

Slavery's Tangled Genealogies: Adoption and Racial Purity in Charles W. Chesnutt's Fiction

“What tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery!” Harriet Jacobs

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One of the most compelling aspects of Charles W. Chesnutt's fiction is his awareness that the meticulously documented family lines of white southerners were elaborate fictions, masking ancestries shared with their slaves. As an attorney, Chesnutt knew that family history functioned as what legal scholar Eva Saks calls a “title” to white privilege, the verification that would allow an individual to access the resources legally withheld from those possessing racially mixed ancestry. This paper examines the ways in which Chesnutt routinely depicted mixed race characters as orphans and adoptees to challenge the South's reliance on genealogy to verify whiteness and sustain the socioeconomic status quo. In the short story “Her Virginia Mammy” (1899), and in the novels *The Quarry* (1928, published in 1999) and *Paul Marchand, FMC* (1921, published in 1999), Chesnutt's mixed-race adoptees all reveal that whiteness, when removed from supposedly documented genealogies and physical markers, becomes a virtually arbitrary designation. Reading these texts through the lens of contemporary research on adoptive identity, I discuss how adoption and the literary tropes of the mixed-race figure inform one another. Both expose family history as a pervasive yet particularly unreliable means of establishing identity.