry. It was poetry of action. The poetic figures were not worked to death. Homer could turn a fine line without plagiarism. He did not have to scan a thesaurus or a library to ascertain whether or not some one else had used the same trope or simile in the same connection. Such a poet is born.

The sort of psychological poetry, which searches the heart for motives of action, Homer could not have written. His themes were simple, his motives direct. Love, with little sentiment, ambition, war, hate, revenge, avarice. Analytical poetry, like Browning's for instance, is, like fiction, the outgrowth of culture. So almost until our own day, there was very little worth-while literary output by American colored writers. In other countries several writers of color had distinguished themselves, but not as Negroes. The two Alexander Dumas were Frenchmen first, last and all the time, and only incidentally colored. The same was true of Alexander Pushkin, the Russian Shakespeare. In America there had been a few feeble sprouts of genuine poetry by colored writers, but the environment was not congenial, and they faded early. A few biographies, human documents, could be found on the bookshelves, but most of the Negro output was beneath criticism. The Negro stood mute, as the legal phrase goes, before the bar of literary judgment.

But in our own day—I may well say in *your* own day—mine is mostly behind me,—the Negro has become articulate, indeed, voluble, sometimes garrulous, and now and then even strident. The criticism so plaintively voiced almost yesterday by Dr. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, that colored writers could not find a hearing with publishers and editors, is no longer well founded.⁶ The subjects which only yesterday were tabooed in the discussion of race contacts and relationships are open to any writer. Publishers vie with one another for books by colored writers or about Negro life. The Negro is the literary fashion of the day, and the interest in him seems to be not merely a fad but a genuine sociological development, likely to grow rather than to die away.

Southern white writers were among the first to discover the value of Negro life as literary material. The South had exploited the Negro's labor by slavery and peonage; it had exploited the Negro's uncast vote by counting it for the white congressional representation, and now they began to exploit him in literature.

To their credit, be it said, the modern Southern white novelist has not set out on purpose, generally speaking, to degrade the Negro. Indeed the present day attitude—"pose" would be perhaps an unkind word—is that of liberality—the tempered liberality of the more enlightened South—not equality, God save the mark!—but a recognition of the common humanity of darker people, of their cultural advancement, of their aspirations—mostly pathetically hopeless from the Southern viewpoint. They note their social aspirations, their improvement in dress and manners, and find them more or less amusing. Some ascribe them less to increasing self-respect than to a simian imitation of white people.

I want to comment on these present-day Negro novels—by which I mean the novels about the Negro, whether written by white or colored authors. I set out some time ago to collect them all, but they came along so fast I soon found that my restricted means would render this burdensome, so I had to fall back more

or less on the public and lending libraries, and even then I have n't read them all. In fact, I got pretty well fed up on them, as the phrase goes, but I have read the outstanding ones, and enough of them to discuss them intelligently.

When Mr. Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*⁷ appeared I criticised it—the title was the most offensive feature—but in the book he spoke of me and my writings in so friendly and complimentary a fashion that my guns were spiked. It is difficult to call a writer a liar and a horse thief who declares that you are a great man and a wonderful writer. It was in a sense the pioneer of a flood of such books. Many of them are written with great literary skill. They deal with all phases of the Race Problem—amalgamation, both legal and illegal, “passing” for white; that perversion of the Mendelian theory, the mythical black baby that is born to a seemingly pure white mother or father; the struggle for equality and the heart-breaking incidents attending it. And on the still more tragic side, lynching, burning at the stake, disfranchisement and the whole list of wrongs and outrages, as lengthy as the catalogue of Homer's ships. Subjects which once were spoken of only in whispers are not only printed in capital letters, but exhibited upon the stage.

In fact, Negro books have multiplied with that mushroom fecundity which marks the growth of every new thing in this wonderful country, in this wonderful age—witness the radio, the airplane and the talking movie, to instance the three latest. And I regret to say, the moral equality of these books has not kept pace with their growth. In fact they seem to grow baser and baser. Compared with some of the more recent output, Mr. Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* is a Sunday School tract.

If the term “Negro Literature” is taken in the broad sense in which it is being used nowadays, as including books by colored writers and books about the Negro, and if by the word “literature” is meant merely books and other writings, there has been for a long time a very large body of Negro literature. Any comprehensive library has many examples. Before the Civil War, and even since, there were many books by Negrophobes maintaining the hopeless inferiority of the Negro, some of them even denying him a soul—which meant more than that it does in our own day, when some advanced thinkers and writers claim there is no such thing as an immortal soul. However, those old-time writers were quite sure that white people had souls. Of course the obvious and often the declared purpose of such a line of argument was to justify slavery. And, on the other hand books against slavery were very numerous.

