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Keywords

mixed race politics, third space theory, Homi Bhabha, Charles Chestnut, The Wife of His Youth, The Sheriff's Children

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Gabrielle Sanford

Tru Leverette, a Mixed race professor of African American and Mixed race literature, explains that people of mixed ancestry have a difficult and confusing racial path: "I, like many other persons born to parents of different races, sometimes think of myself as moving in the space that unites the two, as traveling from one shore to another . . . and other times as sailing the river that forms the meridian between two shores" ("Traveling" 79). And while there has been progress in how America regards biracial people today, Mixed race people are often marginalized in society, literature, and politics through underrepresentation and a lack of acknowledgment of their culture and characteristics. There is very little space for Mixed race people to have their own identities because they are neither seen as a separate race nor accepted into the races that form their racial identity. They are only seen as a combination of two or more races that needs to fit into a predetermined racial mold. This blindness sidelines biracial and multiracial groups and leaves them without legal status.

Charles Chesnutt, a post-Reconstruction Mixed race author, presents Mixed race issues in his short stories "The Wife of His Youth" (1899) and "The Sheriff's Children" (1889). Chesnutt's characters, however, do not want representation for their Mixed race to be the final goal in the changing social structure of America, but rather want to be a part of White society and leave behind their Black heritage. This is seen in "The Wife of His Youth" when Ryder seeks to leave his Blackness in his past and embrace an upward climb to White status by being a part of the Blue Vein Society. The same is seen in "The Sheriff's Children" when Tom grieves over the unfairness of his life due to being Mixed race. Notwithstanding the feelings of these characters, though, Chesnutt encourages a third space for Mixed race representation and a social acceptance of hybridity; he also, to be sure, recognizes that this third space has the potential to marginalize Blacks and biracial people even further.

In his nonfiction, Chesnutt argues that slavery contributed to the wide separation between the White and the Black race through the myth of Black people as stupid, barbaric, and inferior. He summarizes the prejudices that advanced slavery and racial separation in his essay “Race Prejudice: Its Causes and Its Cure” (1905):

[The White and Black races] differed physically, the one being black and the other white. The one had constituted for poets and sculptors the ideal of beauty and grace; the other was rude and unpolished in form and feature . . . There was the contempt of the instructed for the ignorant, of the fair and comely for the black and homely, of the master for the slave, of the Christian for the heathen, of the native for the foreigner, of the citizen for the alien, of one who spoke a language fluently for one who spoke it brokenly or not at all. (*Selected* 85-6)

This strict opposition did not allow for a third space to exist between the races. Hatred and prejudice was meant to keep the Black race from tainting the White. This racism was not just White popular opinion, but became American legislation thirty years after the Civil War.

The conflict surrounding Mixed race individuals’ identity was made apparent in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States issued a ruling that authorized the concept of separate but equal as constitutional. Blacks were forced to use separate schools, churches, buses, water fountains, and bathrooms. However, this ruling left Mixed race people confused and with a lack of identity. There was no separate space for biracial or multiracial individuals. This confusion was addressed with the social adoption of the one drop rule, which stated that if an individual had any Black blood he or she would be classified as Black only. Anne Fleischmann states that the “decision was concerned with racial ‘purity’” and that the case has “sewn racial segregation into the fabric of American society” (461). The ruling made it socially acceptable and legal to discriminate based on race. Because of this ruling, there was no legal opportunity in America for Mixed race people to establish their own identities. It was either decided for them, or they had to choose which race to identify with if they were light enough to “pass” as White.

As an attempt to find a space into which Mixed race individuals could fit, groups called Blue Vein Societies were eventually formed. Many biracial individuals during this time used the racial confusion to their advantage and considered such societies and the gray area between the Black race and the White race as an opportunity to “carve a niche for themselves in American Society, preserve their tenuous whiteness (inclusion), and reinforce their cultural superiority (exclusion)” (Emin Tunc 678). Mixed race individuals who joined Blue Vein Societies wanted the benefits, equal opportunities, and fairness that was given to the White race. However, they needed these advantages to be given through their membership in the borderline space that was the Blue Vein Society because many were not able to pass. This membership caused conflict in the already confusing Mixed race space that they tried to inhabit. Charles Chesnutt addressed this confusion as a Mixed race individual who was light enough to “pass” as White but chose not to because he did not want to deny his Black heritage and culture. He wanted a socially recognized space that was not given through the pompous nature of the Blue Vein Societies, but nineteenth century America did not allow this space to exist. There was still not a separate space for biracial people like Chesnutt, who wished to remain Mixed and not simply referred to as just Black or White. Chesnutt’s progressive ideas were ahead of his time.

