

CREOLE BODIES AND INTERSECTING LIVES AND OPPRESSIONS:
AN INTERTEXTUAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN KATE CHOPIN
AND ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON

by

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ABSTRACT

Differing and contentious definitions of the term “Creole” have tried to produce rigid boundaries defining who to include and who to exclude within a “highly-contested identity space” (Stouck 272) by historians, writers, scholars, and even within Creole communities based on hegemonic dichotomous “either/or” structures. Moreover, these differing attempts at forming exclusive definitions have only revealed Creole to be a category that resists and complicates dichotomous structures. This project compares the nineteenth century Creole short stories of Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson to show how these boundaries are complicated and fissured by the ambiguities of race, gender roles, and female sexuality embodied by the colorful characters portrayed in their fiction. Through their stories, both writers interrogate the social inequalities of gender, race, class, and feminine sexuality, as it existed in the South, specifically in Louisiana. Their stories are more than social commentaries; by centering Creole subjects, they also challenge and disrupt normative standards of proper roles and markings of gender, race, and class.

Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson are both identified as “women” who lived in the same region, but this shared identity does not mean shared lived experiences: the constructed categories of race, class, and sexuality greatly affect and cause individuals to experience oppression in different ways. An intertextual dialogue between these two writers illustrates how they each create different texts of race and human experiences within a common Creole community.

Because of such hegemonic control of what is published, read, and studied, only certain voices are heard, while others are silenced, therefore, forming a narrow, one-sided commentary

of lived experiences—an incomplete picture. To study Chopin while ignoring the work of Dunbar-Nelson only offers one side to a subject whose multiplicity of meanings foster considerable academic debate. Only by placing the stories of these two different authors, one widely anthologized and one not, side by side to see how they interact or contrast with each other, can we then attempt to formulate answers and thus gain a clearer, more whole, picture of the oppression and privilege structures of domination have on women's lives.

DEDICATION

To my sister: with your love, support, guidance, and reality checks, I keep meeting my goals and striving for new ones. I love you.

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INTRODUCTION

“Creole people assert that they were not black *or* white, nor black *and* white, but that they were *Creole*.” --Andrew Jolivette, *Louisiana Creoles*

“I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts of the other writer’s story. And the whole story is what I’m after.” -Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*

The word *Creole* is often elusive, resisting definition; but it can also be at times lucid, denoting a defiance of social and racial dichotomies and normality. Creole is a cultural amalgamation, challenging hegemonic racial categories. It is a contested term, subject to much debate as to who can and who cannot claim it as an identity. It is identity politics, because Creole bodies are where race, class, culture, *and* gender intersect and are affected by systemic structures. “Creole women of color’s bodies have historically been situated as the site where the racialization process is made possible” (Jolivette 18): The one drop rule adds “of color” to modify Creole’s use as an adjective. There was a mythology romanticized in the nineteenth century where Creole meant a distinctive class of white aristocracy derived from French blood and who were distinctive from the newly arrived Americans. However, the French system of *plaçage*, prevalent in Louisiana from the eighteenth century until the Civil War, where prominent white Creole planters would have arranged sexual relationships with *libre* women was, dare I say, “seminal” in (pro)creating Creoles of color—shattering illusions of a “pure blooded” race and culture.¹ It is a mix of French, Spanish, African, and/or Native American. Creole is like its city, New Orleans: an admixture; “a site of contested cultural and ethnic

amalgamation” (Jolivéte 28); carnivalesque. Lastly, the *Creole* in Louisiana is like the “famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique” (Dunbar-Nelson 9). How are all these meanings relevant and used as a literary subject? Another question to consider is: because of its diverse meanings and connotations, how is it represented by different writers? This is a study of Creole subjectivity in the literature of Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson.

Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson both published collections of short stories depicting Creole lives and culture in the late nineteenth-century. Through their stories, both writers interrogate the social inequalities of gender, race, class, and feminine sexuality, as it existed in the South, specifically in Louisiana. Their stories are more than social commentaries; by centering Creole subjects, they also challenge and disrupt normative standards of proper roles and markings of gender, race, and class. They also use Creole characters as an additional mechanism to literary tropes popular during the time, such as the “tragic mulatta,” in order to complicate binary discourses of race and gender. Though both authors published during the same time, Kate Chopin was and continues to be the better known of the two writers; her stories are still more widely read and canonized while Dunbar-Nelson’s stories are not as commonly studied, nor are they part of mainstream American literature anthologies, like those published by W.W. Norton & Company. Creole subjectivity differs in each writer’s works. Chopin focuses on white Creole culture while making references to mulatto or quadroon characters; Dunbar-Nelson writes specifically about Creoles of color. The similar circumstances in their narrative subjects, the spatial-and temporal-scapes, and writing experiences raise questions that demand answers by literary and cultural critics and scholars alike.

This project aims to probe those questions, which include: what are the politics of claiming a Creole identity?; how does other literature published during the post-Reconstruction era form the literature of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson?; do these two authors who lived such divergent lives with differing influences and histories tell the same story?; how do these stories speak to one another about the restrictive, oppressive gender and racial roles experienced in the South?; and does reading Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson within a Creole historical context change or further current scholarship about their writing?

Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson are both identified as “women” who lived in the same region, but this shared identity does not mean shared lived experiences: the constructed categories of race, class, and sexuality greatly affect and cause individuals to experience oppression in different ways. Because of such hegemonic control of what is published, read, and studied, only certain voices are heard, while others are silenced, therefore, forming a narrow, one-sided commentary of lived experiences—an incomplete picture. To study Chopin while ignoring the work of Dunbar-Nelson only offers one side to a subject whose multiplicity of meanings foster considerable academic debate. Only by placing the stories of these two different authors, one widely anthologized and one not, side by side to see how they interact or contrast with each other, can we then attempt to formulate answers and thus gain a clearer, more whole, picture of the oppression and privilege structures of domination have on women’s lives.

Ultimately, I will build an intertextual dialogue between Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson by analyzing and exploring the history of the region and culture that informed their writings and works of literature, specifically the short stories centered on Creole lives and experiences. Being guided by the question of how these texts work together, we can form a larger, more complete picture about oppressed lives in Creole communities in the South.

Comparisons of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson's Creole short stories are rare and almost virtually non-existent, partly because Dunbar-Nelson is often ignored as a fiction writer and instead revered as a poet. By completing this project, I will add to the academic discourse on Creole subjectivity in literature and its importance in understanding contemporary Creole culture and to the literary treatments of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's and Kate Chopin's Creole short stories.

Chapter one discusses and analyzes the history of Creole identity formation as well as the constructions of gender, race, class, and culture central to this formation. As mentioned before, there is little agreement to an exact definition of Creole and who encompasses it, resulting in multiple meanings and connotations. Definitions have shifted through time due to community and cultural politics, thus illustrating just how unstable and resistant identity categories, overall, can be. This chapter traces a genealogy of the use of the word showing how it was once used as a geographical label—meaning to come from Louisiana—before developing into a racialized identity. This racialization and heated contention occurs during and after the prevalence of the system of *plaçage* where these arranged unions between rich Creole white planters and women of color increased the population of the *gens de couleur libre*, or the free people of color. The chapter also discusses how bodies labeled as Creole disrupt dominant society's dichotomous hierarchies and social structures based on bodily markers such as skin color, where a person is labeled as either white or black. Some Creole bodies can be a mix of both white and black, causing racial ambiguity. This ambiguity is political in the sense that it challenges those legal categories defining race as strictly white or black and the privileges associated with each race, such as those aimed to racially segregate society. For instance, the politics surrounding the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case initiated by the Creole group, *Comité des Citoyens* (Committee of Citizens), challenging segregation made New Orleans a site of negotiations for

racial concerns regarding who could claim certain privileges based on legal interpretations defining “whiteness” and “colored.”

Creole bodies are sites of a bodily war of race and class affected by gender. The chapter continues by discussing the role gender plays in identity formation and how it affects social standings. Race intersects with gender in deciding social classifications and characterizations based on the residual effect of the ideal of “true womanhood” that had such an impact on society earlier in the nineteenth century. I will also examine who resists and who strives for this ideal of “true womanhood.” This chapter also explores possible answers to the question of what are the politics of claiming a Creole identity, as well as evaluating those answers.

Chapter two offers an important historical overview of the literature published during the post-Reconstruction era. The types of novels and fiction produced during this time provides part of the structure of the framework used to read Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson’s short stories discussed in this project. This chapter also looks at the location, time, and lives of Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Because of the lack of scholarship focusing specifically on Creole of color subjectivity in fiction, I will use scholarship whose attention is placed on Black women’s subjectivity in literature, including research on the “politics of respectability,” the domestic novel, common motifs such as “passing,” and literary tropes such as “the tragic mulatta.” Creole culture is not mutually exclusive from, but a cultural identity within African American literary traditions. Finally, this chapter provides a short biography of Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, looking at their education, relationships, publishing careers, and criticism of their published works. By looking at the different standpoints of these two women writers, one can appreciate the similarities of their lives as cultural expression in their literature.

Researchers, scholars, and theorists can recognize and address differences among diverse situations and standpoints by considering and using different perspectives regarding an issue. Being aware of and understanding differences contribute to not only a broader-based knowledge of people and their societies, but it also provides a more truthful picture of a community. Standpoint theory offers a recovery of those once silenced voices, perspectives, and agencies excluded by dominant culture—as evidenced by the limited scholarship focusing on Dunbar-Nelson’s short stories. Its methodology also permits us to set up literary frameworks connecting differing experiences, thus opening a critical space to discuss possibly contentious issues. Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes standpoint theory’s generation of shared truths as a “‘common context of struggle’ where people of diverse situations and standpoints can combine their perspectives and use these overlapping understandings to work together” (57). Through literature, I will combine the different perspectives of Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson in order to show how they overlap and work together to reveal social injustices imposed on women’s bodies.

It should be pointed out that standpoint theory can be problematic in that it tends to essentialize groups by suggesting that all members of a particular group experience the same types of oppression in the same way. It is doubtful that either Kate Chopin or Alice Dunbar-Nelson considered themselves as the ultimate representatives of white Creoles or Creoles of color. However, to this particular project, standpoint theory can be useful only by acknowledging that these two voices are not the collective voices of any particular group. Instead, it is useful to look at their relationship in context with different women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chapter three offers an intertextual dialogue between Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. *Intertextual* is how texts relate or derive meaning when standing in relation to each other. Differences are just as central to readings as are similarities and both will be thoroughly explored. This chapter considers some of Chopin's and Dunbar-Nelson's Creole short stories and examines how they interact and conflict with one another. A synthesis of the previous two chapters—Louisiana Creole history and its systems, and a brief literary history of the period—takes place in this chapter in order to structure a framework in which to read Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson together. While this chapter looks at the intertextuality of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson, I would be remiss in not acknowledging how they are also in dialogue with other authors during the post-Reconstruction era whose themes deal with racial, class, and gender issues, especially Dunbar-Nelson and other African American writers. It is important to discuss the critical discourses produced by published literature and how it engages with issues surrounding gender, race, and class in society.

Patricia Hill Collins writes in *Black Feminist Thought* that, “dialogues associated with ethical, principled coalition building create possibilities for new versions of truth” (Collins 38). While ahistorically forcing a coalition between Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson is impossible, an intertextual reading is and can create the possibility for a “new version of truth.” Collins uses Alice Walker's experience as an example by stating: “Alice Walker's answers to the questions of what she felt were the major differences between the literature of African-Americans and Whites offers a provocative glimpse of the types of truths that might emerge through epistemologies that embrace dialogues and coalition building” (38). Through textual analysis of literatures of Black and White women, I aim to open a dialogue between these two women authors to show not only the parallels in their experiences but also where their works connect and speak to one another.

By creating an intertextual dialogue of different experiences and voices, not just those from dominant hegemonic cultures, this dialogue will coalesce to form a larger, more complete picture focusing on the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Overall, this project will show how the differing experiences and oppressions of these women often paralleled with one another. Collins asserts that, “through dialogues exploring how domination is maintained and changed, parallels between Black women’s experiences and those of other groups become the focus of investigation” (Collins 38). This focus also includes the investigation of gender, race, class, and sexuality intersecting these parallels. Creating this literary connection between Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson will create conversations to gain not only cultural and historical knowledge of groups of people who are denied membership to communities or a claim of an identity marker—such as Creole of color, but also to pose new questions that frame the tensions, gaps, and contradictions surrounding given and learned cultural, historical, and textual knowledge.

CHAPTER ONE: GENDER, RACE, CLASS, AND LOUISIANA CREOLE IDENTITY AND CULTURE: RESISTING AND DISRUPTING SOCIETAL NORMS

The statuses and categories of gender, race, and class during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were rigidly fixed in society and clearly demarcated in binaries. People were categorized as either man or woman, for there was no transgender cognizance or language during this time, though transgender people certainly existed. People were considered either upper class or lower class, for our modern idea of a middle class is essentially a post-World War II construction (Suddath 1). Laws were instituted to categorize people as either black or white. The period from 1877 to about 1915 was a time when so-called fundamental gender roles were firmly in place and simultaneously being challenged by both race and gender conscious individuals and groups. Women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere, attending to their husbands, their children, and managing household affairs, while men had access to the public sphere. Racial tensions were at a height during this time, prompting Claudia Tate to refer to this era as “probably one of the most violent periods of white/black race relations” (4). This was especially true in the South. I will refer to this time period by the historical label, post-Reconstruction² throughout this project.

This chapter discusses and analyzes the constructions of not only gender, race, and class but also “culture” associated with these identity categories. While also looking at how these identity categories are constructed and used as tools of oppression throughout the United States during the post-Reconstruction period, this chapter will focus on the South, and specifically Creole identity and culture in Louisiana. Andrew Jolivette hits the mark when he claims,

“Louisiana represents a site of contested cultural and ethnic amalgamation. No single social group or population better represents this blending of worlds than the Creoles” (28). Louisiana Creole identity and culture is used to illustrate just how unstable and resistant identity categories were and still are today.

Western culture has a love affair with dichotomies where everything, especially identity categories, must be set in terms of “either/or.” Either a person’s sex is male or female, or a person is either black or white. These identity dichotomies are faulty and work as a controlling system to keep people in their proper places. Whenever a person does not fit perfectly within a dichotomous framework, societal norms and oppressive systems are complicated and disrupted. This is the case with the Creole people of Louisiana. Since this term was first used as an identity marker, whether it entails birthplace, ancestry, ethnicity, and even race, its meaning has varied. Thus, Creole people do not fit comfortably within a dichotomous framing of identity, though they are also not mutually exclusive from white, Native American, or African American cultures.