Of course most of these books were written by white men. But there were occasional colored men and women who wrote. Phillis Wheatley was the first Negro poet in America. I saw a pageant the other day in which Phillis was represented by a very handsome light-colored girl, while in fact she was a pure-blood dark Negro, brought from Africa while a small child. Her mistress treated her as a human being, in fact more as companion than slave, and from instruction at her mistress's hands and by her own study and reading she acquired a fine command of culti-

vated English. Phillis's poetry was highly complimented by prominent people, though it is only just to say that others found no especial merit in it. However, it measures up fairly well with the average of the literary output of her day. She was a canny business woman as well as a popular poet, as evidenced by the fact that many of her poems are dedicated to the rich people of Boston who belonged to the social circle in which Mr. and Mrs. Wheatley moved. As Mr. Brawley puts it, she was the obituary poet of the Boston aristocracy.⁸

Then there were the various editions of Frederick Douglass's *Autobiography*, William Still's *The Underground Railroad*, J. Madison Bell's poems, George W. Williams's *History of the Negro as a Soldier*.⁹ Then the poems and novels of your patron saint, Paul Laurence Dunbar, a real poet and a good fellow.¹⁰ His fame rests principally upon his inimitable dialect pieces, but there is a chaste and dignified beauty in many of his poems in straight English. Also Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (a wonderful human document), a few collections of sermons, and numerous pamphlets and obscure books emanating from colored sources. A friend of mine, the late "Billy Bolivar" of Philadelphia, died leaving a library of two thousand such books.¹¹ Mr. Carter Woodson must have a great many, as also Mr. Schomburg of Brooklyn.¹² Mr. Arthur Spingarn of New York, staff attorney of the N.A.A.C.P., is an ardent collector of such books, and Dr. R. R. Moton's name is in the List of American Private Book Collectors as specializing in books about the Negro.¹³

All these books can be included in the broad meaning of the word "literature," but when we come to literature in the narrower sense, that is, to *belles lettres*, "beautiful writing," imaginative writing, such as poetry or fiction, essays like Hazlitt's or Macaulay's, solid though less brilliant works of history, like those of Lecky, Prescott and Motley,¹⁴ nothing of this sort worth while, by any high standard, had, up to our own day emanated from colored American writers, and for the best of reasons. Literature, like the fine arts and the best music, is, as I have said, the fruit of culture. "You cannot gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles."¹⁵ It is true that Aesop was a slave, and Horace the son of a freedman, but they were able and brilliant men, enslaved by conquest, but having a background of freedom and culture.¹⁶ The Negro in America had no such background. Some of our intellectuals are spending a lot of time trying to dig up a great and glorious past for the African Negro. They claim for him the greatness and power of the Pharaohs, and attribute to him the art and architecture of ancient Egypt.¹⁷ But I fear this is one of the things that people believe because they like to believe them. Quite probably the ancient Egyptians, like the modern white Brazilians and Cubans, and for that matter Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, and to a degree North Americans, had a Negroid strain. According to Dr. Boas there is no such thing as a pure race,¹⁸ but even the most liberal classification could hardly credit the Negro with Egyptian civilization.

The term "Negro Renaissance" is a more or less inaccurate expression. "Renaissance" or "renascence" means, literally, new birth. It is applied chiefly

to the revival of art and letters in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries, after the long night of the Dark Ages. But Southern Europe had possessed, before the Dark Ages, a literature and an art even superior to that of the Renaissance. The *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* are still the greatest of epics and the art of Phidias has never been excelled.¹⁹ I said once to Dr. Locke that I thought a better word to describe the modern American Negro would be the "New American."²⁰ In my opinion the American Negro, so called, or miscalled, is destined, if his ultimate absorption into the composite American race is long deferred, to develop a type which is very widely different from the West African type from which he has descended. There are, I will venture to say, very few Negroes whose American ancestry dates back even a hundred years, who have n't some white blood, and by the same token there are many white people who have some dark blood.