Over one hundred years later, Homi Bhabha discusses the in between area that Mixed races experience and calls it the Third Space. This theory explores the new space that begins to exist by redefining culture (10). Bhabha explains that this redefinition transcends culture and ethnicity by “[renewing] the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (10). This cultural beyond advocates for a space that allows progress, reconciliation between races, and freedom for individuals who find themselves in a third space. Bhabha acknowledges that, in order to create and inhabit this third space, the present will have to be redefined and reimagined. It will not be convenient for mainstream society when marginalized groups, including Mixed races, ask for recognition and a space of their own to inhabit, but it is this recognition that allows for inhabitation in the cultural beyond of progress and racial mixing to occur. He also argues that this interruption advances the acceptance of different cultures, races, and ethnicities. Without interrupting the present and all of its cultural norms, society will never be able to move forward, grow, and become

more accepting.

Not only does the interruption of society and acceptance of a third space change and advance society and culture, but Bhabha also writes that by “exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (56). By every individual finding the “otherness” in himself or herself and being able to relate to other people’s differences, individuals will be united with different peoples, cultures, races, and societies and not feed into the prejudice of division and opposition like slavery and segregation did. Interestingly, Bhabha’s theory parallels Charles Chesnutt’s work. It is apparent that Chesnutt was advocating for an idea that was not yet set in the minds of others in the late nineteenth century. He was advocating for a third space as a solution to the marginalization of mixed races, and this is seen through his pessimistic view of assimilation into the White race in his short stories.

Chesnutt’s stories “The Wife of His Youth” and “The Sheriff’s Children” present the marginalization and conflict that mixed races experience by being in a space that society says is not valid. These two stories show how absorption into White society can never be a solution for Mixed race people. Chesnutt shows that though his Mixed race characters try to become part of White society, their Black heritage ultimately reenters their lives in various ways and prevents them from assimilating. While his characters show how this method is ineffective, Chesnutt himself presents a bolder and more forward-thinking idea in his essays: the hybridity and acceptance of a Mixed race. He believed that this idea would be the best way to give Mixed races representation and recognition in society. In his essay “The Future American” (1900), Chesnutt describes the possibility of what races in future generations will be comprised of: “There are no natural obstacles to such an amalgamation. . . . Any theory of sterility due to race crossing may as well be abandoned; it is founded mainly on prejudice and cannot be proven by the facts” (*Selected* 49). He reasons that it is not possible for two or more races to live in such close proximity or be a part of the same nation and not at some point cross and produce a new race. Furthermore, Chesnutt calls this mixing a “beautiful, a hopeful, and to the eye of faith, a thrilling prospect” (47). Again, while readers of Chesnutt’s essays can see how he wanted a blending of culture and race and believed that no other solution would be as effective, he uses his fictional characters to

demonstrate why Black absorption into the White race will never be effective.

“The Wife of His Youth” describes the conflict between Ryder, a Mixed race man attempting to retain a space that will help him gain better social standing, and his wife ‘Liza Jane, a former slave from Ryder’s days as a free apprentice to a White family over twenty years ago. Ryder is the dean of a society called the Blue Veins, which desires to “establish and maintain correct social standards among a people whose social conditions presented almost unlimited room for improvement” (*Wife* 1). They sought to leave White prejudice behind and declare a new life for Mixed race individuals that included being light enough to be a part of White culture. Although not stated explicitly, the name of the society suggests that if a person’s skin were light enough to “pass” as White then he or she was more than likely admitted into the society. The physical description that Chesnutt provides of Ryder suggests that he could easily “pass” as an upper-class White man. As Chesnutt writes, “His features were of a refined type, his hair was almost straight; he was always neatly dressed” (4). In addition to his physical description, Chesnutt also tells the reader about Ryder’s intelligence; he is able to memorize and recite long passages from Tennyson as well as play the piano (4, 8). He owns a house and has black servants who wait on guests when he has parties (17). In every way, Ryder fits the stereotype of a successful upper-class White man. Although Ryder is ethnically mixed race, he desires to embrace White society and reject his Black heritage. However, this rejection proves futile when ‘Liza Jane reenters Ryder’s life and reminds him of the Black side of his racial identity.