In the introduction to *Creole, A History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color*, published in 2000, Sybil Kein ponders why scholars have marginalized Louisiana Creoles in examinations of histories of the Louisiana French (xiii). Kein also wonders why no extensive study of the group has taken place before. Perhaps it is because of myriad definitions and both the romantic and exotic allusions this term seems to hold. There are certain politics to claiming Creole and while these politics have been a contentious issue for scholars and historians, they have also been a controversial issue for those in the Creole community. For instance, these politics are important when considering the history of the term Creole, which was initially used to describe the general population in Louisiana and continued through the post-Reconstruction period when the defining of race was quite hostile, thus, leading to arguments of who can and

should claim Creole.³ But what are those politics? Some scholars argue that Creoles are of an exclusive white, aristocratic class, emphasizing a French ancestry and “purity” of blood, while others argue that Creoles have also descended from people of color. How Creole is defined and who claims it have shifted through time due to community and cultural politics, as well as class status implications. There is little agreement as to an exact definition and to whom it encompasses, resulting in a multiplicity of meanings and a virtual bodily border war, and thus a discussion of who claims Creole is needed.

First, it is important to trace a genealogy of the use of the term in the United States showing how it was once used as a geographical label—meaning to come from Louisiana—before developing into a racialized identity. The word “Creole” is a French derivation of the Spanish word *criollo* that is derived from the Latin term, *creare*, meaning, “to create.” In 1884, George Washington Cable asks in his historical text, *Creoles of Louisiana*: “What is a Creole? Even in Louisiana the question would be variously answered” (41). However, Cable does offer answers of his own to this question while also recognizing the fact that others will surely disagree with him.

Cable claims that Louisiana Creoles came into existence in 1718 during French occupation of the province of Louisiana under the charge of Bienville who started laying out the streets and plots of land that would eventually form the city of New Orleans, or “the Creoles’ City” (52). Sometime during the winter of 1727-1728, the French government sent over to the settlement shiploads of *les filles à la cassette*, casket girls,⁴ due to the lack of eligible wives available. The Ursuline nuns, who established a convent in the area in the same year, provided living quarters, schooling, and supervision for the girls until they were selected for marriage after being properly courted.⁵ Cable describes these casket girls as proper maidens and “not of

houseless girls from the streets of Paris, as heretofore” (25). Heretofore, the women who were available for marriage were described as “fallen women” or convicts sent by the French government. Creoles, according to Cable, “have never been careful for the authentication of their traditions, and the only assurance left to us so late as this is, that the good blood of these modest girls of long-forgotten names, and of the brave soldiers to whom they gave their hands with the king’s assent and dower, flows in the veins of the best Creole families of the present day” (26). Those under the guise of a Creole aristocracy insist that only the true Creoles are the ones descended from the *les filles à la cassette*. In fact, Cable states that the title of Creole first belonged to the descendants of French settlers as opposed to the Spanish, but later came to imply “a certain excellence of origin, and so came early to include any native, French or Spanish descent by either parent, whose non-alliance with the slave race entitled him to social rank” (41). This assertion offered by Cable appears to discredit claims that Creole persons during the post-Reconstruction period were also descendants of the so-called “slave race”; however, he does not actually yield to this ideal.

Much to the dismay of many of his contemporaries, including Grace King who had also written a history of Creoles in New Orleans,⁶ Cable acknowledges that in fact, “besides French and Spanish, there are even, for convenience of speech, ‘colored’ Creoles; but there are no Italian, or Sicilian, nor any English, Scotch, Irish, or ‘Yankee’ Creoles, unless of parentage married into, and themselves thoroughly proselyted in, Creole society” (42).⁷ However, he does clarify that the term was “adopted by” and “not conceded to” the “natives of mixed blood” (41) and goes on to discuss the other ways in which “Creole” was used. There was a monetary value attached to the title, and this expanded its meaning to include anything peculiar to Louisiana that could be sold. Cable lists these items as: “Creole ponies, chickens, cows, shoes, eggs, wagons,

baskets, cabbages, negroes [sic], etc.” (42). By using it in this way, the use of the term as an adjective was to distinguish saleable Louisiana goods from American goods and this essentially also commodifies the term Creole. By providing a litany of saleable items marketed as “Creole,” Cable was supporting the argument that the identity marker originally applied to anyone or thing “native to Louisiana.” This was, of course, disputed by some of his contemporaries who were protecting the idea that Creole should strictly be applied to the descendants of the French and Spanish.⁸

Many white scholars and writers, like Grace King and M.H. Herrin, insisted that the Creole line branches from some of the first aristocratic French families in America. These historians and scholars vehemently deny the “myths” of any ancestors coming from the “dark continent” of Africa or the Caribbean islands.⁹ Herrin asserts, in his text, *The Creole Aristocracy*:

This fanciful legend, utterly incredible, a product of the grossly misinformed, attaches itself quite erroneously as an integral part of our early American scene to a people who not only came to this continent, as did so many others who sought freedom and the opportunity to live a life of their own, but who, in so doing, distinguished themselves in their adopted land in more than one field of endeavor, and who, with their progeny, became the first aristocratic families of one of America’s most colorful cities, old New Orleans. (27)

Herrin stresses that the Creoles in America are the noblest race with the purest blood in America and are “jealous of their Caucasian lineage” (29). He continues with an examination of other “racial strains” known in Louisiana that include the mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, and griffe.¹⁰ Herrin argues that because of the various “racial strains” located in one area, this has been the cause for “the widespread erroneous impression of those not too interested in accuracy as to what the Creole really is, viz: a white person descended from French and/or Spanish settlers (or of European parentage)” (29). This is an example of the dominant class creating racial categories in order to maintain an “us” and “them” dichotomy, furthering the denial of any shared ancestry.

Herrin, however, disregards the fact that most of these “racial strains” are the result of white Creole parentage. What Herrin and others arguing for an exclusively white Creole identity fail to acknowledge in their histories of the Louisiana Creole aristocracy is how the system of slavery institutionalized the rape of Black women and practice of *plaçage*.

By ignoring these common practices, these writers silenced the lived experiences of a whole class of people. Here I will also suggest that the story of the shipments of the *les filles à la cassette* may be a romantic myth perpetuated to cover the fact that many so-called white Creoles may actually be descendents from enslaved Black women and/or “free women of color.”¹¹

Andrew Jolivéte argues that the term Creole “has always referred to those mixed-race persons born in the New World as there was no substantial white female population to reproduce an all-white Creole population in Louisiana” (9). The wealthy white male planters used the bodies of women of color for sexual fulfillment and thus produced a multi-racial Creole population.

The institutionalized raping of Black women during slavery was made legitimate by the objectification and racist characterizations placed on women of color. According to theorist Hazel Carby, dominant white society instilled the notion that a “slave woman . . . could be ‘neither pure nor virtuous’; existing in circumstances of sexual subordination” (21). Under racist society’s purview, slave women may have been forced, but were also willing to be sexually available to their masters. Carby further argues that this idea of “willingness” ultimately led to beliefs that women were active participants in the violent sex act. “Rape has always involved patriarchal notions of women being, at best, not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inviting a sexual attack” (39). This system of institutionalized rape has had a continuing effect on the stereotypes of the immorality of Black women. While some white Creole men sexually

abused the bodies of their enslaved women, other's maintained concubines that lived away from the plantation and in the city in problematic *plaçage* relationships.

The complex system of *plaçage* thrived, especially in New Orleans, between the years of 1769-1865. This system involved long-term formal sexual arrangements between Creole white men and women of color who were racially classified as quadroons (Long 7, Martin 57). Many scholars refer to the women in these types of relationships as either *placées* or concubines. It should be noted that this system relied on patriarchal structures and its privileges that promoted not only racial but also gender imbalances between the dominant group (white, rich males) and the "others" (black, enslaved females). These arrangements could have been consented but many were forced, seeming as the only opportunity for many of these women for financial security. However, these arrangements for the women of color involved can be seen as an alternative with few advantages. Whatever advantages offered, though, were limited within the constructs of a society maintained by racism, sexism, and the control of Black women's bodies and sexuality. Legal marriage was basically denied to free women of color¹² and these formalized and sometimes contractual arrangements could afford them protection and survival. Free women of color could only marry free men of color, and free men of color who were considered "marriageable" were virtually non-existent. Therefore, for a free woman of color who had limited advantages or rights within the law, the system of *plaçage* that was used "to save herself and her progeny was not only pragmatic, but, in a sense, ingenious" (Martin 64). Since these women were not legally married, they retained ownership of any wealth acquired. Most of the meetings between the men and women took place in controlled, formal environments.

Grand Balls were held where Creole white men would pay an entrance fee to view and meet available quadroons. These relationships were usually arranged by the mothers of women

of color who would groom their daughter to become *placées*. Also, financial terms were usually agreed upon before an arrangement was finalized, including possible settlements in the event of premature separation (Martin 67). These relationships were similar and somewhat treated like marriage; however, they were not legally recognized by the state (Long 7). Therefore, preliminary negotiations were important for the protection of these women and their children if anything should happen to their white male partners. In fact, some men would leave wealth and property to their concubines and children as an inheritance, much to the chagrin of the white heirs, resulting in legal disputes that were sometimes settled in favor of the *placées* (Martin 66). Often, the women and children in these arrangements would be given their own property and a few even owned slaves. However, the promise of financial security and a severance pay was not necessarily guaranteed in a *plaçage* relationship. Many *placées* were abandoned and left with nothing from their white male partners.

Scholars assert that these sexual relationships, along with a significant number of planters manumitting their slave mistresses and biological children, resulted in the creation of a third racial tier in Louisiana: the *gens de couleur libre*, the free people of color (Martin 57, Domínguez 24). Before the end of the Civil War, these people were a third class of people recognized in Louisiana's unique tripartite racial classification system. If a slave woman of color entered into the practice of *plaçage* and gave birth, it was common for the white Creole father to free both his concubine and any children produced from the relationship. If he did not own them, then he would buy their freedom (Martin 60). Over time, many of these women of color and their heirs became wealthy and part of a class of rich families of color referred to as the "*cordon bleus*" (65). While the *gens de couleur libre* enjoyed more privileges than slaves, they did not have the same legal or social equality of whites. They could not legally marry white partners and

were not held in the same esteem as whites. The lives of these free people of color mirrored the white Creoles, they “embraced Catholicism, and, through the acquisition of slaves and extensive landholdings, established themselves as Louisiana’s black elite (12-13). The *gens de couleur libre* identified themselves as Creoles, “much to the horror of the white Creole community” (Brasseaux 90), and their descendants are commonly called Creoles of Color. The racial signifier of “mulatta/o” was widely used to designate those of mixed racial identity or of an indeterminate race (Brody, Dunbar-Nelson). Instead of admitting the existence of “Creoles of Color,” descendants of Creole men and their slave mistresses or *libre* women, many whites would use the identity term mulatta/o.

During the post-Reconstruction era, many whites claimed Creole as exclusively applying to “pure” white Louisianans of European decent, particularly French descent (Martin 59), and “there were certain assumptions being produced about the merits of European blood that had the effect of demonizing black women and erasing Indian women from positive Creole identity formation from 1890-1920” (Jolivéte 12). Because of racist beliefs and attitudes, acknowledging the existence of Creoles of color became a contentious issue. The purpose for claiming an exclusive white Creole identity and denying the existence of Creoles of color only served to perpetuate a mythology of a “pure” white Creole aristocracy. In fact, Charles Gayarré, a Louisiana historian, made a total of “thirty explicit references to ‘the pure white ancestry of the Louisiana Creoles’ within an hour” (Domínguez 143) in his 1885 address at Tulane. The urgency to deny the existence of Creoles of color served to establish that “Creole meant pure white in order to retain . . . social standing” (Adams 27). This bodily border war was not just influenced by race; class also plays a significant role in the inclusivity and exclusivity of claiming Creole as an identity.

All these meanings have much to do with what Virginia Domínguez suggests in her critical work, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*, that “a single definition of the term *Creole* may have been adequate for all of these societies during the early stages of European expansion. But as the Creole populations of these colonies (or former colonies) established diverse social, political, and economic positions for themselves over the years, *Creole* acquired diverse meanings” (13). As previously stated, class also plays a significant role in determining the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of a cultural identity marker.

Class and social status are determining factors for social group membership. Domínguez discusses the close ties of social status with the terms of identity used in normative society. It is important to quote Domínguez in full to inform the discussion about the politics of claiming a Creole identity:

The dispute between the two sectors of Louisiana’s population that identify themselves as Creole, in addition, hinges on the status connotations of the labels *Creole*, *white*, and *black*. The long history of African slaves left in Louisiana, as in other parts of the United States, a traditional association of whites with upper status and of blacks with lower status. To white Creoles today the mere suggestion of possible African ancestry invokes a lowering of social and economic status of the people in question. To colored [sic] or black Creoles, on the other hand, the claim of at least partial European ancestry accords the group in question a status (or expectation of status) higher than that accorded to “pure” blacks. Moreover, to colored [sic] or black Creoles the association with early European settlers in Louisiana signals a tie to the state’s “old families” and, by extension, to higher status. Thus, to identify someone as Creole is to invoke in the course of a particular conversation historically linked connotations of social and economic status. But this is not to say just that “ethnic” identities have status connotations; it is to say that New Orleanians’ perception of status, of how things used to be and how in their opinion they ought to be, is often the major criterion by which individuals are identified as Creole. What many of us normally assume to be likely *connotations* of membership in a particular group are, in the case of southern Louisiana, often, if not always, the crucial variables that individual New Orleanians manipulate in making themselves members of a group, or in identifying others as members of a group. Status, then, is frequently more of a determining factor on group membership than genealogical ancestry. (263)

Social class revolves around the management and segregation of racial groups while racial classifications and differences play a fundamental role in the development of hegemonic rules and societal norms. While social status associated with an ethnic or racial identity may be a motivating political factor in either claiming an ethnic identity or discrediting others from such claims, the different and sometimes conflicting definitions of *Creole* undermine societal assumptions about ethnic identity.

Opposition was quite heavy and set to hamper any social status Creoles of Color may have gained based on the “*connotations*” of membership of a particular group. For instance, this opposition prompted certain laws to be passed in order to control who were and were not part of a group. Black codes were laws enacted throughout the south in order to ensure social inequalities between whites and people of color. In 1857, a bill was introduced to define a person of color as “anyone with a taint of African blood” (Domínguez 26). These laws also controlled education, working restrictions, and property ownership (Dunbar-Nelson 28) of free people of color throughout the south. Alice Dunbar-Nelson, in her essay, “People of Color in Louisiana,” points out that “the free people of color, however, kept amassing wealth and educating their children as ever in spite of opposition, for it is difficult to enforce laws against a race when you cannot find that race” (29). However, after the Reconstruction era, racist Jim Crow laws were enacted to further legally segregate the races, and to obscure any social standing acquired by men and women of color. These laws especially impacted the higher class of Creoles of color in New Orleans whose status was about to change from these laws.

