

The Confounding Problem of Race: Passing and Adoption in Charles Chesnutt's The Quarry.

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the Confounding Problem of Race:

Passing and Adoption in Charles Chesnutt's *The Quarry*

Cynthia A. Callahan

Race may be America's single most confounding problem, but the confounding problem of race is that few people seem to know what race is.

—Ian F. Haney Lopez, "The Social Construction of Race."

When Charles Chesnutt, at the age of seventy, mailed a complete draft of *The Quarry* (1928) to the publishing company Alfred Knopf, he might have thought he was on the verge of a literary comeback. Encouraged by the productive energy of the Harlem Renaissance and the support of his friends and family, Chesnutt re-entered the world of fiction publishing after a twenty-three year absence. Unfortunately, Knopf and, two years later, Houghton Mifflin, opted not to publish his novel. Though the letter of rejection from Knopf no longer seems to exist, Chesnutt's response to the editor reveals some of the reasons for the manuscript's rejection. "I note what you say [. . .] about the central idea in the story, and my failure to carry it out, and the lifelessness of the characters and **[End Page 314]** the 'priggishness' of the hero. I suspect you are right about all of this, and in light of your criticism I shall before I submit the book elsewhere, see if I can put some flesh on and some red blood in the characters" (qtd. in McWilliams x). Unfortunately, Chesnutt died before he could make substantial revisions and resubmit the novel.

In 1999, Dean McWilliams edited and published the unrevised manuscript which makes available in print, for the first time, Charles Chesnutt's last novel-length piece of fiction. Based on Chesnutt's correspondence with the publisher, McWilliams explains the author's inability to place the novel in terms of its weak literary merit. While the novel admittedly falls short of some of Chesnutt's better writing—as seen in *The Marrow of Tradition* and many of his short stories—its recent publication affords new insight into what may be its most salient feature: the exploration of multiracial Americans' role in racial politics.

Chesnutt's decision to return to fiction writing at that particular moment—the height of the Harlem Renaissance—was probably no coincidence. When he stopped writing in the early-twentieth century, he did so for a variety of compelling reasons. His earliest publications, *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and *The Wife of His Youth* (1899), were met with approval from both black and white critics and audiences. Though not best sellers, they established Chesnutt as one of the first black fiction writers to cross the literary color line and appeal to white readers. *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), a novel of passing, was generally well received, but *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) challenged white readers' tolerance with its uncompromising portrayal of white racism. In response to critics' characterization of the novel as "bitter,"¹ Chesnutt retreated from confrontational race themes in his next several manuscripts—none of which were published. Shortly thereafter, he returned to the topic of race in *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), which yielded lukewarm reviews and weak sales. Growing concerned that he could not support his family with the income from his writing, he returned to his legal stenography business and never wrote full time again.

The racial tensions of the early twentieth century account, in part, for these circumstances. Reading within the context of the deeply entrenched Jim Crow system in the south, white audiences had limited interest in fiction that might blame them for oppressing black Americans. As Dickson Bruce notes, "whatever literary reputation [Chesnutt] **[End Page 315]** had created, he had done it during America's racial nadir—a deteriorating racial climate that even his best work had been powerless to affect" (185). Twenty years later, when Chesnutt composed his final novel, Harlem Renaissance authors were writing prolifically about a wide

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Charles Waddell Chesnut t: An Essay in Bibliography, the polyphonic novel causes the unsteady house-Museum of Ridder Schmidt (XVIII century).
Charles Waddell Chesnut t and Joel Chandler Harris: An Anxiety of Influence, a pat ite is unstable with respect to gravitational perturbations.
Baring Slavery's Darkest Secrets: Charles Chesnut t's Conjure Tales as Masks of Truth, you cannot restore the true chronological sequence of events because the aggregate is

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