‘Liza Jane cannot be mistaken for any race except Black. Unlike Ryder, she has no White heritage. She is the exact opposite of what Ryder seems to desire in a wife. Chesnutt writes that Ryder is attracted to Mrs. Dixon, who is “whiter than he, and better educated” (5). ‘Liza Jane is described as “very black, —so black that her toothless gums, revealed when she opened her mouth to speak, were not red, but blue” (10). She interrupts Ryder’s reading of “A Dream of Fair Women” by Tennyson and asks if he has ever heard of a mulatto man named Sam Taylor (11). The more she tells Ryder her story the clearer Ryder’s past becomes. Not only is he Sam Taylor, but he is also the free man who worked in the fields for a White couple. He also chose to marry a slave. Even if his skin is light enough to see the blue of his veins and “pass” as White, his past is shown to be as Black as ‘Liza Jane’s complexion. His

connection to his Black race also becomes apparent when he retells 'Liza Jane's story in a Black southern dialect to members of the Blue Vein Society. Chesnutt writes, "He then related, simply but effectively, the story told by his visitor of the afternoon. He gave it the same soft dialect, which came readily to his lips" (20). Once 'Liza Jane comes back into his life, he is no longer in control of the characteristics that contribute to him being seen as Black. He has not left behind his Black heritage even when he moves to another state, buys a house, and becomes the dean of the Blue Veins.

This idea of trying to absorb into White society is also seen in "The Sheriff's Children." Tom, the mulatto accused of killing Captain Walker in the town of Troy, North Carolina, is seen as Black only. The one drop rule indirectly influences the townspeople's consensus that Tom is responsible for the murder. His White ancestry is deliberately forgotten because of the circumstance of a man with Black ancestry possibly killing a White man. However, Sheriff Campbell discovers that Tom is his son when Tom says that he attributes his life to the Sheriff (*Wife* 86). In the same way that Ryder and his past are unable to be separated, Tom's origins as a Mixed man who was sent away along with his Black mother haunts his present reality as well as his future. Tom is well educated, speaks standard English better than the White people living in Troy, and understands the town's judicial system. However, he tells his father, "I learned to feel that no degree of learning or wisdom will change the color of my skin and that I shall always wear what in my own country is a badge of degradation" (87). Even though Tom has gone through the steps to become a "respectable" member of society, his efforts and education are not enough to compensate for the Black half of his identity. Tom recognizes a better life is impossible because, according to the one drop rule, he has no chance of escaping the stigma of his roots and the color of his skin. The reader can see his lack of expectation manifested in his suicide. Tom tears the bandage off the bullet wound caused by his half-sister, Polly, and allows himself to bleed to death. Polly is the only character who successfully acts out and causes violence besides the person who murdered the Captain. She unwittingly shoots her half-brother and provides the opportunity that Tom needs to kill himself. The reader could interpret this act as the White race's animosity toward the inclusion of biracial individuals in White society. In the same way that Ryder realizes absorption into the White race is impossible because of his heritage, Tom also discovers that fighting for this same status does not advance

him, but, rather, hinders him. Although tragic, this conclusion is an accurate representation of how acceptance into an exclusively White culture is not the answer to Mixed race individuals' representation in society.

Even though Chesnutt argues for a third space for Mixed race people, he does recognize potential problems. One issue that arises is that having a separate space for biracial individuals will further marginalize Black people. In his essay "The White and the Black" (1901), Chesnutt recounts a conversation he had with a Virginia train conductor:

"Do you ever,' I asked, 'have any difficulty about classifying people who are very near the line?'