New Orleans during the post-Reconstruction era offers a location for negotiations of racial concerns over the “separate but equal” laws enacted throughout the country during this time. In 1892, Homer Plessy was arrested for violating Louisiana’s Separate Car Act of 1890.

The Act required that “equal but separate” accommodations must be provided on all passenger railways, mandating that “no person or persons, shall be permitted to occupy seats in coaches, other than the ones, assigned to them on account of the race they belong to” (Golub 563). Plessy had purchased a first-class, one-way ticket from New Orleans to Covington, Louisiana. He took a seat in the “Whites Only” car. Plessy was only seven-eighths white and according to legal definitions based on the infamous “one-drop rule,” he was, therefore, legally classified as Black. His overall intention to sit in this privileged white section went unchallenged and unnoticed until someone pointed out, through a prior arrangement, that Plessy was indeed considered legally Black and thus breaking the law. When Plessy ignored the Conductor’s demand to move to the Colored car, he was arrested and charged in violation of the Separate Car Act. The case eventually reached the Supreme Court where the lower court’s decision was upheld. Plessy’s act of civil disobedience was in coordination with the *Comité des Citoyens*, an organized group of Creoles of color who raised money for the legal case, the detective, and the railroad company (Adams 2-4) in order to put the law to the test.

The fact that Creole New Orleans was the location of the *Plessy* legal dispute is significant considering its history of maintaining a tripartite racial classification system, the racial hybridity of Creoles, and its attempt to distinguish a separate Creole culture from the rest of the country. Due to the high interracial population in New Orleans, laws designed to keep the races separate were problematic. However, Jim Crow laws initiated throughout the south were written to firmly set the American pattern of racial binaries into place. Understandably, these laws were resented by the Creoles of color, especially the more affluent men and women of the class whose prominent positions in society were now tenuous. The “Americanization” of setting distinct dichotomous racial classes, “threatened to destroy their culture and community” (Golub

569) and disturb their group membership in a class associated with economic status. Class as much as race had prompted the community to challenge the laws preventing access to privileges afforded only to those legally classified as “white.” If Creoles of color were now strictly classified as Black, then the “New Orleanians’ perception of status” associated with the label Creole and all its connotations would be lost. The Citizens’ Committee to Test the Constitutionality of the Separate Car Law (*Comité des Citoyens*) was formed by the Creole professional class in order to challenge the legitimacies of the segregation laws (Adams 2) and to protect their social standing.

Plessy v. Ferguson is well known as giving “constitutional legitimacy to Jim Crow segregation laws” (Golub 563). However, certain facts of the case actually exposed how those laws defining race are fallacious and problematic. Interpretations of the *Plessy* case call “attention to the *instability* of racial categories and to the often partial nature of legal racial constructions” (Golub 567). Issues of passing and racial ambiguity marked the legal process in the *Plessy* case. Based on appearances, Homer Plessy was white and his choice to sit in the Whites Only car would have remained unchallenged as long as he continued to “perform whiteness” (Adams 2).

Other theories emerged from the arguments of the case, such as the relationship of whiteness to property. Cheryl Harris, a critical race theorist, sees “whiteness as property” in that one’s reputation and privileges as a white person can be held as a property right. She argues, “rights in property are contingent on, intertwined with, and conflated with race” (277) and the system of slavery as property helped facilitate the “merger of white identity and property. Because the system of slavery was contingent on and conflated with racial identity, it became crucial to be ‘white,’ to be identified as white, to have the property of being white. Whiteness

was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings” (279). By denying Plessy, who in all matters appeared to be white, access to the Whites Only railway car, the railroad company was in fact depriving him of any associations or reputation of being seen as white. Laws protecting the property of whiteness were predicated on “white supremacy rather than on mere difference” (Harris 283). By denying Others the same types of privileges and access as whites, it only increases the value of whiteness: “The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness” (Harris 283). As previously stated, there are significant advantages to class and social status in claiming certain group memberships that exclude those whose race “hinges” on connotations associated with racial labels. Whiteness was (is) an exclusive club where laws were set in place to enforce the “right to exclude—determining who was or was not white enough to enjoy the privileges accompanying whiteness. In that sense, the courts protected whiteness as they did any other form of property” (283). There is no doubt that the magnitude of the case’s decision played a significant role in the public imagination regarding race during the post-Reconstruction era, especially how it influenced many authors writing about race issues and the implications of segregation laws. More importantly, these segregation laws’ attempt at the strict binary defining of race only complicated any definition of Creole.

The Creole body resists the racial dichotomy of “white” or “black.” Sybil Kein quotes from Stephen Thernstrom’s *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* that, in fact, “over time, a great many have passed into white groups in other parts of the country, and others have become integrated into Black communities. This latter choice is not based wholly on appearance, for many Creoles who choose to identify as Afro-Americans are white in appearance” (xiv). Creole bodies resist dominant society’s hierarchies and determinations of

individual's proper roles and places based on bodily markers. These bodies provide a point of disruption with patriarchal society.

Due to hegemonic exclusionary practices of dominant culture, Creole becomes an embodiment of "other" culturally identified as, what Sidonie Smith describes when referring to those not the universal subject or those who represent "colorful" heterogeneous diversity, "exotic, unruly, irrational, uncivilized, regional, or paradoxically unnatural" (9). In other words, "white," in society, is considered the norm, the neutral, the positive, the rational, the civilized, and the natural. Whiteness and the possession of whiteness as property are privileged whereas being seen as the Other to whiteness is shameful to those possessing whiteness and remain compliant with dominant societal, racist thought.

The body, according to Judith Butler, is always a "region of *cultural* unruliness and disorder (106). The parts of the body that make up the whole are what define the borders of one subject from the other; it separates one race from the other and one sex from the other. Body politics assign and adhere subjects to their proper places and roles in society based on the parts of the body further dividing subjects into dominant and marginalized cultures. The Creole body, however, disrupts any clear border or divisions. With the possible exception of sex, the bodily border marking race, ethnicity, and to some extent class, obfuscates any such distinction. A Creole could be black, white, or mixed; she or he could be French, Spanish, Indian, African, or mixed. This resisting of dichotomous norms and unsettling of societal normative standards is what complicates any definition of the term that tries to incorporate race.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson was fully aware of the disagreements and debates surrounding the definitions of "Creole" in her lifetime. Based on the arguments presented in this chapter regarding the definition of the Louisiana Creole, I am settling on her description defining the

Louisiana Creole as: the “famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique” (9).

GENDER ROLES AND CREOLE IDENTITY IN THE POST-RECONSTRUCTION PERIOD

As stated before, the post-Reconstruction period has been described as violent in regards to race relations. Theorist Evelyn Higginbotham also calls this time period as one of the worst *and* the best for African American women (185). The chapter, thus far, has looked at the racial, class, and cultural implications of identity categories. It is also important to discuss the gender roles associated with these categories. Gender roles and expectations were different for white women and women of color. Again, race, ethnicity, and how “Creole” was defined influenced gender roles in society.

In 1892, Mary L. Shaffter published her article, “Creole Women,” in *The Chautauquan* describing the proper roles and behaviors of Creole women. Shaffter stays true to the underlying connotation of *Creole* associated with proper nobility as fitting to the “chivalry of their men and the grace and beauty of their women” (346). Creole women are the ideal partners who maintain a state of dignity, and they possess superior domestic skills: “as wives, Creole women are without superiors; loving and true, they seldom figure in domestic scandals. . . . [they] are good housekeepers, are economical and industrious” (346). They are also raised with the utmost care to protect their innocence and docility. Young Creole girls are sent to a convent to obtain a proper, Catholic education, and “at sixteen or seventeen, the girl is ready for society” (347) where she will then enter an approved, though short, engagement to be married to a suitable Creole man. Creole women are expected to be devoted and submissive are towards their families. Shaffter claims, “women’s rights, for them, are the right to love and be loved, and to name the babies rather than the next president or city official” (347). One cannot help but think that the

idea that women would “name the babies rather than the next president” is a direct response to the challenges made by suffragists during this time against fixed gender roles. Of course Shaffter offers her own definition of Creole and like most whites in the post-Reconstruction era, her definition limits the term to whites only. She declares: “Creoles are the descendents of French or Spanish, born in Louisiana. Incorrectly, the term is applied to any one born and living in New Orleans or its vicinity” (346). Therefore, the description of Creole women Shaffter discusses only applies to white women. These expectations of women having superior domestic skills, being a doting mother and wife, and maintaining a protection of innocence are rooted in a system promoting an ideal set of standards of “true womanhood.”

What is commonly referred to as the “Cult of True Womanhood”¹³ greatly influenced what was determined to be the proper role or sphere for women during the post-Reconstruction period. Women were expected to uphold the fundamental virtues that defined a “true” woman. Not only were women judged by themselves, but also by their husbands, the community, and society as a whole. Women were expected to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic and were relegated to what is referred to as the private, or domestic, sphere; only men participated in the public sphere. Due to what is believed as her inability to reason logically or grasp abstractions, a woman was viewed as incapable of engaging with the world. There was an underlying, implicit idea as to whom these virtuous characteristics of “true womanhood” included and excluded. The notion of “true womanhood” and ideals of femininity did not apply to all women: it only applied to white, upper-class women, thus, excluding women of color and those of the lower classes. Therefore, the narrowly defined categories of race and class played a significant role in working to deny women of color any status of “true womanhood” while also setting up certain tropes and expectations. According to theorist Hazel Carby in her pivotal work, *Reconstructing*

Womanhood, “[t]he parameters of the ideological discourse of true womanhood were bound by a shared social understanding that external physical appearance reflected internal qualities of character and therefore provided an easily discernable indicator of the function of a female of the human species” (25). For example, vulnerability and appearing delicate were ideal characteristics for white women while strength and the “ability to bear fatigue” were considered positive, and marketable, physical features for Black women. Carby notes that it “is worth considering that a delicate constitution was an indicator of class as well as racial position; woman as ornament was a social sign of achieved wealth, while physical strength was necessary for survival of women in the cotton fields, in the factories, or on the frontier” (25). The notion of purity, while associated with white women was often denied to Black women thus reinforcing negative images and stereotypes of Black women, such as overt sexuality.

Negative stereotypes also worked to reinforce the virtues of white women. For example, perceived overt black female sexuality provided the borders of this exclusion to the “Cult of True Womanhood” while also emphasizing the repressed sexuality of white women. This idea of a “Cult of True Womanhood” was more prevalent from about the 1820s until the Civil War, but it still held sway in the post-Reconstruction period, especially in the South. However, as white women’s rights groups were fighting against this social standard, Black women’s groups were working towards a politics of respectability, especially for those in the women’s movement in the black Baptist church who were rallying against the trope of overt black female sexuality.

The representations of the sexualities of white womanhood and Black womanhood were “diametrically opposed” (Higginbotham 190), and this viewpoint extended from the time of slavery. Slave women, and especially *libre* women, were not portrayed as victims, but instead as “naturally promiscuous” (White 39), “jezebels” (89), and were often denigrated as “lewd,

lascivious, and licentious” (Hanger 224) throughout the country while the white “southern lady” was viewed as moral and pure. When the system of *plaçage* was practiced, the women of color in these relationships were often blamed for initiating and trapping their white male partners. Kimberly Hanger describes how these women of color were viewed as without morals or honor: “*Libre* women had to tread carefully and artfully within a patriarchal society that valued males more than females but that did not afford them the paternal protection due the weaker sex because they ostensibly did not possess honor and virtue—attributes accorded only to whites” (219). In 1786, the infamous “*tignon* law” was enacted that made “excessive attention due to dress” by women of “pure or mixed African blood” a criminal offense. This law was in response to angry white women pressuring the government to control the system of *plaçage* (Martin 62). *Libre* women were often blamed for seducing and tricking white men into these liaisons. White men were prey to the overt sexuality of these exotic women of color. Negative stereotypes branded women of color as “lascivious,” “lewd,” and “licentious” (Hanger 224) carried through to the post-Reconstruction period.

Women of color contested and challenged these negative stereotypes perpetuated by dominant white racist society. For example, the slave narratives written by women of color, especially Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), interrogated conventional standards of womanhood and more importantly questioned its relevancy to the lives of Black women, especially enslaved women of color. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is based on Jacobs’s life; however, in order to protect herself from scorn and her job as a domestic servant, Jacobs used a fictional narrator in place of herself, Linda Brent. Hazel Carby claims that Jacobs’s *Incidents* is “the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of the conventions of true womanhood by a black author before emancipation” (47). Enslaved women were often denied

the privilege of marriage and especially a home of their own. According to the conventions of “true womanhood,” a husband was necessary in providing the meaning of her existence. With no home, or domestic sphere, of her own, this took away any power a woman was allowed. In the narrative, even though Brent did not have a husband, she did have children by an affair she consents to have with Mr. Sands, a white neighbor who she perceives as “kinder” than Dr. Flint, the man who owns her. Brent consents to the affair with Mr. Sands in order to avoid the sexual advances of Dr. Flint and to ensure a better life for any future children she may have. Dr. Flint was notoriously known to sell off his offspring by his slave mistresses. Jacob’s narrative reveals the forced sexual nature of her (Brent’s) enslavement where in order to avoid the coercion and eventual raping by Dr. Flint, she had to make this decision to enter an illicit affair. I resist calling it a choice given that Jacobs, and many enslaved women, were forced to pick this option in order to survive: “seeing no other way of escaping the doom I do much dreaded, I made a headlong plunge” (55). Jacobs rightfully claims, as Linda Brent, that, “a slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others” (56). However, even after the emancipation of slaves, racist society used these types of forced choices made by enslaved women about the sexual burdens they endured to construct negative stereotypes of Black women, such as immorality and character unworthy of respectability. These narratives and the “incidents” they conveyed influenced the politics of later generations of women of color

Evelyn Higginbotham discusses a Black women’s movement during the post-Reconstruction era and beyond challenging societal stereotypes and dominant white society’s “racial-exclusivist” image of America. Through published writings and public assemblies, these Black women asserted “agency in the construction and representation of themselves as new subjectivities ... and contested racist discourses and rejected white America’s depiction of black

women as immoral, childlike, and unworthy of respect or protection” (186). Higginbotham characterizes this as a “politics of respectability” among black Baptist women groups. These black Baptist women promoted conformity to societal norms of morals and social comportment based on white dominant standards. The black Baptist women did not solely direct their contestations of racist discourse at white Americans but instead, “condemned what they perceived to be negative practices and attitudes among their own people” (Higginbotham 187). Black women were not merely just assimilating in dominant society, for it was much more complicated; these politics of respectability also acted subversively by offering alternative images and ideals to counteract those negative images and stereotypes proliferated by white dominant society to ensure social subordination of women of color. Because of the emphasis of claiming respectability through displaying morals and manners, social status or class did not influence “womanhood.” Poor Black women then “boldly asserted the will and agency to define themselves outside the parameters of prevailing racist discourses” (Higginbotham 192). Material wealth was then not a factor in determining respectability. Instead, character was deemed as valuable and something you did not have to purchase or rely on wealth to afford.