A corollary of this argument is, of course, that the very worthy achievements of the American Negro can by no means be attributed entirely to his dark blood. The white people rarely claim any credit for them, partly perhaps because to do so would be to acknowledge their blood relationship, which, though entirely obvious, they prefer to ignore, and partly because of the sense of fair play, sadly distorted at times it is true, after all a characteristic of the English people from whom the American Negro derives most of his white inheritance, which, perhaps unconsciously, inhibits the white man from claiming at one end what he disowns at the other. It is either that or a generosity we have never suspected which makes him concede to the Negro as Negro the very considerable contributions of people of mixed blood.

And now, having determined what we mean by Negro, and what we mean by literature, and put ourselves in a position to speak intelligently about Negro literature; having cleaned out the underbrush of the pre-Civil War period, and cut out the deadwood of the past generation, we can approach the very lively, the almost rank new growth of Negro books which has sprung up since the War-to-end war,²¹ which it has n't, and to make the world safe for democracy—which it equally has n't—and discuss the good and the bad in them.

In the first place they approach the Negro from a new viewpoint. The old Uncle Tom type seems to have disappeared entirely. He was a likable old fellow, almost too good to be true, but we cherish a pleasant memory of him, and always read with interest any item identifying the original Uncle Tom, of which there would seem to be almost as many as there are pieces of the true cross²² in Catholic countries. The story itself is immortal. Next to the Bible it has been the best seller in the history of book publishing. It has been translated into every tongue which has a written form and has been running on the stage steadily ever since it was dramatized. There is always a "Tom show" going somewhere, sometimes half a dozen at once, and now that the talking movie has arrived it has a new medium of expression.²³ It might pay the new school of Negro writers to analyze the reasons for its success. It grew out of a condition which, happily, no longer exists. A modern writer cannot repeat the incidents, unless he dates his story before the Civil

War. But *Uncle Tom's Cabin* registered because it dealt with deep-seated, fundamental realities, things which exist in all men, regardless of worldly station—the relations of husband and wife, parent and child, the right to the fruits of one's toil—the freedom of one's own person,—and indeed of one's own soul, for in spite of Uncle Tom's pronouncement it is exceedingly difficult for one to be the captain of his soul²⁴ and control his own spiritual development, when his body all his life is under the control of some one else.

The old "mammy" type is fading, although it still survives in the novels written by Southern white authors and is still going strong in "mammy songs" along with the "mother, home and heaven" doggerel which flourishes in vaudeville. One would gather from reading Southern stories and novels of the old school and from Southern oratory of the present day, that every white child born in the South had a colored "mammy," though statistics prove that not one white Southerner in ten was a slaveholder, and therefore there could n't have been mammies enough to go around. The Southerners not long ago proposed to erect a monument to her at Washington, but however touching the memory of the faithful slave may be to the children of the master, the relationship seems not to be one which the black mammy's own children held in especial honor, perhaps for the reason that the care and affection which she is assumed to have lavished upon her white nurslings were taken from her own children.²⁵

The self-seeking colored person who fawns on the white folks and for selfish reasons tries to prove himself the type of Negro which he assumes that they like, has also more or less disappeared from fiction, though he still survives to a degree in real life in certain preachers and teachers who

"Crook the pregnant hinges of the knee,
That thrift may follow fawning."²⁶

The beautiful octoroon, the product of the white man's sin for several successive generations, and the victim of his passions, has given way to the modern sophisticated "near white" or "high yellow" who has been to college, and takes advantage of her complexion either by "passing" for white or at least exercising in public the privileges of the "caste of Vere de Vere." Sometimes she puts it over quite far, and marries into the old Knickerbocker or Mayflower families. It is quite within the bounds of probability that the offspring of some such ambitious and enterprising lady may yet sit in the presidential chair. A man of Indian descent who does not deny his origin, is pretty close to it, and a man said to have been of Negro descent who did deny it has occupied the throne itself.²⁷

The crude and stolid field hand has almost disappeared from fiction, although Dr. Du Bois made a brave but not entirely successful attempt to idealize him in his first novel, *The Silver Fleece*.²⁸ In place of him we have the migrant, the factory operative or mill hand. The squalid cabins of the plantation have given place to the sordid tenements of great cities. The overseer with his bull-whip has been replaced by the foreman with his time clock. The jolly carefree

buck-and-wing dances and hoe-downs have given place to the black bottom of the hectic cabaret and night club, and the bang of the banjo, while still going strong, to some extent, to the sob of the saxophone. The black face minstrel has yielded place to the talented actor in the legitimate drama. Always excepting the perennial Uncle Tom, colored actors now star in *The Emperor Jones*, *In Abraham's Bosom* and other plays which demand a high order of histrionic talent.²⁹ Topsy has been replaced by the Florence Millses and Josephine Bakers,³⁰ and the real talent of Bert Williams and Ernest Hogan by the finer artistry of Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson.