'Oh, yes, often.'

'What do you do in a case of that kind?'

'I give him the benefit of the doubt.'

'That is, you treat him as a white man?'

'Certainly.'" (*Selected* 55)

Although the conductor tells Chesnutt that he is fair and gives both Whites and Blacks equal treatment, he still admits that he would give mulattos, who do have Black heritage, the "benefit of the doubt" and allow them to stay in the White car. Giving Mixed races the status of the dominant race causes issues in the Black community. Chesnutt makes the reader think about and analyze the possible marginalization of 'Liza Jane and other Blacks at the end of "The Wife of His Youth."

Even though at the end of the story the reader's first reaction is to respect Ryder for his decision to acknowledge 'Liza Jane as his wife, on closer inspection, the ending shows the potential for ostracism that will arise after the story ends. 'Liza Jane is the exact opposite of the woman Ryder wants for a wife. Her background, skin tone, and speech are all undesirable and remind Ryder of his days as a "free" black man. Ryder admits that acceptance in the Black community would be "a backward step" (*Wife* 7). It would not benefit the Blue Veins to be accepted by Blacks because of the low status of Blacks in America. So the last thing Ryder wants is a Black wife. When 'Liza Jane comes back into his life, he is surprised and does not at first tell her that he is her husband. He appears to be ashamed

of his connection to a former Black slave woman—and, after talking to her, gazes at his reflection in a mirror. This scene suggests long contemplation about the color of his skin. Although the reader has already gotten a physical description of Ryder that implies he has every feature that will allow him to “pass” as White, this moment implies a different view. Earlier, Ryder has watched ‘Liza Jane walk away and observed how people on the street regarded her with “a smile of kindly amusement” that suggests condescension (17). This scene causes Ryder to think about his own reputation and what claiming ‘Liza Jane and his Blackness would mean for the way people would begin to perceive him. By gazing in the mirror for “a long time,” Ryder begins to notice physical features that look more Black than White (17). To combat this feeling, Ryder treats ‘Liza Jane in a way that pushes her as far away as possible from himself. When he does announce ‘Liza Jane as being the wife of his youth at his dinner party, she is not presented in the expensive evening wear in which the other fairer-skinned women and men are dressed. ‘Liza Jane is dressed as a servant “in gray, and [wearing] the white cap of an elderly woman” (24). This foreshadows how ‘Liza Jane will more than likely be treated in Ryder’s home. She will not take on the role of his wife, and he introduces her only as “the wife of my youth” (24). Even though Ryder says that he has “no race prejudice,” he does have black servants in his home, and it is likely that ‘Liza Jane will succumb to this same fate and become the cook in the household like she was when she was a slave (7, 12). Ryder’s rejection of his blackness causes ‘Liza Jane more suffering.

The marginalization of Black people is seen even more directly in “The Sheriff’s Children.” Tom, the story’s Mixed race character, is angry at his father over being biracial and feels as if his opportunities are tainted by the fact of his Black half. As Tom tells his father, Sheriff Campbell, “you gave me a black mother You gave me a white man’s spirit, and you made me a slave, and crushed it out” (*Wife* 86). Here, Tom attempts to distance himself from the Black race. In the same way that Ryder sought to distance himself as much as possible from ‘Liza Jane and his Black heritage, Tom also wants to show society that he wants no part of his Black heritage. When his father points out that he is now free from slavery, Tom replies, “Free in name, but despised and scorned and set aside by the people to whose race I belong far more than to my mother’s” (86). Not only does his race hinder him academically and occupationally, it also makes him a target in society. Tom makes it clear that he wants nothing to do

with Black society. Mixed race people cannot safely inhabit a third space or try to identify with the White race without putting Blacks at risk. This shows Chesnutt's acknowledgment of the likely further marginalization of Blacks when Mixed race people seek a higher status or a third space in society.