Most Black women who subscribed to a politics of respectability also believed obtaining a proper education, one that was not limited to domestic and/or religious skills, was an important step to defining oneself outside the parameters of racist discourse. In her collection of essays, *A Voice From the South*, Anna Julia Cooper not only refers to the many definitions of womanhood, but also reflects on the status of women and education. Cooper believed that a commitment to education was critical for women in order to uplift the race as a whole. She also looks at how the social commitment to higher education was different for white women than for Black women

and pointed out that many Black men tried to prevent, as opposed to support, Black women from obtaining an education:

It seems hardly a gracious thing to say, but it strikes me as true, that while our men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on almost every other subject, when they strike the woman question they drop back into sixteenth century logic. They leave nothing to be desired generally in regard to gallantry and chivalry, but they actually do not seem sometimes to have outgrown that old contemporary of chivalry—that idea that women may stand on pedestals or live in doll houses, (if they happen to have them) but they must not furrow their brows with thought or attempt to help tug at the great questions of the world. I fear the majority of colored men do not yet think it worth while that women aspire to higher education. Not many will subscribe to the advance ideas of Grant Allen. . . . The three R's, a little music and a good deal of dancing, a first rate dress-maker and a bottle of magnolia balm, are quite enough generally to render charming any woman possessed of tact and the capacity for worshipping masculinity. (75)

Cooper not only argued for education, but also for morality and spirituality. She was skeptical of any elevated ideals of womanhood that were rooted in archaic codes of chivalry that she deemed as elitist and could only realistically apply to a few (Carby 98). Instead, Cooper argued for a “reverence for woman as woman regardless of rank, wealth, or culture” (15).

The idea that Black women could gain full equality through adopting a politics of respectability also reflects what Wilson J. Moses refers to as, “genteel domestic feminism,” where Black women held the viewpoint that adopting a “genteel standard of Victorian sexual conduct” would do more for their advancement towards equality and respectability (Moses 964). Many women of color of this time wrote novels depicting characters maintaining this ideal, and though their works reflected a genteel ideal of womanhood. Most of these writers were also activists working in reform movements challenging racism, sexism, and classism.

CHAPTER TWO: SAME SPACE, SAME TIME, DIFFERING LIVES: KATE CHOPIN AND ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON AND THE LITERATURE OF THE POST-RECONSTRUCTION ERA

During the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras in the United States, especially in the South, the debate about who could claim “Creole” as an identity heated up—it became more of a matter of race than ever before. These debates surrounding racialized identities only furthered the contentious struggles between Creoles and Americans and the desire to distinguish the Creole community from Americans. People of color now had the opportunity to ascend in politics and business, prompting well-respected historians and others to challenge what they believed was a misconception of Creoles: the conception of Creole as a mixed race of people. The Creole in southern literature became popular in the genre of local color fiction, where their quaint and unusual traditions, “speaking a native dialect, and illustrating regional differences” (MacKethan 191) would set them apart from Northern readers who were “increasingly homogenized in northern cities” (191). As a specialized “other” in the nation, the Creole represents differences from what was considered the American norm.

Those considered popular local color writers noted for writing Louisiana Creole subjectivities are George Washington Cable, Grace King, and Kate Chopin. Their stories centered white Creole main characters with Creoles of color as marginal characters. These authors wrote the Creole as a “fiercely proud people who saw themselves as an embattled culture within a culture” (192). Cable and Chopin also confronted the “troubling racial dichotomies and mixtures” (192) of Louisiana with their Creoles of color characters. However, it is Alice Dunbar-Nelson who centers Creoles of color subjectivity in her stories. Dunbar-Nelson is not as widely

known as Cable, Chopin, or King and only in recent scholarship is Dunbar-Nelson's work associated with Creole subjectivity within the local color genre.

The marginal characters of color in “white fiction” could easily be an example of the “tragic mulatta” trope: “intelligent, gifted, but always rejected within cultures defined by purity of ‘blood’” (MacKethan 192) when stationed next to white characters. Gender also plays significantly in the Creole character. The ideals of gender are just as dangerous and challenging to dichotomies as is race. As best illustrated in Chopin's *The Awakening*, the model Creole woman is portrayed in literature as one who is “sensuous but also motherly, openly tolerant of sexual innuendo but also obedient and family-oriented” (192). These contradictions in character plainly show the inadequacies of defining gender roles based solely on binaries.

This chapter discusses the lives of Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson as writers of Creole subjectivities in fiction who also challenged gender and racial norms through their literature—both overtly and subversively—though somewhat differently. Both women spent part of their lives in Louisiana Creole communities where they mined material for the bulk of their fictional works. Kate Chopin married a successful white Creole man and lived in Creole communities throughout her marriage while Alice Dunbar-Nelson was born a Creole of color in New Orleans who eventually migrated to the northeast. Both women wrote and published around the same time in the post-Reconstruction era centering Creole culture and lives. These experiences did have different effects on the lives and art of these women, though they also shared common struggles. This chapter provides an overview of the literary structures used by women writers that challenge and subvert racist and sexist ideologies in the fiction of the post-Reconstruction era in order to better inform the historical context of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson.

Because of the lack of scholarship focusing specifically on Creoles of color subjectivities in fiction, I will use scholarship whose attention is on Black women writers' literature.

The post-Reconstruction period was rife with the inevitable beginnings of change—not only temporally with the end of one century and the beginning of a new one, but also of cultural values and the onset of new technologies. As discussed in Chapter one, the social identity categories of gender, race, and class were being challenged and subverted by women's groups throughout the United States. While this was so for Creole women, the challenges to patriarchal constructions and ideals could be different for both white Creole women and Creole women of color, especially since this ideal provided separate images of "woman" based on perceived race. While white women's groups were resisting the constricting ideals of true womanhood and were pushing for new opportunities existing outside the home, women of color were setting the ideals of true womanhood as a standard in order to subvert the racist and sexist constructions of Black women perpetuated by dominant society that portrayed them as without morals or virtue. Racist society had defined women of color "as the complete antithesis of the True Woman—the female not as pure moral paragon, but as animal: woman as laborer and breeder. Symbolically, this was the heritage of *all* African American women" (Ammons 8). These negative characterizations of Black women bolstered a continuance of sexualized violence on their bodies. As the scholar Elizabeth Ammons points out, "for middle-class white women, the issues of violence, sexual exploitation, and silencing were played out against a backdrop not of rape-lynch mythology but of domestic ideology; and the contrast clearly appears" (34) in the different communities and lives of women. Nevertheless, these different approaches shared a similar obstacle that connected the lives of white women and women of color: the systematic silencing of their voices and lives.

Women gained a voice through literature. Women's literature produced in the United States during the post-Reconstruction era forms a diverse yet connected body of work. There is a relationship between the socio-political history of this era and its effects on women's writing. Literature allowed women to break the silences imposed on them. It is imperative that any project that examines women's writing acknowledge the histories, differences, and shared struggle of all women, regardless of race, class, or sexuality. Ammons writes how crucial it is that oppressions be analyzed and recognized in combination with each other and that

by telling the story of women of color and white women together, the story itself grows denser. Points of intersection—friction, harmony, alienation, appropriation, subversion, oppression—are forced into view from various sides, and they in turn throw into relief similarity, difference, and, most important, the possibility for new vision. For example, not only do we get the views on race and racism of women of color, a fundamental reality that frequently comes up when women of color become a focus, but as soon as women of color and white women are part of one study, we are forced to think at the same time about the attitudes toward race and the racism of white women, a subject that does not automatically come up in criticism about them, but should. (viii-ix)

White women writers dominated the fiction market before the nineteenth-century, though Black women maintained a rich oral literary tradition (Ammons 20). White women writers were finding their voice against the stifling trappings of domesticity through literature. These women were claiming agency and creating their own subjectivity: "The fact that her right to write herself has been systematically denied her . . . by the violent process of feminization to which she, as a privileged white American woman, has been forced to submit" (Ammons 35). Moreover, Black women authors were also rewriting themselves as protest to the constructions of Black womanhood that denied the presence of femininity while equating her to chattel. These writers were publishing what theorist Claudia Tate refers to as "domestic novels," the dominant form of the post-Reconstruction era for women of color that featured formulaic plots promoting morals and the virtues of domesticity and prescribing a politics of respectability. While white women

and women of color writers were challenging their oppressive roles in society in slightly different ways, both groups were using their literary voices to shatter sexist ideals and to “*name* the systems of violence, sexual control, and silencing that governed the lives of countless American women” (Ammons 21). These women’s writings that intersected and overlapped were in conversation with one another.

The acts of speaking, writing, and being published provide women with an agency to remove themselves from a merely objective position. Women speaking and writing for themselves outside the norms were considered dangerous to traditional hegemonic values set forth by patriarchal society. Theorist Sidonie Smith quips that, “the wrong words in the wrong mouths articulated in the wrong places would confuse social relations and provided subjectivities” (16). Women were expected to follow a script upholding those ideals set forth by “provided subjectivities” as written by sexist, racist writers. Women writers struggled from the stifling roles determined by their gender, race, and class and wrote about their own subjectivity. These voices challenged and subverted the sexist, racist, and classist patriarchal constructions of womanhood, for white women and women of color. Women of color, and other voices silenced by dominant society, used their writings as a way to enter into the larger socio-political discourses from which they were excluded. There were various ways in which Black women through literature challenged dominant society’s construction of Black womanhood, including domestic novels and the ideal of respectability, the “tragic mulatta” character, and themes of passing.

Claudia Tate’s research looks at Black women’s writings, specifically at the domestic novels during the post-Reconstruction period. Up until the end of the twentieth century, literary critics, and even some feminists, read these domestic novels out of their historical context and

marginalized this genre of writing as bolstering patriarchal ideals. However, it has been noted that the domestic novel was a prominent discourse in Black women's writing. Tate maintains, "hence in amazing opposition to the violent resurgence of racial oppression that marked this period, these novels focus by and large on happy domestic settings without directly addressing interracial turmoil. The settings are suggestive of the civil accord that black people of the prior Reconstruction era had optimistically anticipated" (14). Black women writers subversively exposed the real sexual exploitation of women and the institutionalized violence associated with that exploitation by promoting what is referred to as a politics of respectability.

The right to sexually self-identify was a common theme among women that crossed racial boundaries, though done separately and coming from different angles. For women of color who were so long characterized as animalistic and as displaying overt sexuality, the theme prevalent in their works dealt with, either explicitly or implicitly, the racist sexual mythology about their bodies: "the theme that commanded [their] attention most urgently . . . was the racist sexual mythology that assaulted black women in white America. The same ideology that denied sexuality to respectable white women of the middle and upper classes—the ideology Kate Chopin would attack in *The Awakening*—defined black women as nothing but sexual. Good white women were asexual; all black women were all-sexual" (Ammons 31). This attack on the mythology of Black women as all-sexual beings is a reclamation of their sexualities—a right to self-definition. It was a right to *not* be sexual.

As discussed in the first chapter, the system of institutionalized rape has had a continuing effect on the stereotypes of Black women as immoral. Black women authors publishing during this time indicted white men for rape while claiming morality and virtue. These writers placed the responsibility for Black women's violated virtue on to the white rapists, while also

maintaining a politics of respectability. Hazel Carby states, “to understand the first novels which were written at the end of the nineteenth century, one has to understand not only the discourse and context in which they were produced but also the intellectual forms and practices of black women that preceded them” (7). Slave narratives serve not only as an important discourse in the formation of the writings of women of color in the post-Reconstruction period, but also as a record of the institutionalized raping of Black women that set the precedence for the later generations. Theorist Darlene Clark Hine observes, “virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contains a reference to, at some juncture, the ever-present threat and reality of rape” (38). This combination of maintaining a politics of respectability and placing the responsibility of violated virtue on white men simultaneously undermines the lynching propaganda protecting the virtue of white women from so-called uncivilized Black men that was set forth by these so-called civilized white men. Through creating morality and virtue in literary characters in spite of dominant society’s attempt to take it away, Black women novelists wrote about maintaining respectability and virtue by focusing on the character of the self through the genre of the domestic novel.

Domestic novels center ideal fictional relationships, “the courtship, marriage, and family formation” (Tate 4) of Black women. They typically feature a black female protagonist who exemplifies the virtues of femininity so revered during this period. Formulaic plots promoting morality and the virtue of domesticity is what Tate uses to define these as “domestic novels.” The heroine would travail through a series of tribulations and adventures eventually leading up to the ultimate ideal of “marriage, family happiness, and prosperity” (Tate 5).

These novels were not meant to be mimetic forms of representations of Black women’s lives, but rather as exemplifying the ideal of the politics of respectability that considered

decorum and morals as an “important emancipatory cultural discourse” (Tate 4). These domestic novels also were used to promote human character advancement within the Black community. The bulk of these novels was published at the end of the nineteenth century and promoted within the Black women’s club movement, who were the intended audience of these publications.¹⁴ Moreover, the novels contained an aesthetic value that offered their first readers a pleasurable way to read and to affirm their ideology of respectability:

The aesthetic value of these novels initially resided in their ability to gratify a distinct audience of ambitious black Americans who sought to live fully, despite their commonly experienced racial oppression. For that first public audience, reading these stories probably incited pleasure because they enabled racial desire for enlarged social opportunity as full-fledged American citizens. The story of ideal family formations was especially well suited to this first audience because its formulaic plot line encoded bourgeois constructions of the successful individual, community, and society to which that audience subscribed. (Tate 7)

The formulaic structure also offered a consistency that tended to provide harmony and agreement to the conflicts and tensions within and between groups. It should be noted that these novels were not escapism but instead offered a class of people who were recently emancipated an opportunity to construct their own identities in the face of racist and sexist dominant groups who used controlling images to maintain social inequalities.

It was after the post-Reconstruction period when this formulaic ideal featured in these novels was challenged and subverted. Newer generations of writers and readers began challenging the patriarchal structures of marriage and family. The black heroine in the novels still follows the trajectory towards marriage; however, this ultimate ideal becomes a metaphor for the death of her independence, personal freedom, and of her own sexual expression. The protagonists in these novels are characterized as “tragic mulatta,” whose mixed race allows them to transgress color lines. These “domestic tragedies” made up the works of writers Jesse Fauset and Nella Larsen who used the “tragic mulatta” character to show the detrimental effects of

systematic racist structures that vilifies and punishes those who transcends racial borders in society.