Then we have some entirely new types which derive entirely from modern conditions. The colored doctor, for instance, unknown a generation ago, is the most outstanding representative of the race, at least in numbers and in earning power. He has been used quite freely and effectively in Negro fiction. The colored lawyer is not so popular a subject. Indeed the colored lawyer in the South is largely conspicuous by his absence. By the way, the first one in the United States, I believe, was John M. Langston, an alumnus of Oberlin, perhaps the first colored graduate.³¹ I read somewhere the other day that the first colored lawyer in North Carolina had been recently admitted to the bar of that state. This was a misstatement, because fifty years ago, when I was on the verge of manhood, John M. Leary, a colored man and a brother of Sheridan Leary, a former resident of Oberlin and one of John Brown's raiding party, was a practicing lawyer and an able one, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where I lived at the time.³² The Negro preacher is almost virgin soil for the fictionist, but the black Elmer Ganttrys³³ and grafting bishops will surely come into their own, as well as the devoted men who give their lives and their talents for the uplift of their race for a meager recompense.

Colored readers have sometimes criticized the Negro characters of Mr. Octavus Roy Cohen, the Jewish writer of Alabama. I am free to say that I have found some of his stories very amusing. The imaginary best "cullud society" of "Bummingham" with its hodgepodge of lawyers, doctors, preachers, barbers, hairdressers, gamblers and shrewd swindlers, if overdrawn and therefore libelous, has some semblance of reality, though I can't imagine a lawyer being admitted to the bar even of Alabama, with as little learning, legal or otherwise, as lawyer Evans Chew. Florian Slappey is a quite convincing type of the happy-go-lucky hand-to-mouth type of social parasite who spends most of his time scheming how to get something for nothing. One fault I have to find in that connection is that our up-and-coming colored story writers have let this shrewd white man preempt this financially rich vein of Negro literature. Cohen's only real competitor is Hugh Wiley, another white man, with his vivid stories of the Negro labor battalions in the Great War, of crap-shooters and "Lady Luck." One thing I cannot forgive the Cohen output is the illustrations. The artist seems to use the same tame gorilla as the model for every character, male or female—black, brown and yellow. There are perhaps some Negroes as ugly as Cohen's

characters are depicted—there are homely people in all races—but we ought to be thankful to the Creator that He did n't load down the whole race with such a burden.

The grafting colored politician is another somewhat sinister development attending the progress of the colored people. Dr. Du Bois in his novel *The Dark Princess*³⁴ has depicted very vividly this type in Chicago, and I suspect has done the Chicago Negro no serious injustice.

There has been much criticism among colored readers and critics about the types portrayed in the current Negro novels. With much of this criticism I concur heartily. Looking back cursorily I find no outstanding noble male character in any of the Negro novels, written by white or colored writers. The male characters are either weaklings, like the principal male character in *Nigger Heaven* and in *Birthright*,³⁵ or addicted to degrading vices, such as gambling, lechery, drunkenness, the use of narcotics, or else somewhat unbalanced, like the hero of the *Dark Princess*. Porgy, with his goat and his wagon, is an interesting character, but no particular credit to his race, and the returned soldier in *Home to Harlem* is by no means an admirable character.³⁶

The Southern white writers manifest, apparently, much fairness in dealing with their Negro characters. It is to be regretted that they do not choose finer types, but they would probably reply that they use the material at hand. Catfish Alley is doubtless an interesting place, and Mr. Heyward seems very familiar with it, but I am unable—it may be snobbishness on my part or a certain Victorian hangover—to get up much enthusiasm over the characters in *Porgy* or over the profane and crafty Aunt Mamba with her stolen second-hand false teeth, and her efforts to annex a white family.³⁷ The Charleston white people may admire that type of Negro, and there may be some of them, but I imagine most of the colored people of Charleston are quite satisfied not to “belong” to white families. Hagar was not much improvement, and Lissa, after all, plays a small part in the story—she is merely the lay figure on which to drape the other characters.