Chesnutt criticizes the one drop rule in his essay "What is a White Man?" (1889). Because states had the power to decide what constitutes a person of color, they could, more than anything, determine "what proportion of white blood should be sufficient to remove the disability of color" (*Selected* 26). Thus, Mixed race people had opportunities to distance themselves from their Black blood if they were able to "pass." Although at first glance this rule seems only to benefit Mixed individuals as a separate race, it inadvertently marginalizes Blacks further. Chesnutt's analysis of the one drop rule helps us understand the consequences of a Mixed race person choosing a third space and how this preference is perceived by Black communities. Although many Mixed races during Chesnutt's time only wanted to be able to progress in a White dominated society, their actions were seen as "denying their Blackness and/or worshipping Whiteness" (Leverette, "Speaking Up" 435). This denial is seen in both Ryder's and Tom's attitudes toward the Black race. By seeking an in-between space, biracial people are seen to be denying the minority race that contributes to one side of their identity. This denial is also because throughout history Mixed race individuals have been seen as gleaning the best from both the White race and the Black. They were seen as being different from Blacks in the sense that they obtained "beauty, goodness, intelligence, and worth" from the White side of their race (436). For many years after the one drop rule was put into place, Mixed race people were seen as a bridge between the White and the Black, a "better" version of other colored people, or as a barrier between White and Black communities (436-38).

Blacks' perceptions of Mixed race people came about because of the Blue Vein Societies that existed, which were controversial because their members were seen as denying or being ashamed of their Blackness. Members had to possess the qualities such as "veins [that] could be clearly seen beneath their skin, whose hair could be passed through a fine-toothed comb, and whose skin was no darker than a paper bag" (Leverette, "Speaking Up" 436). In addition, Tanfer Emin Tunc describes the Black community's perception of these societies as being "an organization of 'interracial royalty' whose

members were more ‘white than black’—that attempted to distinguish itself from the rest of the black community” (678). Obviously, this created a general feeling in the Black community that Mixed race individuals were arrogant and erected another barrier that Blacks would have to overstep in order to prove themselves to be intelligent and hard-working. The consensus among Black communities seemed to be that biracial people should not have representation in a third space if it hinders other minorities from getting ahead.

In addition to marginalizing Blacks, Chesnutt’s argument for a separate Mixed race group also risks marginalizing the very biracial people who seek this third space for themselves. In “The Wife of His Youth,” Ryder marginalizes himself and the other members of the Blue Vein Society. Even though the group claims to look at only the “character and culture” of people wanting to join, this is untrue. Ryder subscribes to the view that an individual who was “not white enough to show blue veins” would not be able to enter into the group (*Wife* 1). Therefore, it is not just a society based on culture and character. If it were, this would be indicated by the name of the group. However, the real name of the group is never made known to the reader by Chesnutt. Instead, the group is known by this nickname, which symbolizes the importance of a light skin tone. This preference further splits the Mixed race community. Not all people who are mixed have light enough skin that enables their veins to show through. Because of this, these Blue Vein Societies split an already “othered” group into an even more “othered” group. The narrator does acknowledge this briefly, and tells the reader “There were those who had been known to assail it violently as a glaring example of the very prejudice from which the colored race had suffered most”; however, the narrator then goes on to say that this anger diminished when the critics were able to see the inner workings of the group and how it served to “guide their people through the social wilderness” (2). Although these societies may help guide Mixed race people to a tangible identity, they still contribute to the marginalization of the darker individuals of their race. The darker group is not able to pass and reap the benefits available to lighter individuals. By dividing an already othered group, more animosity and hostility can set in—the very characteristics that were meant to be left behind after the end of slavery.

In “The Sheriff’s Children,” not only is Tom as a Mixed race individual marginalized because