“Mulatta/o”¹⁵ is used to define multi-racial persons who are usually a mix of black (African) and white (European). The term originated from the word “mule,” indicating a union that would “produce a sterile offspring” (Bender 516). The term later became used as a racial designation as early as 1595.¹⁶ In the seventeenth century, this racial designation took on “political, legal, and economic significance during slavery” (516), especially after anti-miscegenation statutes were being passed in order to protect “racial purity” and assigning the race of offspring as the same status as the mother. These statutes would have underlying consequences, as literary critic Bert Bender describes in the encyclopedic definition of “mulatta/o”:

[it] had the effect of condoning rape of black women by white men while affirming the social need for racial purity. But such laws . . . could not prevent the inevitable: that some people of mixed race would “pass” as white, living among and marrying white people. Even as most states in the late 1700s were defining mulattos as those with one-quarter black ancestry, the literal determination was less scientific and based heavily on . . . physical appearance. Eventually, “mulatto” came generally to refer to all people of mixed race, including quadroons and octoroons. (516)

As Bender points out, race was determined mainly by bodily markers; by phenotype. Because of differences in skin color within black communities, a complex aesthetic hierarchy formed. For instance, lighter skinned slaves who were more likely than not white men’s offspring were usually assigned to duties inside the house as opposed to laborious fieldwork. The mixed race offspring were also more likely to be manumitted by their white fathers (516). In 1850, “only 7 percent of slaves were considered mulatto, but 43 percent of free blacks in the South were so classified” (516). The *gens de couleur libre* were often referred to as either mulatta or octoroon as opposed to the exclusive “Creole” identity term. The mulatta in literature can serve as a

“rhetorically deconstructive device” (516) that complicates and shows the instability of race as an identity category, especially within societies holding on to an identity defined by a fallible idea of purity of blood.

The figure of the “tragic mulatta” is a literary construction designating a character who is subjected to societal constraints and suffers undo hardships and setbacks because of her multi-racial identity. However, that multi-racial identity is almost erased when dichotomous racial structures of “black or white” are applied. “The mulatta’s shifting cultural placement is symptomatic of her ambiguous character. She occupies a central space that is perpetually being erased or effaced in an effort to stabilize (reify) the tenuous, permeable boundaries between black and white, high and low, male and female, pure and impure” (Brody 116); therefore, leading to raceless or racially indeterminate characters when the “mulatta” is written in literature. P. Gabrielle Foreman, in her text, *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, sees the figure of the mulatta as “largely a figment—or pigment—of the racial imagination, a figure . . . who disrupts placid racial, sexual, and national mythologies, the mulatta is both highly ambiguous and extraordinarily ubiquitous” (4) in nineteenth century literature. In most of these stories, according to Foreman, the mulatta character is employed as a “rhetorical appeal to white readers” (5) for easy white identification. Because of this position to whiteness, “the mulatta is often seen as the most *affective* figure through which to move whites to recognize Black sentience and humanity and act to ensure Black inclusion in the body politic” (Foreman 5). During this period in literary history, it was believed that women readers would be able to connect with the female characters without race proving to be an obstacle that would prevent empathy. Usually, the mulatta character’s past and ancestry is presented as a mystery. She is often described as having Spanish or even Greek heritage to explain duskier skin shades.

When the truth of her African ancestry is discovered, tragedy ensues because of the loss of her perceived white privileges. The “tragic mulatta” character comes with personal pathologies that are revealed when she can no longer pass over the color line or when her “blackness” is ultimately realized. When the character is able to pass, her passing ultimately leads to a deepening self-loathing and the difficulty of coming to terms with her new space in society in a racial class the character loathed. Peace for the tragic character is usually found only in death. There are distinct differences between the way the tragic mulatta character is written by white and Black authors. White authors usually comply with the privileging of whiteness thus stigmatizing blackness as Other and depicting the character as ashamed of her color. Black authors interrogate the treatment of Black women by racist society, focusing on the violence that ensues on the bodies of these women, especially once her color is perceived and she no longer passes for white.

The tragic mulatta character in literature before the late 1890s was written as inadvertently passing in white society. She was brought up as white and believed to be white, for the truth of her African ancestry was hidden from her. Eventually, in these stories, the character would learn of her African ancestry and thus follow the conventions of the tragic mulatta trope, such as Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892). However, this inadvertent passing usually stopped once identity was reassessed. Iola Leroy was offered a choice to marry a white doctor and continue living with the privileges of whiteness. However, Iola refused his offer and chose, instead, to “cast her lot with the freed people as a helper, teacher and friend” (Harper 114-115). Iola decides to use the education and training she received before being sent into slavery in order to help “uplift” the newly freed men and women of color. Harper, like other Black authors, used the tragic mulatta trope to challenge the “social corruption represented by the institution of

slavery” (Carby 73). Literature of inadvertent passing by the tragic mulatta eventually progressed into conscious narratives of passing after segregation laws took effect.

The enacting of Jim Crow laws throughout the south and the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* court decision giving constitutional legitimacy to segregation sparked a proliferation of literature that considered and critiqued “passing” and “the color line.” “Passing” is the crossing of “any boundary intended to distinguish and separate ‘black’ people from ‘white’ people” (Andrews 617). This segregating boundary between the two races is often referred to as “the color line.”¹⁷ There were different reasons for people to pass through the color line. According to theorist Cheryl Harris, “becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one’s life rather than being the object of others’ domination” (277). Because of the Jim Crow laws, certain privileges, and entertainment, economic, and political opportunities were denied to people of color because of their race. Passing for white offered access to these privileges and opportunities, and often passing would guarantee survival.

Narratives of passing written by both Black and white writers explore the politics and issues surrounding racial identities and tensions. Fiction that centers racially mixed characters explores questions of passing in order to comment on the unique position mixed-race people have in a society where racial and sometimes ethnic identity is stratified according to problematic and arbitrary notions of what is black and white. These narratives were in conversation with politics surrounding the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, grappling with racial categories. Plots are often constructed around a dilemma where the main character(s) must choose whether or not to pass for white. Usually these choices involved attainment for love or opportunities on the other side of the color line, or rejecting to pass for white out of loyalty to African Americans. Fictions of passing often, but not always, use the literary trope of the tragic

mulatta/o. Political themes of passing include demonstrating the injustices and arbitrariness of a segregated society that relegates people of color to second-class citizenship. In these novels, passing disrupted social meanings by subversively changing social structures. Segregated society was about exploiting the differences between Blacks and whites, but passing showed many people legally defined as Black as having a lack of difference with whites. Passing exposes the hypocrisies of segregation laws by showing how the same person can be socially accepted as white, and retain all the property and privileges associated with whiteness, can then be denied those same privileges and declared as a second class citizen once African ancestry is revealed. These literary tropes and conventions are part of the literature labeled as local color fiction and Creole fiction.

I now move towards a brief biographical and literary history of two writers of Creole fiction, Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson, while certainly not the only writers of Creole fiction during the post-Reconstruction era, are the two writers which I feel most clearly demonstrate the argument that I have begun to establish in this chapter regarding Creole fiction of this era. These biographical sketches of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson help to illuminate possible influences their lives may have had on their literature as well as demonstrate the ways in which gender and race contributed to the content of their work and to their reception as authors.

Kate (O'Flaherty) Chopin (1850-1904)

Kate O'Flaherty was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. She was brought up Catholic and spoke Creole French, her maternal grandmother's language. O'Flaherty read widely and was educated at parochial schools. In 1870, O'Flaherty met and married Oscar Chopin, a Creole from Louisiana. The newlyweds moved to New Orleans where they lived a comfortable, middle-class

life socializing with both New Orleans Americans and Creoles. In 1879, the Chopin's moved to Cloutierville in Natchitoches Parish. Oscar owned a few small plantations and a general store, where he spent most of his time working. In 1882, after just barely twelve years of marriage, Oscar Chopin died of malaria, leaving Kate to raise six children alone. Kate Chopin continued to live in Natchitoches Parish running the family's general store. Though she proved capable as a business manager in her late husband's store, Chopin and her six children moved back to St. Louis in 1884 after several pleas from her mother to return. The following year her mother died. It would not be until five years after these devastating losses that Chopin would begin her life as a published writer. This first part of Kate Chopin's life seems typical of most Southern middle class women; she was married, had six children, and was dutiful to her family. But during the second phase of her life, Chopin challenged societal conventions prescribed for her gender not only in her writings, but also in her personal life.

Taking the advice of a doctor friend, Chopin began writing. She published her first pieces, two short stories ("Wiser Than a God" and "A Point at Issue!"), in a small magazine in 1889. Soon after this little bit of success, Chopin self published her first novel, *At Fault* that met with some critical success. This small bit of recognition and success lead her to publish in the well-known magazines, *Harper's* ("Boulôt and Boulotte" in 1891) and *Vogue* ("A Visit to Avoyelles" and "Désirée's Baby" in 1893). Chopin gained national attention and popularity with her collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk*, published in 1894.

It was from her time living in Creole communities in New Orleans and Natchitoches Parish where Chopin drew inspiration for her short fiction published in magazines and in her collection *Bayou Folk*. These series of publications gave Chopin a national literary reputation, establishing her as a popular writer of local color short stories. Her stories were renowned for

their “local color” thus limiting her reputation to that specific genre. As her popularity as a fiction writer grew, Chopin was welcomed in many literary circles. Though, it would be her second published novel and its notoriety that would catapult Kate Chopin into the American literary canon.

Chopin published her second and most (in)famous novel *The Awakening* at the end of the nineteenth century in 1899. Chopin, having published several short stories mostly depicting Creole culture and characters of Louisiana, was already well known and respected by the time *The Awakening* was published. However, after the novel’s initial reception, Chopin was scandalized and subsequently shunned from her literary circles. One scholar reports that the novel was “so sensational in its day that it was withdrawn from circulation . . . and brought her into such ill-repute that she is said to have been reluctant to publish anything more” (Wilson 14). It was difficult for Chopin, in fact, to publish afterwards due to the controversy surrounding the novel; she published only three stories after *The Awakening* (Boynton 57). Two of her biographers claim the novel was banned and removed from libraries.¹⁸ *The Awakening* went into near obscurity until being revived in the 1950s and again at the height of the Second Wave of Feminism where lost literature written by women was recovered and republished.

Though Chopin had been developing the theme in her short stories, scholars argue *The Awakening* is her most profound interrogation of the problematic ideal of what it means to be a woman at the turn of the century. Her treatment of a womanly ideal of purity and submissiveness stunned critics who labeled the novel as “morbid” and “shocking.” Chopin’s protagonist, Edna Pontellier, brazenly declares, “I give myself where I choose,” exerting agency as an independent subject—not an acceptable desire for proper white women at this time who were expected to be selfless and submissive.

However, it is her short stories that contain a multitude of themes challenging constructs of not only gender, but also of race, class, and female sexuality—especially her Creole stories. Chopin focuses on marginal characters and themes dealing with isolation and a suppressive reality of not being understood—of being the outsider. These stories offer her most pervasive social critique of gender, race, class, and feminine sexuality in the South during the turn of the century.

Through her fiction, one can ascertain that Chopin was a social critic. Though she may not have explicitly aligned herself with feminists of the time, she definitely interrogated and examined social forces and its contradictory patterns within relationships and culture and its effect on normative gender roles. Chopin biographer Victoria Boynton describes Chopin's fiction as hinging on the "explorations of female experience" (53). Throughout her body of work lie the complex themes of how women in various social positions negotiate the constructs and attitudes of dominant society regarding imposed expectations based on gender, race, and class:

The key interpenetrating themes included in this complex are the conflicts between women's search for autonomy and their loyalty to the caring and nurturing roles they have held historically; the evolution of women's social and economic identities beyond their absolute dependence on men the balancing of the imperatives of the body and the mind; and the corollary investigations of women's place in the heterosexual matrix, the biological consequences of that position, and its impact on women's sense of self and world. (Boynton 53)

These conflicting behaviors and challenges to dichotomous notions of gender are embodied in Chopin's Creole women characters. Chopin herself was also conflicted between her search for autonomy and the responsibility she conserved for her family. This conflict she carried for the rest of her life. In 1904, Kate O'Flaherty Chopin died from a brain hemorrhage after returning from the World's Fair held in St. Louis.

Alice (Moore) Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935)

Alice Ruth Moore was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1875. Moore's Creole identity included a mix of white, black, and Indian. Her mother worked as a seamstress to support Alice and her sister. Details about Moore's father are limited, but he was often referred to as a "merchant marine" or a "seaman" (Hull 34). She attended public schools during her formative years then continued to Straight College (currently known as Dillard University) where she graduated from the esteem teacher's program. It was also during this time that Moore ventured into journalism when she started the "Woman's Column" published in the *Journal of the Lodge*, a newspaper for a fraternal organization (Hull 35). Moore spent the first twenty-one years of her life living within the Creole of color society of New Orleans, and her time spent here would provide her with the experiences that would influence her later interests and activities, including activism for both race and women's issues. Her life among the New Orleans's Creoles would also provide her with the material for her only published fictional works. Around 1896, Moore and her family left New Orleans in search of opportunities in the Northeast.

Her time in Massachusetts and New York was exciting and eventful. Moore was quite active with work and building her personal and political relationships. In 1897, she began teaching at Public School 83, as well as part time on the weekends at a mission in East New York City. During this time, Moore became active within the black women's club movement, where she, at one point, became secretary of the National Association of Colored Women. Her involvement and experiences inspired her to write essays about "women in clubdom" (Hull 42). However productive and successful Moore was during this time, it was her ill-fated marriage, from 1898 to 1906, to poet Paul Laurence Dunbar that became one of the most notable events of her life (Lutes 112).¹⁹

Her marriage to the famous poet “defined her public role for most of her life” (Lutes 112), though the marriage lasted for only a short amount of time and she had remarried twice after Dunbar’s death. The marriage to Dunbar was beneficial to her career because of his renowned status as “America’s first famous black *litterateur*” (Hull 42). She was forever known as the widow of the great Paul Laurence Dunbar, but retaining his last name kept her from near obscurity (Hull 43). In 1910, she married Henry Arthur Callis; however, that union was also short-lived and they later divorced at some unknown time (Hull lviii). She finally found a suitable partner in Robert J. Nelson, whom she married in 1916. Alice kept the name “Dunbar” but adding “Nelson” with a hyphen as her last name. This was done intentionally, as mentioned before, to maintain a public persona. Alice and Robert remained together until her death in 1935. In addition to these marriages, Dunbar-Nelson was also involved in at least three intimate relationships with women, including an intense affair with journalist Fay Jackson Robinson. Dunbar-Nelson’s diaries suggest “the existence of an active black lesbian network in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century” (Lutes 112). Themes of female sexuality, both straight and queer, can be seen in her work, mainly her poetry.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson published only two book-length volumes of fictional work during her lifetime; however, she was a prolific writer and did publish a tremendous variety of writings, some of which “defy easy categorization” (Lutes 112). Her oeuvre that can be classified includes: short stories, poems, essays, reviews, and editorials in a variety of newspapers and magazines. The lack of published collections in book form have kept her writings “marginally accessible” to critics and scholars of later generations thus making it difficult to research her whole body of work.²⁰ She was recognized as a poet in her lifetime while her short stories depicting Creole culture were often ignored. In 1895, when she was just twenty years old,

Dunbar-Nelson, as Alice Ruth Moore, published *Violets and Other Tales*, a collection of essays, poems, sketches, reviews, and short stories. *Violets* is an experimental work and shows a young writer “trying on voices” (Hull 40). This collection served as a springboard for her second and more mature collection of short stories, *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, published in 1899, which contains versions of three of the best short stories from *Violets*: “Titee,” “Little Miss Sophie,” and “A Carnival Jangle.”