One noteworthy thing about most of these Southern white writers is that they tell the truth about their own people—how they rob and exploit and scorn and degrade their dark neighbors. Sometimes, as in *Mamba's Daughters*, the active villain, like the black overseer in the old days, is made a colored man. A curious corollary of this is Mr. Rudolph Fisher's colored character in *The Walls of Jericho*³⁸ who works the residence segregation racket for his own not at all high-minded purposes.

The heart of any romantic novel is the heroine—perhaps I should say the female protagonist in speaking of the present day Negro novel, for precious few of them are given any heroic attributes. With the exception of Mary in *Nigger Heaven*, or the heroine of Walter White's first novel,³⁹ and the women of Miss Fauset's novels,⁴⁰ they are all unchaste. When I wrote that sentence a week or two ago I had not read Miss Fauset's latest novel,⁴¹ in which I regret to say the

heroine joins the scarlet, or at least the pink sisterhood. Of course I recognize that female virtue has gone out of fashion in fiction—I hope not so much so in real life—but I feel about the matter something like I do about the Octavus Roy Cohen illustrations. I *know* that these characters are not the best types or even average types of the womanhood of the race. Of course the female rebel is more interesting or more easy to make interesting—vice has the edge on virtue in fiction—most of the interesting women in romance have sinned for love or for profit—Beatrice Esmond, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, *Anna Karenina*,⁴² etc., but it remained for one of our most eminent young colored writers to have his heroine sin for no apparent reason whatsoever. She did not love her paramour, she got nothing out of it, she was not responding to any resistless sex urge, nor even to curiosity, but her lover asked, and she just consented, and did some other foolish things afterwards which contribute to the development of the story but which stamp the heroine with mental as well as moral weakness.

One of the vilest of the colored women characters in present day fiction is *Black Sadie*,⁴³ who so far as I could gather, had no morals. So far as she was decent at all, it was a matter of animal instinct—many animals are decenter than many humans. Sadie was a constitutional thief and robbed even her benefactors with perfect sangfroid. She would take jewels or any other portable property which was not locked up or nailed down and could be easily turned into money, without blinking an eyelash. The book is brilliantly written by, I am informed, a white Baptist preacher of Richmond, Virginia, who displays an intimate and circumstantial familiarity with the baser side of Negro life and character which suggests not only careful study but personal experience.

Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* is very well written, but I don't recall a decent woman character in the book. Some of the male characters are steeped in baseness, some of which is so vile as to be merely hinted at. But the very nadir of vileness is reached in a novel by a colored writer, W. Thurman.⁴⁴ It is called *The Blacker the Berry*, and by way of foreword the author quotes an alleged Negro folk saying,

The blacker the berry
The sweeter the juice.

The novel is founded on the assumed scorn of light-colored people for dark women—which in my opinion the author grossly exaggerates—and the gradual degeneration of his heroine growing out of her sensitiveness to this discrimination. I can say frankly that he has n't helped the dark girl a particle, if she needs any help.

I read the other day an item which I cut out of a newspaper, which voices some rather pertinent reflections on the prevalent type of these books. It is a quotation from a recent number of the *Birmingham News*, based on an expression by Dana Skinner, dramatic editor of *The Commonwealth*:⁴⁵

"Those who have tried to keep tab," says the editor,

on what is being done in the way of productive literary art among Negroes cannot fail to recall the bold intermixture of animalism permeating that part of it about which most of the raving is done. It seems to be a swirling current into which much of the best talent is drawn and too much of the really proven literary talent is condoning and encouraging, either by complimentary mention or dubious silence, leaving it a right-of-way which causes it to boldly overshadow any literary art that might be really constructive.

The sad fact that it emanates from motives that appear, on the face, to be both mercenary and devoid of exalted idealism, adds a new danger to its popularity. We have never been able to see any masterly merit in either its conception or its portrayal.

It flits from one cesspool of vice to another, holding up the worst in Negro life to public gaze as though there were nothing worthier and better to show. Certainly, it sells to a thrill-hungry, unsuspecting public curiously agape for fads.

As far as we have been able to see, it starts low, remains low, maintains a sensual note and glories in a sensual imagery suggestive of its authorship and origin. Without venturing a criticism on any particular literary effort, one can select what is styled the successes and study them according to approved standards of art to find that they exploit the worst features and explode the best theories of Negro home and social life. A literature that is truly interpretative must be in some sense moralistic; it must exalt those of low degree as well as the mighty. It may deal with the sensual for moral purposes. It must glorify the humble and degrade the haughty. It must do it—a course of events common to everyday life and everyday people. Its filth must have a moral purpose as well as an informative portrayal.

