KATJA KANZLER

‘Race’ and Realism: Vision, Textuality, and Charles Chesnutt’s

*The Marrow of Tradition*

Abstract: In this article, I read Charles Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) against the background of realism to unravel the novel’s distinct critique of racial discourse. I argue that realism’s characteristic technique of appealing to the visible to establish the reality and realness of its fictions enables the novel to trace a similar operation in the discourse of race. My focus rests on the novel’s treatment of two pairs of characters that challenge the visual confidence of both realism and race, pairs that exemplify what Samira Kawash has called ‘interracial twins:’ sets of characters whose parties ‘actually,’ ostensibly belong to different ‘races,’ yet whom the text presents as strikingly similar in their appearance. In its characterization of and narratives surrounding these ‘twins,’ the novel exposes the techniques by which racial discourse naturalizes itself and un-masks race as a textual construct, generated by stories and documents that dangerously sustain a reality of their own.