

“competition would be crushed”:

National and International Threads in Charles Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream*

by R. J. Ellis

Charles Chesnutt's 1905 novel *The Colonel's Dream* has regularly been described as an under-recognized work, yet the problem persists, even into the second decade of the twenty-first century.¹ I believe this neglect stems not only from overlooking the subtlety of Chesnutt's representation in this novel of the catastrophic failure of Reconstruction in North Carolina, but also from failing to recognize the text's engagement with other, even larger themes related to the rapid development of American capitalism, as the country became a dominant force in the global marketplace. For Chesnutt, increasing globalization made all the more disastrous the failure of the white South to shake off the legacies of slavery and instead sustain its racism by way of such practices as segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement.

Undoubtedly, Chesnutt shows an acute awareness of the virulent forms of racism proliferating in the South as the nineteenth century moved into the twentieth, made plain when he poses and responds to the question, “what is the effect of this wholesale disfranchisement of colored men, upon their citizenship?”² This was a time when African Americans were pitched into what I call the nadir of the period Rayford Logan called *The Nadir*: the closing decade of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth, by which time the failure of postbellum Reconstruction had become pathological.³ A consequence of this was that, in 1905, the difficulty of addressing a white as well as a black audience had increased, as intolerance grew, spurred on by the ever-rising popularity of scientific racism. Yet, also, Chesnutt wanted his white audience to contemplate how the situation of the South was being rapidly altered in ways at best under-recognized, as economic, political, and cultural change swept through the Western world.⁴

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¹ In his 1980 book *The Literary Career of Charles Chesnutt*, William L. Andrews notes that “*The Colonel's Dream* has always been the least popular and least discussed of Chesnutt's novels” (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980, 257). Since then, some insightful work has been published following up on Andrews's reading of the novel, by critics such as Brook Thomas, in *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract* (Berkeley: UP of California, 1997), Matthew Wilson, in *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2004), Ryan Simmons, in *Chesnutt and Realism* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2006), and Elizabeth Hewitt, in “Charles Chesnutt's Capitalist Conjurers,” *English Literary History* 6 (2009): 931–62.

² Charles Chesnutt, “The Disenfranchisement of the Negro,” 1903, rpt. in Charles W. Chesnutt, *Essays and Speeches*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Robert C. Leitz III, and Jesse C. Onslor (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993) 181.

³ Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901* (London: Dial, 1954).

⁴ See, for example, John P. Jackson, Jr. and Nadine M. Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004) 129–42. Chesnutt's desire to address a white audience emerges in a letter he wrote to his publishers, Houghton, Mifflin on 8 September 1891: “I should not want this fact [his racial identity] to be stated in the book . . . because I would not have the book judged by any standard lower than that set for other writers. . . . I am willing to submit them all [the short stories] to the public on their merits” (quoted in Helen M. Chesnutt, *Charles Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* [Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1952] 69).