The Goodness of St. Rocque, published under the name Alice Dunbar, showcases the writer’s talent as a regional writer. The stories in *St. Rocque* offer a colorful, detailed discourse of Creole customs and traditions that “rival those of better-known regional writers such as George Washington Cable” (Lutes 113). These traditions, grounded on “Old World Creole,” emphasize “family, formality, and a closed society” (Hull 51). The Creole characters are also representative of differences that existed in New Orleans’s Creole communities. Some reviewers praised *The Goodness of St. Rocque* for its beauty and subtlety, while others dismissed or flat out scorned the collection for its lack of race specific themes. She was “determined in her fiction not to be bound by race in any direct way, either linguistically or thematically” (Ammons 60). Dunbar-Nelson continued to write about Creole subjectivity, some of which focused on racial issues dealing with the problems of not being accepted on either side of the color line. This theme of the racialized Other is especially pronounced in the short stories, “The Pearl and the Oyster” and “The Stones of the Village.”

Her literary work did meet criticism, but unlike Chopin, Dunbar-Nelson was not criticized for what she said but for what she did not say. “For Dunbar-Nelson writing about human experience without being forced to focus on race presented a fundamental problem” (Ammons 59). The white literary establishment in the early twentieth-century encouraged and

expected black authors to write only of racial issues and to write in dialect; they expected black authors to effectuate a literary stereotype. Dunbar-Nelson, however, refused to cater to this ideal of what a black woman writer entailed, and her potential success paid for that refusal.

Though her poetry conveys a more politically controversial tone commenting not only on race and gender but also of sexuality, her earlier fictional stories do not outwardly ponder the themes of racial or gender conflict, but instead do so subversively. By using Creole subjects and culture, she blurs color lines with characters of indeterminate racial markers. She centers marginal female characters in her stories that, like Chopin, dramatize restricted feminine roles in society. This subversive style, manifesting in characters whose race is that of Creole of color, disrupts and disables decisive racial markers used by hegemonic social structures in order to keep people in their proper places based on gender and race. Dunbar-Nelson's non-fictional writing—essays and columns—offers the most explicit social critiques of the status of women and racial and class issues. In fact, her journalistic pieces were passionate and bold diatribes on the problems of racial discrimination, especially the horrors of lynching.

Dunbar-Nelson has been criticized for missing the opportunity to write about and emphasize her experiences as a Black woman in her fiction. Dunbar-Nelson wrote extensive prose and poetry about the experiences of being identified racially as Black in America during her lifetime. As for her collection of fictional prose, I assert that she used her experiences as a Creole woman of color as her fictional stories center on Creole communities and lives. As argued earlier, Creole disrupts hierarchal racial dichotomies because of multiplicity and differences. The Creole short stories in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, and those not published until the release of The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series, celebrate differences and resistance to exact definitions that its culture inspires. When contemplating this

collection as a whole, one can see its unifying theme is that of multiplicity and connotes “irresolution of difference” (Ammons 63). Not announcing the race of her characters is a political act that calls into question the need to do so. Critics never criticize Chopin for writing about indeterminately raced characters, for they assume her characters are white, unless specifically told otherwise. The people in Dunbar-Nelson’s and Chopin’s stories are not racially characterized but instead characterized by their location: New Orleans, where exists an admixture of ethnicities and cultures.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson, like others women writers of the period was more interested in creating art with literature as opposed to overt political purposes. “As an artist Dunbar-Nelson insisted on her right to cross both the color and the gender line; she believed in her right to exercise complete imaginative denial that undermined her strength as an artist. To write as if race or gender or class is not part of one’s identity . . . is to silence huge central parts of oneself” (Ammons 68). Though I agree with her critics that denial of one’s identity is to silence a part of oneself, I do not agree that this was what Dunbar-Nelson was doing in her fiction. Her critics’ argument is based on the dichotomous logic of either/or: either you are white or you are black, either you are male or you are female, either you are rich or you are poor. Dunbar-Nelson was a multi-racial, bisexual woman whose identity, I argue, cannot be reconciled neatly within this dichotomic framework. “Alice Dunbar-Nelson believed that she as a black woman was capable of defining herself for herself. For her, that meant being free to range incognito and without restriction through the territories of class, race, and gender that she as an artist saw as contiguous, separate, overlapping, blurred, oppositional, indistinguishable, central, irrelevant—in short, whatever she wished” (Ammons 68). As an artist, Dunbar-Nelson did not subscribe to dominant culture’s insistence on fixed demarcating identity categories. Gloria Hull recognizes

that “social conditions and the literary establishments made authentic self-definition (as persons and artists) extremely difficult for black women writers” (xxxix). In this way, Dunbar-Nelson did not “fully excise” complex racial and gender issues from her fiction. Instead, “her stories invite readers to perform a continuing and always insecure negotiation with signifiers of race. In doing so, they encourage reflection about our own cultural narratives of racial being and difference and the way we inscribe them into our experience of narrative forms” (Strychacz 79). Critics who read her Creole characters as “racially indeterminate” are in fact misreading her. Dunbar-Nelson does write about race; she writes about Creoles of color. Alice Dunbar-Nelson died on September 18, 1935 from heart trouble.

Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson led vastly different lives; however, they used the same subject for their art: the Creole. To just read Chopin’s stories will not provide the reader with a whole picture of Creole and its resistant form to societal norms and definition. It would only be looking at half the picture—or hearing a one-sided conversation. In order to better envision the whole, one must also read the works of other consenting voices challenging the constructions of their identity as others write it. This voice is Alice Dunbar-Nelson. In the next chapter, Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s literature will be compared in an intertextual study in order to form a more complete picture of the Creole subject in literature.

CHAPTER THREE: AN INTERTEXTUAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN KATE CHOPIN AND ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON: WHOLE CREOLE SUBJECTIVITY IN LITERATURE

The majority of fictional literature by Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson centers Creole subjects and their culture and communities. It is clear that Chopin was writing from a white, upper-middle class woman's perspective while Dunbar-Nelson was writing from a Creole woman of color's perspective. As mentioned throughout this project, differing and contentious definitions of the term "Creole" have tried to produce rigid boundaries defining who to include and who to exclude within a "highly-contested identity space" (Stouck 272) by historians, writers, scholars, and even within Creole communities based on hegemonic dichotomous "either/or" structures. Moreover, these differing attempts at forming exclusive definitions have only revealed Creole to be a category that resists and complicates dichotomous structures. Comparing the stories of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson will show how these boundaries are complicated and fissured by the ambiguities of race, gender roles, and female sexuality embodied by the colorful characters portrayed in their fiction, especially when looking at the differences and similarities of how the authors portray race, gender, and class through their characters. Both authors' Creole short stories are more like vignettes that say and mean much more than what is actually written. There are underlying themes with an implied political discourse interrogating social injustices and oppressions. This chapter discusses how each author writes differently about race, gender, and class.

By looking at these two writers side by side, I am attempting to dismantle any notions of a narrowly defined southern tradition in literature, especially one that may be defined as

“Creole.” Authors known for their Creole short stories, George Washington Cable, Grace King, and Kate Chopin, focused on white Creole subjectivity. In these stories, a certain tradition was carried forward relying on the “Creole as white aristocracy” mythology. Both Cable and Chopin did acknowledge Creoles of color, but King maintained the ideal of a white Creole aristocracy perpetuating a mythology as seen in her collection, *Balcony Stories*, and in her history of New Orleans that denied the existence of Creole people of color. Alice Dunbar-Nelson clearly focuses on Creole of color subjectivity in her fictional work, though often her critics aver that her characters are “racially indeterminate” or “racially ambiguous” because she does not overtly specify their race. Meanwhile, readers and critics assume that the races of Chopin’s characters are determinate—even when a character is supposed to be racially indeterminate. Chopin, and sometimes Cable, did, however, challenge ideas of race and its association with Creole by using racially mixed characters; however, there is never any doubt as to the race of these characters for the reader is told explicitly that they are in fact racially mixed. Creole is not mutually exclusive from Black or white traditions, but instead, because of its unique history and problems with definition, is a cultural identity residing in both African American and Southern white literary traditions. Because of this dual residency within two traditions, Creole complicates and engages in different ways the literary tropes of these traditions, especially in regards to race. Even though Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson display different racial consciousness in their stories which resulted in differing texts of human experiences, what they do have in common is the constant interrogation of gender and female sexuality prescribed by dominant society.

Though Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson’s stories are the focus of this project, neither author alone can be *the* ultimate representative of their perspective race, gender, or class. It is imperative, as literary theorist Patricia Yaeger states, to “construct a wide terrain from which to

explore southern women's racial differences and their unevenly shared symbol and language systems, erected so boldly across differing topographies of power" (xi). This wide terrain should also be one from which to explore how the use of "coding" works in their stories in order for these authors to covertly comment on the effects of societal norms situated within a binary structure used to oppress women—on both sides of the color line, though sometimes in different and unique ways. Looking at just two such different authors cannot wholly "construct a wide terrain," so I draw on comparisons with other important works published during their time that thematically interrogate gender and racial issues prevalent in post-Reconstruction society. Focusing on the fictional works of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson is the beginning of a critical dialogue that will aid in the goal of constructing a terrain exploring "southern women's racial differences" and experiences.

This chapter is an attempt at just that, an intertextual dialogue between Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson through their literature. It is highly unlikely that these two women met while both were living in Louisiana, but both use the landscape, communities, and the culture associated with place to frame the conventions and themes of their stories. These two writers are tied together by more than just location; they both explored the nuances of their Creole communities through their deft stories. The lines connecting these two women are theoretical, of course. By bringing these two authors together atemporally, it is important to read them within a unique historical context of Louisiana Creole identity remembering that Louisiana once legally instituted a tripartite social classification that included the *gens de couleur libres*, or free persons of color. The *libres* had a different social status from the whites and enslaved blacks of the colony before the Civil War. The system of *plaçage* and the systematic forced sexual relationships between privileged white males and women of color were also prevalent in

Louisiana and must be taken into consideration. The institution of slavery and its effects on women and men of color and how it influenced racial relations and tensions in the country are also used as part of the framework in which to read these stories. These systems had a direct and indirect influence on the themes and characterizations central to their stories. While Chopin maintained, to a certain degree, that Creole usually equaled “white,” Dunbar-Nelson used Creoles of color. The themes and characterizations inspired by Louisiana’s unique history disrupted racial and gender norms and intersected with each other through their stories.

“Intertextuality” is how texts relate or derive meaning when standing in relation to each other. The questions I explore when looking at the texts from these two writers are: What do Chopin’s stories say about Creole identity, race, and gender roles when related to Dunbar-Nelson’s, and vice-versa?; and where and in what ways do the narratives of Creole identity, race, and gender roles converge and diverge? The differences are just as central to the intertextual dialogue as are the similarities. This intertextual dialogue will explore those difference and similarities in theme, location and community, the effects of dominant societal systems set in place to bolster normative roles based on perceived gender and race, and also look at, to borrow from Yaeger, “southern women’s racial differences and their unevenly shared symbol and language systems” (xi). This intertextual dialogue relies on both the similarities and the differences between the overarching themes and motifs of the stories and will consider and demonstrate how Chopin’s and Dunbar-Nelson’s differing positions—particularly with respect to race—create different texts of racial and human experiences.

In this chapter I examine three of these writers’ representative fictional works with respect to the questions and issues presented above, Kate Chopin’s short story “*Désirée’s Baby*” (1893) and Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s published short story “*Little Miss Sophie*” (1895) and the

unpublished “The Stones of the Village” (written between 1900 and 1910). These three works are comparable in thematic structure in that they exploit the tropes of the tragic mulatta, symbols of domesticity, the law, and narratives of passing from a Creole standpoint; however, I will show how they are remarkably different in the treatment of their racially mixed characters.

In all three of these stories, the trope of the “tragic mulatta” and the politics of passing are probed and analyzed in similar and different ways and in relation to its formation of Creole identity and culture. As stated earlier, this intertextual study draws on the comparative guidelines forming the theoretical framework set forth in the first two chapters of this project. All three of these stories are about identity formation and how these identities become unstable based on misperceived bodily markers, socially prescribed gender roles and expectations, and heteronormative sexuality. A comparison of these stories with other literary works published at this time will enrich the discussion by showing how Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson’s texts are in conversation with their contemporaries.

As mentioned in Chapter one, Creole women of color were often labeled as “quadroons” or “mulattas” instead of as simply “Creole” by whites whose interests were maintaining a mythology of a white Creole aristocracy. The mythology was based on hypodescent racial classifications relying on certain ratios of ancestry of African blood. This system of classification was found to be problematic where the identity labels “quadroon” and “mulatto” eventually became umbrella terms to automatically refer to any mixed-race persons. The Creole in Chopin’s stories is always read as white, though Creoles of color exist in many of her short stories. In keeping with the times, she usually refers to the characters of color as “quadroons” or “mulattas.” Alice Dunbar-Nelson uses Creoles of color, but her characters are often misread as racially indeterminate because she does not comment on their race; it is not an issue for Dunbar-

Nelson. Moreover, her critics will sometimes apply a “tragic mulatta” theoretical reading to her characters. For instance, Jordan Stouck calls the protagonist in Dunbar-Nelson’s “Little Miss Sophie” the “abject mulatta” (273). While the identity of Creoles of color in both Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson’s stories can be read as “tragic mulattas,” there are some similarities between the two authors’ stories, but there is, however, also a distinct difference in the way each author writes her characters of color.

Both Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson have used the character of the “tragic mulatta” in unique ways in which location and historical context act as influential elements. They both write the “tragic mulatta” in relation to Creole subjectivity, relying on their vantage as Louisiana Creoles that not only reveal the oppressive natures of the system of *plaçage*, the sexual exploitation of women of color by white men, and existing in a segregated society, but also the discriminatory ways in which Creole was used as an exclusive identity term. The difference between Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson is how they write about racial issues. For Chopin color is seen as something shameful especially when faced with the threat of losing “whiteness” and all its associated privileges, while for Dunbar-Nelson color is not an issue but instead a fact of life.