Men's vices are not to be depicted for the sake of proving them vile, only to no purpose beneficial to them or to others.

There are dark spots in Negro life—so in the life of all peoples. There is no merit in selling it to the public at the price of transient popularity or paltry coin. The literature that lives is not built that way and the authors who have courted fame by that route are known only by chance even though they may have reaped a harvest of temporary fame and ill-gotten gain.

In the columns of a previous issue attention has been called to a type of Negro literature written by Negroes fairly degrading to Negro womanhood, and this is true not because Negro womanhood is worse than the womanhood of any other race, but because Negro authors are not better nor more discriminating.

We know of no author who has risen to fame on the carcasses of the womanhood of his race.

Mr. Skinner's criticism is a just rebuke both to those who produce this mercenary slush and also those able, discriminating literary Negroes who condone it either by their complimentary mention or their silence. There is heroism worthy of the pen, there is tragedy and comedy worthy of the footlights in Negro life. Also there is vice and animalism outside of New York's Black Belt and the price of its glory is a poor compensation for its bland portrayal.

But what as to the future of Negro literature? I am not concerned about the white writers about the Negro, but what about the colored writers? They have learned to write, and to write well. Their contributions to the best magazines are not only acceptable but solicited. They write with a verve and a swing like their

actors and singers put into their work. Naturally a somewhat indolent people—Miss Fauset has said the Negro's capacity for rest is one of his most valuable characteristics,—it keeps the white people from working him to death and gives him time to live, with strength enough left to enjoy life—when they are doing something they enjoy doing, they develop a surprising industry. Some of you may have seen the screen picture *Hearts in Dixie*, a picture of low life, but not base life,—among the Negroes along the Mississippi River.⁴⁶ If so, you will remember "Stepin' Fetchit" who has a "mizry" in his feet whenever he is asked to chop wood or fetch water, but who is a marvel of terpsichorean agility when the banjo or the fiddle starts a dance.

This *élan*, this verve, is reflected in the verse as well as in the prose of our colored writers. The work of our best poets glows with the divine fire. The colored writer has a great subject—the life of ten or twelve million people, becoming every day more diversified, more complicated—with the fundamental emotions and interests common to all humanity, colored or differentiated by those interests and feelings which grow out of their own peculiar position. Out of these distinguishing traits, building on the great fundamentals and imponderables, they can evolve a body of writing sufficiently distinctive to be classed as Negro literature and at the same time heartily and cordially welcomed as American literature.

Doubtless some of you have literary aspirations or have written things. In addition to the poets widely recognized whose poems appear in the leading monthlies and in the anthologies, there is a surprising quantity of promising verse and short stories that appear in the colored magazines. The colored writer has all the literary machinery. There are some excellent Negro critics. Mr. Braithwaite and Benjamin Brawley perhaps the first, Mr. George Schuyler is one, a columnist, who writes *à la* Mencken⁴⁷ with a fine dash of wit. Eugene Gordon, a discriminating critic who wields a hammer so heavy that, when he has finished a critical article one must search the broken fragments which strew his passage to see if there is any good thing left.⁴⁸ Mrs. Alice Dunbar-Nelson is another discriminating reviewer.⁴⁹

In addition to Mr. Braithwaite's Anthology there are anthologies of Negro Poetry, *Colored Who's Who's*,⁵⁰ and the latest development, a Negro *Bookman* magazine. So no literary gem of purest ray need remain in oblivion for lack of a medium of publicity.

I shall probably not be here to see it, although I don't know, I came of a long-lived family and events are moving very rapidly, but some day there will no doubt be a Dickens, or a Balzac, or a Dostoievski⁵¹ who will depict in lasting colors the real life—not merely the hectic night life, of the American colored people. May I hope that this writer may come from your ranks?



SOURCE: Undated typed text at the Fisk University Library. Chesnutt indicates on the title page that this speech was delivered in Oberlin, O. Internal references suggest composition in 1929 see nn. 6 and 45.

¹The Dunbar Forum was a student organization at Oberlin College. Oberlin was, in 1835, the first American college to admit African Americans.