of the confusion surrounding the inhabitation of a third space but he also suffers at the hands of the law because of this third space. Chesnutt puts an especially heavy emphasis on the effect of the one drop rule in this story. Tom's marginalization as a biracial person is apparent from his being called the "strange mulatto" who is accused of murder (*Wife* 63). By inhabiting this third space and being labelled as a mulatto, he is more "othered" than if Tom were to simply "choose a side." If he chose to identify as Black, Tom would at least be certain of the outcome and consequences of that claim. However, being in an illegitimate third space causes society to view mulattos as strange, foreign, and immoral. This causes Tom to feel stuck in the space that he is forced to inhabit. This feeling of being trapped racially is synonymous with Tom attempting to escape from prison. Tom tells the Sheriff that the only way he will be able to be free from jail is if he shoots him. His independence and chance of escape depends on killing the White man as well as using his education to differentiate himself from the Black race. Tom is not ready to inhabit this third space, and as soon as he realizes he is a part of a hybrid identity, he allows himself to bleed to death. The Sheriff's sympathy as the White man comes too late and does not save Tom. This outcome can be seen as Chesnutt's comment on how biracial people can create a space for themselves, but it does not come without repercussions. The result then becomes that by separating from the Black and the White and willingly inhabiting a third space, Mixed race individuals have a better chance of being represented if they are willing to endure the risks. Tom was obviously not proud of this space, and he suffered as a result. However, even pride in identity and a willingness to risk ostracism does not get rid of the marginalization that has the potential to occur within Mixed race groups. Just like Ryder, Tom did not achieve this third space. This shows the reader that, although Chesnutt advocated for this space, he knew it was a lofty and controversial goal.

Charles Chesnutt concludes in his essay "Race Prejudice: Its Causes and its Cure" (1905) that race will soon be an obsolete concept and that "there shall be in the United States but one people, moulded by the same culture, swayed by the same patriotic ideals . . . when men will be esteemed and honored for their character and talents" (*Selected* 93). In Chesnutt's vision, although different cultures will continue to exist, the way that society will view race in the future is inescapable. As Bhabha suggests, "otherness" will be represented by finding the "other" in another person. By doing

so, an amalgamation of race will take place where all people are represented, and the concept of the “other” will one day be eradicated. However, in the present, mixed races have to continue to fight for representation in American society.

“I think I must write a book,” Charles Chesnutt writes in an 1880 journal entry, in which “the negro’s part is to prepare himself for social recognition and equality; and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it If I can do anything to further this . . . I would gladly devote my life to the work” (*Selected* 21-2). Chesnutt was an advocate for advancing “othered” peoples’ cultures, including his own. His passion for representation of “othered” groups is seen in his essays, personal thoughts, and short stories. He influenced the idea of a third space so that marginalized and sidelined groups would be represented as much as possible. However, when it comes to Mixed race individuals today and their issue of deciding whether to inhabit a third space or choose a side instead, there is no solution that will be without consequences and risks. The one drop rule and *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling altered the way society viewed race in nineteenth century America, and the effects are still seen today. According to Chesnutt, absorption into the White race is not the answer for Mixed race people because it would be a denial of their Black heritage, and, therefore, a denial of their Mixed race identity. Although Ryder in “The Wife of His Youth” thinks that moving up in society as a Mixed race individual requires a denial of Black blood, Chesnutt destroys this theory when he inserts ‘Liza Jane back into Ryder’s life. The same occurs in “The Sheriff’s Children” when Tom recognizes that his education and “White” way of speaking do not erase or separate him from the color of his skin caused by his possession of Black blood. Secondly, if the biracial community denies its Black heritage and dwells in a third space, then the Black community will experience more marginalization in society. Chesnutt fears that Mixed race people will choose the “superior” side that makes up their own race if they are given the chance of having a third space because they do not want to suffer the same unfair treatment that Blacks suffered in society. However, Chesnutt, as a Mixed race man, was also aware of the importance of allowing Mixed race people the freedom they had never experienced before to choose their own identity.

Charles Chesnutt brought to light the issues during Reconstruction that are still seen today. Institutionalized Black and White racial division left Mixed race people to fend for themselves in a

third space that was invisible and illegitimate. Today, Mixed race people are still on a long path of self-discovery. Each Mixed race individual must choose their own racial path and confront both the ramifications and rewards head-on, like Ryder chooses to do in “The Wife of His Youth.” If they choose instead to be shaped by society like Tom, then all biracial individuals are at risk of losing the possibility of a separate identity. Both Homi Bhabha and Charles Chesnutt call for Mixed race people to embrace their own racial path and find progress and freedom in the cultural beyond.

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