²Chesnutt was born in Cleveland on 20 June 1858. In September, Jerry (or John) Price was arrested by a U.S. Marshal. The Chesnutt family returned to Cleveland shortly after the birth of a second son, Lewis, on 16 January 1860.

³The Western Reserve encompassed 3.3 million acres in what is now northeastern Ohio, extending 120 miles west of Pennsylvania and south beyond the present cities of Youngstown, Akron, and Willard.

⁴To "noll" is to cancel a legal proceeding against a party.

⁵All four of Dunbar's novels appeared after Chesnutt "began to write," but he formally became a novelist before Chesnutt when his *The Uncalled* was published in 1898.

⁶Du Bois agrees with Chesnutt regarding the greater degree of recognition being given black writers and artists. But he also complains about rejections of their works by white publishers and the readerships they control in his essay "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis*, 32 (October 1926), 290-97. Johnson was more positive than Chesnutt indicates. He acknowledges the complaints of "some younger Negro writers" in "Negro Authors and White Publishers," *The Crisis*, 36 (July 1929), 228-29; but then he virtually dismisses the alleged problem: "I believe that Negro writers who have something worthwhile to say and the power and skill to say it have as fair a chance today of being published as any other writer."

⁷This 1926 work by Van Vechten (1880-1964) includes the character Byron Kasson who views Chesnutt as a masterful stylist and one who has pictured accurately and with insight the wide variety of different types of African Americans. Another character, Mary Love, also lauds Chesnutt's literary achievement. Chesnutt is not known to have reviewed the novel.

⁸Brawley critically analyzed Wheatley's writings in *The Negro in Art and Literature in the United States* (1913), offering commentary as well in *A Social History of the American Negro* (1921) and *A Short History of the American Negro* (1927). In none of these does he relate that Wheatley had a penchant for penning eulogies to the great and near-great in Boston.

⁹James Madison Bell (1826-1902), *The Poetical Works of James Madison Bell* (1901); George Washington Williams, *History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* (1872).

¹⁰In addition to four novels, Dunbar—an Ohioan—published nine collections of poems during his lifetime.

¹¹William Carl "Billy" Bolivar (1849-1914), driven by an early and steady interest in book collecting, founded the Afro-American Historical Society in 1897 with his own collection of over three thousand items.

¹²Known as the father of black history, Woodson—an ardent book-collector—helped found the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915, and established the *Journal of Negro History* the following year. Arthur A. Schomburg (1874-1938) helped establish the Negro Society for Historical Research, was elected president of the American Negro Academy in 1922, and collected over ten thousand books, manuscripts, and pamphlets related to African-American culture which the New York Public Library acquired in 1926.

¹³Arthur B. Spingarn (1878-1971) gave his collection of African-American literature to Howard University. His brother Joel E. Spingarn was the originator of the N.A.A.C.P. Spingarn Medal awarded to Chesnutt in 1928; and Arthur's commitment to that organization resulted in his serving as president from 1940 to 1966. Robert R. Moton (1867-1940), a noted bibliophile, discusses his literary values in his autobiog-

raphy, *Finding a Way Out* (1920); he succeeded Booker T. Washington as principal of Tuskegee Institute in 1915, where he served for twenty years.

¹⁴William Hazlitt (1778-1830), *The Round Table* (1817); Macaulay, *Essays Critical and Miscellaneous* (1843); William E. H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (1883); William H. Prescott (1796-1859), *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843) and *History of the Conquest of Peru* (1847); John Lothrop Motley (1814-77), *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1856).

¹⁵Sir John William Watson (1858-1935), *Epigrams of Art, Life and Nature* (1884).

¹⁶Though the life of Aesop (620?-564? B.C.) is shrouded in legend, a major source for material about him is Herodotus (484?-420? B.C.), who preserved the tradition that Aesop had been a slave. Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65-8 B.C.) observed in his *Satires* that, while his father's family had been servants, his father was a small landowner who gained his freedom from slavery before Horace's birth.

¹⁷Chesnutt appears to have in mind Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), author of numerous works advancing this argument. See, for example, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1887) and *From West Africa to Palestine* (1912).

¹⁸Franz Boas, *Anthropology and Modern Life* (1928).

¹⁹Phidias (c. 500-c. 432 B.C.) was considered the greatest sculptor in ancient Greece.

²⁰Alain L. Locke had recently published *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925).

²¹In 1914, H. G. Wells published *The War That Will End War*.

²²That is, the cross on which Jesus died.

²³Post-Civil War touring companies mounted truncated versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* generically referred to as "Tom Shows." No less than eight silent-film adaptations of the novel had been produced by 1929. An American version with sound was not available until 1987.

²⁴William E. Henley, "Invictus," *Echoes* (1888).

²⁵Julia Peterkin (1880-1961), who fashioned sympathetic portraits of South Carolina African Americans in novels such as *Black April* (1927), observed that African Americans should be gratified by a proposal before Congress to honor the black mammy with an appropriate monument ("The Negro in Art," *The Crisis*, 31 [September 1926], 238-39). Prompted by a suggestion from Mississippi's U.S. Senator John Sharp Williams (1854-1932), Congress had passed a resolution in 1923 to erect a monument in honor of black mammies.

²⁶See "The Disfranchisement of the Negro," n. 12.

²⁷Charles Curtis (1860-1936) born on what was then land belonging to the Kansa (Kaw) tribe in northeastern Kansas, was one-eighth Kansa on his maternal side; a lawyer, Curtis rose through the ranks of local and national Republican politics, initially opposing the presidential nomination of Herbert C. Hoover (1874-1964) in 1928 but later serving as vice-president in his administration. The president "said to have been of Negro descent" is Warren G. Harding.

²⁸*The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911).

²⁹Paul Green (1894-1981), *In Abraham's Bosom* (1926), starring Jules Bledsoe (1898-1943); Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), starring Charles S. Gilpin and then Paul Robeson (1898-1976), who was also a distinguished singer.

³⁰Florence Mills (1895-1927) was a torch-singer who starred in several Broadway productions including *Shuffle Along*. Josephine Baker (1906-75), turned down for *Shuffle Along* because, at fifteen, she could not legally work on Broadway, became a celebrated dancer in Paris in the 1920's.

³¹Langston (1829-97) was, in 1854, the first African American admitted to the bar. He founded the Law School at Howard University in 1868.

³²John S. Leary (1845-1904) was not the first but the second African American admitted to the North Carolina bar, practicing law in Fayetteville before becoming the dean of the Law School at Shaw University. Lewis Sheridan Leary (1836-59) was one of five blacks who participated in John Brown's 16 October 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry, where he died the following day.

³³*Elmer Gantry* (1927) by Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) critically describes a corrupt white revivalist.

³⁴Published in 1928.

³⁵Thomas S. Stribling (1881-1965), *Birthright* (1922).

³⁶Claude McKay (1890-1948), *Home to Harlem* (1928).

³⁷Like Hagar and Lissa who are discussed below, Aunt Mamba is a character in *Mamba's Daughters* (1929).

³⁸Rudolph Fisher (1897-1934), *The Walls of Jericho* (1928).

³⁹Walter F. White (1893-1955), *The Fire in the Flint* (1924).

⁴⁰Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882-1961).

⁴¹*Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929).

⁴²Beatrice Esmond is a character in Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* (1852); *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891); Maggie Tulliver is the heroine of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (1877).

⁴³Thomas Bowyer Campbell (1887-?), *Black Sadie* (1928).

⁴⁴Wallace Thurman (1902-34), *The Blacker the Berry* (1929).

⁴⁵Richard Dana Skinner (1893-1941) reviewed *Harlem*, a play by Thurman and William Jourdan Rapp (1895-1942), in "The Play," *Commonweal*, 9 (6 March 1929), 514. Skinner's comments provided the occasion for the editor from which Chesnutt quotes: "Are Negro Writers Exploiting Their People?" *Birmingham News-Age-Herald*, 10 March 1929, 10.

⁴⁶*Hearts in Dixie* was released in 1929. It starred Stepin' Fetchit (1892-1985), born Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry.

⁴⁷Henry L. Mencken (1880-1956) was a journalist and essayist distinguished by his iconoclasm, acerbic sense of humor, and Olympian perspective on the human condition.

⁴⁸Eugene Gordon (1890-?) wrote for the *Boston Post* and contributed short stories to *Opportunity*.

⁴⁹The widow of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935) was a teacher, editor, book-reviewer, and short story writer.

⁵⁰Braithwaite edited the annual volumes of *Anthology of Magazine Verse* from 1913 through 1929. *Who's Who in Colored America*, edited by Joseph J. Boris, first appeared in 1927.

⁵¹Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-81).