In “Désirée’s Baby,” the identities and lives of Désirée and Armand are disrupted when confronted with the realities of their perceived and actual mixed racial bodies. Armand mentally and physically recoils from Désirée when he blames her unknown ancestry for the dark coloration of their baby. When asked by Désirée what the baby’s dark skin means, he replies, “the child is not white; it means that you are not white” (243). She immediately denies this assessment and points out her fair skin, gray eyes, and brown hair, only to have him claim these as similar to their quadroon slave. Because of the apparent mixed-racial features of the baby, Désirée is immediately thrown into an identity crisis: “My mother, they tell me I am not white.

Armand has told me I am not white. For God's sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true. I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live" (242). Faced with the reality of losing her whiteness and, therefore, her family, Désirée chooses suicide rather than to live with the revelation of her perceived true ancestry. Surrounded by rather ambiguous circumstances, Chopin writes Désirée as walking off into the "banks of the deep, sluggish bayou" (244) to never return in order to signal her demise.

Within the penultimate paragraphs of the story Chopin reveals the attitudes of dominant white society towards race and gender: that color is a problem and is something to be ashamed of when revealed to others, and this shame, legally, follows the mother. The body of the baby acts as a signifier for the race of the mother; the race of the father is not even a consideration in determining the racial fate of the baby because of sexist and racist systems claiming that a child's racial background must always follow the mother. This attitude towards blackness as disgraceful is later reinforced by the dénouement of the story. In what critics referred to as "shocking," the gender of the tragic mulatta figure is actually subverted; it is Armand who is now faced with an identity crisis. Armand discovers a remnant of a letter from his mother, who died when he was a baby, to his father, thanking God "for having so arranged our lives that . . . Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (245). The letter reveals to Armand the secret of his true racial ancestry. Chopin ends the story with the words, "cursed with the brand of slavery" in order to gain empathy from the readers for her protagonist. Though this story is an obvious and successful attempt at interrogating sexist norms of society, Chopin misses the opportunity to confront racist scripts regarding color as something to be ashamed of and considered unfortunate for those tragic

characters. Chopin is not conscious of the treatment of women of color in relation to race and remains in compliance with the systematic belief of whiteness as privileged.

Her critics have also missed this opportunity. For example, Emily Toth describes Chopin as using the “tragic mulatta” stereotype “in an original way” (203), pointing to the fact that racial prejudices “that associate whites with reason and blacks with passion” (203) can victimize both women and men, citing the decision made by Désirée over her fate. Nowhere in the critical piece did Toth critique Chopin’s unquestioned assumptions about racial identity—that being of color is a stigma in society. Chopin’s ending is powerful because of its subversion of gender norms, but had it interrogated politically racialized scripts of identity it would have created a more accurate depiction of the lived experiences of Creole women of color. Where Chopin falls short, Black women writers, such as Pauline Hopkins and Dunbar-Nelson, have deftly identified and interrogated assumptions about mixed racial identities and the violent implications created by racist socio-political ideologies for Creoles who are identified as women of color.

For instance, Désirée’s situation and apparent suicide is reminiscent of the suicide of Grace Montfort in Pauline Hopkins’s, *Contending Forces* (1899). However, the writing between these two women authors is drastically different in their treatment of the tragic female characters and the circumstances surrounding their apparent suicides. Grace’s ancestry, too, was made unknown to the readers. Hopkins, like Chopin, made it unclear as to whether or not Grace was Black or white or of mixed race, but Grace’s racial indeterminacy is not the intended focus of the theme of the novel. According to Hazel Carby’s reading of the text, Hopkins actually “made it clear that it was irrelevant whether Grace Montfort was a black or a white woman. Her behavior was a representation of ‘true womanhood,’ but her skin was a little too ‘creamy’” (131). What is relevant to the text, and as a commentary on the lived experiences of women of color, is the fact

that rumors of doubt about the purity of Grace's blood was enough to change the neighbors' relations to "coldness and reserve" (Hopkins 45) towards the Montfort family: "Bill Sampson's words to Hank Davis had somehow found a voice, and the suspicion of Negro blood in the veins of Mrs. Montfort was a deathblow to a proud spirit and social aspirations" (45). Because of this doubt of white racial purity, Grace, like Désirée, is stripped of her womanly virtue and dignity—Désirée is told that she has brought shame and "injury" to Armand's family, while Grace is now reduced to property for exchange between white men; Grace is now seen as a sexual object for Anson Pollock to possess and own. The murder of her husband leaves Grace vulnerable to those who wish to strip the Montforts of their property. Pollock claims Grace and her children as his property and does so based solely on her perceived and rumored racial identity. Rather than belong to Pollock, Grace commits suicide. Her suicide is written in virtually the same fashion as Désirée's own death: "Grace Montfort disappeared and was never seen again. The waters of the Pamlico Sound tell of sweet oblivion for the broken-hearted found within their soft embrace" (71). However, while Désirée's experience with the realities of racism encompasses overwhelming feelings of shame and disgrace, Grace's experience encompasses both mental and sexualized violence. Hopkins describes in excruciating details the gang whipping of Grace by two of the white vigilantes. This torturous scene can be read as a brutal gang rape in the "displaced form" (Carby 132) of the lashing. Her clothes are torn from her "shrinking shoulders" (Hopkins 68), she is "bound" to the post, and then lashed "alternately by the two strong, savage men" (69). Unlike Désirée, Grace does not commit suicide because she is ashamed of her perceived blackness; she commits suicide to escape a future violent sexual relationship with Pollock. As revealed in Harriet Jacobs' slave narratives, forced violent, sexual relationships were an inevitable reality experienced by enslaved women that was often ignored in white historical

texts. Blame for these relationships was placed on the women, citing their immoral seduction of the white men.

Dunbar-Nelson offers her own commentary about the exploitative relationships white men have with women of color, and the consequences from those relationships experienced by Creole women of color in the stories of *The Goodness of St. Rocque*. The tragic mulatta trope Dunbar-Nelson employs follows a unique, New Orleanian trajectory. Central to New Orleans, Dunbar-Nelson interrogates the sexualized relationships known as *plaçage*. In the short story “Little Miss Sophie,” Dunbar-Nelson interrogates *plaçage*’s detrimental effects on women of color. The theme of the story reveals how these relationships are defined by sexist and racist standards requiring gendered specific sacrifices that work to preserve the privileges and “integrity of the white, male subject” (Stouck 273). By suggesting that Miss Sophie’s love affair in the story is indeed *plaçage*, I am not trying to romanticize relationships that were political, exploitative, and possibly sexually violent, or attempting to dismiss and ignore rape and racial violence. As pointed out earlier in Chapter one, the system of *plaçage* and its any said “advantages” were limited and controlled within the constructs of a society perpetuated by racism, sexism, and the control of Black women’s bodies and sexuality.

The story reveals that five years previously Miss Sophie was involved in a month long, “little Creole love-affair” (*Works I*, 145). This “little Creole love-affair,” or *plaçage* arrangement, is where the social and sexual vulnerabilities of women of color are exploited. The affair ended badly leaving her in poverty and living in a “miserable little room in a miserable little cottage in one of the squalid streets of the Third District that nature and the city fathers seemed to have forgotten” (138). Here Dunbar-Nelson comments on how the “city fathers,” read white Creole men, viewed women of color’s bodies as merely disposable. The “squalid streets of

the Third District” acts as code for the dilapidated community of disposed women who these “city fathers seemed to have forgotten.” Dunbar-Nelson further claims how these forgotten women are part of the permanent New Orleans streetscape when she writes, “passengers on the Clairborne line are too much accustomed to frail little black-robed women with big, black bundles; it is one of the city’s most pitiful sights” (143). The “big, black bundles” they carry signify the extra labor they must endure in order to support themselves to survive in squalid conditions after arrangements are broken. Opportunities for gainful employment were scarce for women, especially for women of color; therefore, they met with extreme poverty, so any extra labor they could find was welcomed. Working as a seamstress, Miss Sophie endlessly toils for “whole days and nights” for her meager survival. Though these women are classified as forgotten, they are not portrayed as “ashamed” or “shameful” as in Chopin’s story. However, in order to further interrogate the inequalities of these types of relationships, Dunbar-Nelson uses imagery woven with narration to convey the fallen status placed on these women in literature and in real lived experiences.

The story begins with the image of Miss Sophie, “a little, forsaken black heap at the altar of the Virgin” (*Works I*, 137), who has fainted at the feet of a statue of the Virgin Mary. The narration framing this scene employs phrases such as “darkness was falling” and “lights would be lowered” to reinforce the imagery as representing the status of *placee* women as “fallen.” The “frail little black-robed women,” as described on the streetcar, and are thus considered unmarriageable due to the laws preventing them from marrying any man outside of their racial class. Society viewed these ex-concubines as being impure and having lost virtue, so, therefore, they are not proper women to marry. Miss Sophie, like Désirée and Grace Montfort, is denied “true womanhood,” not just for her participation in *plaçage* arrangements, but also for her

mixed-racial identity. While there are vast differences in the ways each author treats the characters of Désirée, Grace, and Miss Sophie, what remains integral to their identities and fate, and to the stories themselves, is how their race is perceived.

Though their texts differ in terms of racial identity and how race influences the treatment of women by dominant society, both Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson through their employment of symbols of commitment, domesticity, and marriage in their stories, demonstrate how these tropes often influence identity formation and prescribed gender roles for women. In “Désirée’s Baby,” Chopin uses the *corbeille*, and in “Little Miss Sophie,” Dunbar-Nelson uses the ring as symbols. Both of these symbols question the specific scripts of gender prescribed for women and men, yet the different symbols function in similar and in different ways for the authors and their characters in the stories. The *corbeille*, a French Creole wedding tradition, is a wedding gift from the bridegroom to the bride consisting of a basket or trunk full of exquisite gifts. Such trunks would usually contain jewelry, clothes, and other fripperies. Chopin uses the *corbeille* to function as a symbol of matrimony, identity, and ultimately the destruction, or rather the erasure, of the marriage between Désirée and Armand when it is burned. At the beginning of the story, the *corbeille* signifies for Armand and Désirée the acknowledgement of a marital identity for the couple. Through matrimony and the laws surrounding such unions, Armand gives Désirée his name thus creating, legally, a legitimate identity for her: “He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana? He ordered the *corbeille* from Paris, and contained himself with what patience he could until it arrived” (241). Armand expresses the importance in delaying the wedding until the *corbeille* arrives after considering the mystery surrounding Désirée’s background. The concrete, physical act of giving the gift from the bridegroom to the bride acts as a metaphor for the

normative traditional act of giving one's name. Thus, this connection makes the *corbeille* essential in the naming and, therefore, formation of a socially acceptable identity for Désirée through legal marriage.

Even though this symbol of marriage and domesticity prescribes specific gender roles for women, like Désirée, in normative society, its function proves more important for Armand as a symbol of marriage and identity, especially with respect to race. After the realization that Désirée is a person of color, she disappears “among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou” (244). Armand wishes to rid himself of any material objects reminding him of her existence. Creating a pyre he burns the *corbeille*. This curious act suggests an exhibition of the destruction of the wedding vows that helped seemingly form a legal identity for Désirée, but instead it propels the discovery of identity for Armand. This physical destruction erases the marriage that would have otherwise been considered null and void in the state of Louisiana during this time. As mentioned in Chapter one, civil codes were in place that restricted legitimate marriages between free persons of color to free whites or to enslaved persons. In other words, because of the mixed racial identity of either Désirée or Armand, the marriage, according to Louisiana law, was illegal. In a sense, the destruction of the *corbeille* is also symbolic in the identity formation of Armand, who while burning it discovers his true racial identity as a person of color when he discovers the letter from his mother revealing the truth. In this sense, he burns the illusion and myth of racial purity and is left with the reality of his own body and mixed raced heritage.

The plot of “Little Miss Sophie” centers around a ring Sophie is given from her ex-lover Neale. The ring in the story signifies (broken) commitment, marriage, and, also, like in “Désirée’s Baby,” identity formation. The ring not only signifies and legitimizes Neale as the

rightful heir to his uncle's fortune, but it is also used symbolically, or as a trope, for domesticity and marriage that is denied to Miss Sophie, and constantly to women of color in *plaçage* relationships in New Orleans in the nineteenth century. In Miss Sophie's possession, the ring and what it symbolizes is virtually useless. This uselessness of signifying marriage and proper domesticity is highlighted by the story's title: "Little Miss Sophie." The personal title of "Miss" in Sophie's name is a heteronormative societal designation for women who are not married; a title Miss Sophie would still keep even if Neale kept his promise of a commitment. As mentioned, civil codes prevented a legal, legitimate marriage between Sophie and Neale.

Because of gender expectations scripted for women of color, Miss Sophie maintains her faithfulness to the men in her life by her acts towards the ring and what it signified for her. After the breakup with Neale, she pawns the ring in order to take care of her father: "She remembered the day she had kissed and wept and fondled it, until it seemed her heart must burst under its load of grief before she took it to the pawnbroker's that another might be eased before the end came, —that other her father" (*Works I*, 145-146). Now that the other man in her life and his new bride may suffer without the ring, she literally works herself to death to redeem the ring from the pawnshop. That the ring signifies commitment, marriage, and domesticity to Miss Sophie is clear to the readers. She convinces herself that she must redeem the ring at any cost, even if it means starving to death. In the madness that consumes her mental state, she becomes delusional and starts to (mis)identify herself as how the ring should signify her: as his bride: "Well, he must have it; she might starve in the attempt. . . . The bumping car rode slowly, and the hot thoughts beat heavily in her poor little head. He must have the ring; but how—the ring—the Roman ring—the white-robed bride starving—she was going mad—ah yes" (146-147). However, the only way Miss Sophie can realize the promise of the ring of Neale's commitment and blissful

domesticity for herself is in death: “There it was, clasped between her fingers on her bosom—a bosom white and cold, under a cold happy face” (152). The only true significance the ring has is as property instrumental in clearing up the “difficulty of identification” (144) for the white Creole man on the “verge of ruin” (144). The ring is a piece of property that proves that he is indeed deserving of a large inheritance because of the purity of blood proving his whiteness, a position he must hold in order to be able to enter into a *plaçage* union—one that is certainly much more advantageous for the white men than for the women of color whose personhood and sexualities are taken advantage of in the arrangement. The trope of the ring as property in relation to race exposes the injustices, exclusions, and hypocrisies that racist society demands and prescribes to women of color.

Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson use these symbols of proper domesticity, commitment, and marriage to show how they are differently applied where questions of race and class are concerned. These traditional symbols actually work towards the formation of identity for the men in the story while denying the women of color any societal privileges. The ring and *corbeille* are not the only tropes used by Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson in relation to gender and race, the law is also used in these stories. The law is used to signify authority, freedom, and sanctions. In “*Désirée’s Baby*” and “*Little Miss Sophie*,” the laws of Louisiana deny freedom to marry white men and allow any authority for both *Désirée* and *Miss Sophie*. While the trope of the law is implied through the symbolism of marriage and domesticity in “*Désirée’s Baby*” and “*Little Miss Sophie*,” it is explicit as itself in Dunbar-Nelson’s “*The Stones of the Village*.” In “*The Stones of the Village*,” the law is used to affect the common trope of passing prominent in African American literature published after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* court decision granting constitutional legitimacy to segregation laws in the country.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson wrote “The Stones of the Village” sometime between 1900 and 1910 for a volume she was planning titled, *Women and Men* that was never published during her lifetime. Gloria Hull states that Dunbar-Nelson had plans of possibly expanding the story into a full-length novel. However, she was discouraged by editors claiming, “at present the American public had a ‘dislike’ for treatment of the ‘color-line’” (*Works III*, xxxvi) and the story remained in manuscript. In spite of the editors’ claim, novels and stories interrogating the color line and passing were being published, such as Charles Chesnutt’s fiction, *The Wife of His Youth*, and *Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899), and *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson’s novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and Nella Larsen’s short story, “Passing” (1929). In conversation with these other stories, Dunbar-Nelson explores the politics and circumstances associated with passing over the color line and how doing so challenges race categories set in place by the law. Importantly, “Stones” is one of Dunbar-Nelson’s most explicit explorations of identity and race within Creole culture.

The protagonist in “Stones,” Victor, dedicates his adult life to studying, practicing, and applying the law, and, while passing as a white man in prominent white Creole New Orleans society, uses his position within the law and the power it provides to effectively maintain his whiteness. Under the guise of the law, Victor has the freedom and power to contain the truth of his past. In his courtroom and with his everyday relationships and encounters, he is hyperaware of how his actions and attitudes towards people of color are perceived and assessed by others:

When it came to a question involving the Negro, Victor Grabért was noted for his stern, unrelenting attitude; it was simply impossible to convince him that there was sheerest incapacity in that race. . . . He was liked and respected by men of his political belief, because, even when he was a candidate for a judgeship, neither money nor the possible chance of a deluge of voters from the First and Fourth Ward could cause him to swerve one hair’s breadth from his opinion of the black inhabitants of those wards. (*Works III*, 23-24)

Victor's conscious attitudes and actions towards people of color in his community is a reflection of his own dismissal of his mixed racial background. His very job of upholding the exact laws of the state that oppress his race is instrumental in his claim to the property of whiteness. Because he could lose that position, Victor is paranoid to the point of mania. His paranoia is so great he becomes both entranced and frightened of the Creole of color attorney, Pavageau. Victor considers Pavageau his "*bête noir*" (24), literally translated to "black beast," but used to denote a person or thing strongly avoided. Pavageau represents the racial part of himself that Victor hides. Victor uses his power as a judge to rule against a case Pavageau argues in his courtroom. After the ruling against Pavageau, Victor admits to himself that Pavageau had the better argument but would not dare rule in his favor: "Fools, can't they see who is the abler man of the two?" He wanted to go up to Pavageau and give him his hand; to tell him that he was proud of him and that he had really won the case, but public opinion was against him; but he dared not. Another one of his colleagues might; but he was afraid. Pavageau and the world might misunderstand, or would it be understanding?" (24). Again, this shows Victor's hyperawareness of how he is perceived. He is paranoid to the point of feeling that if he shows a bit of admiration for a colleague of color, people would then see right through his passing and (mis)understand his true racial identity—a racial identity as defined by the exact laws in which he practices and rules with on a daily basis.

It is not merely a coincidence that the case Pavageau argues in front of Victor is against segregation—Pavageau defends the right of a Creole of color child to enroll in a whites-only school. After Victor rules that the boy should be removed from the school because of his color, Pavageau asks Victor in the courtroom: "Perhaps Your Honor would like to set the example by taking your son from the schools" (26). Pavageau's question makes it clear that he knows Victor is passing for white and essentially accuses him of being a hypocrite. Victor's son, though a

mixed-race child because of his father's ancestry, is allowed to attend a whites-only school because he is perceived as white, while the boy Pavageau is defending is not allowed because he is marked as Black only because the ancestry of his grandmother is known. With this scene, Dunbar-Nelson offers commentary on the hypocrisies of segregation laws, speaking directly to the politics surrounding the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that unfolded in New Orleans that held the public's imagination regarding race during this time.

This scene is also in dialogue with other narratives of passing published at the turn of the century where moments of encounters enact an identity crisis for the protagonist. This moment of encounter leads the protagonist to feeling as if he or she must choose between returning back to the Black community or remaining in the white world. Theorist Valerie Smith observes that in narratives of passing the

Passing male characters can either be re-educated and returned to the bosom of home and community to uplift the race, or they can remain in the white world and be constructed with some measure of condescension, ambivalence, or even approval. . . . Passing women characters, on the other hand, are either re-educated and returned to the bosom of home and community, or they receive some extreme form of punishment such as death or the sacrifice of a loved one. (45)

For example, in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of and Ex-Colored Man*, the unnamed protagonist's moment of encounter with his friend from the past, Shiny, encourages him to "cast the die of [his] fate" (506) and reveal his African ancestry to his future wife. The encounter and her reaction influence his decision to remain passing as a white man. The narrator's decision to remain in the white world leads to ambivalent feelings in the end. In Nella Larsen's novella, *Passing*, both Irene and Clare pass for white, though for different lengths of time and for different reasons. Irene and Clare's encounters actually shape the novella, where it is divided into three parts: the encounter, the re-encounter, and the finale. After her encounters with Irene, a friend from the past, Clare continues to pass for white until the moments before her

death. These encounters lead to the finale where Clare's passing is revealed to her white, racist husband, John. After John violently confronts her: "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" (238), Clare falls to her death from a six-story window, keeping to the gender-specific script of receiving punishment for remaining in the white world.

While Johnson and Larsen's passing narratives remain true to the typical political trajectory defining the genre, Dunbar-Nelson complicates this tradition by subverting the gender-specific script. After his encounter with Pavageau, Victor does experience ambivalence where he feels both a sense of relief and self-abasement. He feels as if must now "cease all the oppression, all the little injustices" (30) he had offered to those men and women of color. However, he refuses to leave the white world and fears that any sudden benevolence shown towards people of color would give his African ancestry away. His encounter with Pavageau actually heightens his paranoia of being revealed; thus, he dies at the end of the story. Victor is punished because he buys into the systematic privileging of whiteness, which causes him to give out "oppression" and "little injustices" to the people of color in his community.

Dunbar-Nelson portrays Victor as hostile and indignant towards black people, refusing to even have black servants in his home. In "Désirée's Baby," Chopin portrays Armand as consciously mistreating Blacks because of the truth revealed about mixed racial identity. Unlike Victor, though, Armand is unaware of his true racial mixing and is instead taking on the "very spirit of Satan" in his dealings with the slaves because of his wife's perceived racial identity. Both Armand and Victor are alike in the sense that they perform and construct their "white" masculinities by the subjugation and mistreatment of people of color and women.

However, mistreatment of Blacks in order to maintain a passing identity is not a common strategy employed in other narratives of passing; although, colorism is sometimes revealed

where lighter skinned people discriminated against darker skinned people. For instance, in Charles Chesnutt's short story, "The Wife of His Youth" (1899), the protagonist Mr. Ryder's enslaved past is revealed when he acknowledges the existence of his very dark skinned, plantation wife. In this case, Mr. Ryder is not passing for white, but instead as distinguishing himself as "more white than black" (47) without the burdensome pasts usually associated with those with darker skin. He is a member of a society known as the Blue Veins whose goal is to eventually be absorbed by the white race. Membership to the society is rumored to require that members be of free birth, which would disqualify Mr. Ryder if his past were ever known. Chesnutt also writes an encounter in the story that challenges Mr. Ryder's perceived identity. The wife of Mr. Ryder's youth returns to unite with him. After his encounter with the wife of his youth, Mr. Ryder reveals his enslaved past, and keeping with the constructs of the narratives of passing, the protagonist's decision is met with approval. Chesnutt's narrative of passing retains a "mystery of past" as seen in both Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson's stories analyzed in this chapter.

Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" is not a narrative of passing, although the conclusion depicts the tragic end of its protagonist, which is similar to conclusions of passing narratives at this time. Nevertheless, Chopin writes Désirée as committing suicide because of her shame about her perceived blackness. While neither Miss Sophie nor Victor commit suicide at the end of their perspective stories, Dunbar-Nelson's characters do die at the end. Miss Sophie dies because of her forsaken and forgotten status as a jilted Creole woman of color. Because of prescribed gender roles of sacrifice and suffering, she literally works herself to death in order to restore the integrity of white, male privilege for her ex-lover. Because Victor buys into the system of whiteness and refuses to lose all property and privilege associated with it, he is punished with death.

Both Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin use the tragic mulatta character for “whitening differences” to produce exceptionally heroic or beautiful characters who come to tragic ends because of a “fatal trace of blackness.” However, I point out that Dunbar-Nelson does not portray Miss Sophie as consciously passing as white—she is a Creole of color and this fact actually challenges an “obvious and easily definable boundary between black and white” (Stouck 274). By Dunbar-Nelson refusing to label Miss Sophie as anything but Creole, the story plays on a transgression of boundaries. Moreover, Dunbar-Nelson’s ending betrays this blurring and instead restores an oppressive order. Sophie dies at the end from literally working herself to death in order to preserve her commitment to the man she loves. She sacrifices her body and mind in order to save him from his unfortunate plight. Miss Sophie is a tragic character deployed to critique the racial and sexual politics of oppressive systems in society that exploit the bodies and labor of women of color. Thus, it can be argued that this restoration also exposes injustices of social boundaries, especially when the system of *plaçage* and its detrimental effects on the lives of the women of color who are/were in these arrangements are de-romanticized, recognized, and acknowledged in the reading of the stories.

These stories also challenge any narrowly defined “Creole” southern tradition. While it is true that Creole culture has been depicted as upholding rigid patriarchal customs and mores by defining specific gender and racial roles and how “Creole” is sometimes read as “white” (a la Grace King), Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s stories offer an “alternate version of Creoleness” that “undermines the exclusivity of white culture” (Stouck 276). Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson construct a much more complicated Creole culture as a whole. The character Désirée embodies the construction of a complicated Creole culture in Chopin’s work. Here, what is assumed about the racial markings of bodies and where these racial markings originate is complicated, it is

disrupted. The plight of Désirée and her baby is influenced by interlocking racist and sexist thought—it is automatically the mother’s fault that the baby does not appear “white.” No one considers the possibility that Armand may not be truly “white”; he never knew his mother. The “mystery of past” is reinforced with Victor and his fierce protection of keeping his past from being revealed. In “Stones,” Dunbar-Nelson is exposing the detrimental effects of communities trying to preserve an exclusive Creole dichotomy (white Creoles *or* Creoles of color) through the character of Victor. While growing up, he never quite fits in his community with other Creoles of color, mainly because his Grandmère prevents him from playing with the children in his neighborhood: “‘What you mean?’ she hissed at him, ‘What you mean playin’ in de strit wid dose niggers?’ And she struck at him wildly with her open hand” (*Works III*, 5). Moreover, due to thoughts of racial purity prevalent in society, white Creole children reject him. He has to hide his racially mixed identity in order to pass into the white Creole community he embraces as an adult. Dunbar-Nelson’s clear understanding that Creole, while in some respects belongs to its own racial category, but, yet, is not mutually exclusive from Black and white traditions, is still affected by the perceived notions of Black and white racialized identities. Therefore, as illustrated by these texts, Creole identity not only disrupts societal dichotomous norms and hierarchies, but the same norms that they disrupt also work to complicate Creole identity.

CONCLUSION

Kate Chopin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson were contemporaries who lived and wrote, at least part of their lives, in the same space and time: Louisiana at the end of the nineteenth century, or in a time referred to as the post-Reconstruction era. Both authors centered Creole bodies and culture in many of their short stories challenging normative gender roles and racial categories. The constructed categories of race, class, and sexuality influence an individual's lived experience, and both of these authors' fiction set to capture the lived experience of those in their Louisiana communities. Louisiana Creole communities are the particular location that anchors these characters' racial and ethnic identities for both Chopin and Dunbar Nelson. Though both have written prolifically, Chopin received, and still receives, more critical scholarship and has a stable, consistent place in the so-called literary canon while Dunbar-Nelson still remains in near obscurity. What causes some voices to be heard and other's to be silenced? A one-sided commentary about a culture consisting of contradictory and multiple meanings—Creole—can only provide a blaring incomplete picture.

During the first two chapters of this project, I have attempted to probe the questions of what are the politics of claiming a Creole identity, how does other literature during the post-Reconstruction era inform the literature of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson, and finally, does reading Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson within a Creole historical context change or further current scholarship about their fiction. The final chapter looks at how different stories from these two authors speak to one another about specific racial and gender roles as experienced in Louisiana Creole communities. The overall goal of this project looks at history and literature using a

Feminist theoretical framework where an attempt at building bodies of knowledge is made in an ongoing, dialectical process where differences—different aspects or angles of truth—are looked at in order to achieve some type of clarity about how race, gender, and feminine sexuality inform Creole subjectivity in Louisiana. This projects illustrates how claiming a Creole identity can be a political act within itself for because of, and in spite of, the multiple and contentious meanings surrounding the identity term, it ultimately challenges and resists the racial dichotomy of either black or white.

Chapter one looks at the history and the constructions of race, class, and culture intrinsic to Creole identity formation. Historical and scholarly debates about the meanings of Creole expose just how unstable overall identity categories are in a society consisting of so much difference. Location and community are central to a Louisiana Creole's identity. Origin is one of the term's original definitions, meaning to come from Louisiana. Because of race, time, and social standing, community obviously had different meanings for Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson. And how they portrayed the city—or country—scape and its colorful array of inhabitants is unique to the writer and her perceptions of the community.

I also argue that Creole bodies are sites of a bodily war affected by race and class. Once an identity steeped in an aristocratic French and Spanish tradition, the racialization of Creole richly encompasses an African and Native American heritage through pre-emancipation societal systems and institutions, such as *plaçage* and slavery. These systems and institutions controlled by white dominant society perpetuated the political, exploitative, and often times sexually violent relationships between white men and women of color. During the post-Reconstruction era, white Creoles resisted recognizing that Creoles of colors existed by instead using problematic hypodescent racial classifications based on certain ratios of racial ancestry. These classifications

were racist and faulty, and ultimately “quadroon” and “mulatto/a” became all encompassing terms for mixed-race persons. Much of the literature produced from Louisiana writers during the post-Reconstruction era depict Creoles of color they often referred to as “mulatto/a” or “quadroon.” George Washington Cable and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, however, used characters with indeterminate race that they referred to as Creole. The chapter concludes with a discussion specifically about gender and the residual effects of the ideal of “true womanhood” as it related to social classifications and characterizations. The project shows how this ideal excluded “others” based on race and class and how maintaining the ideal relied upon those exact exclusions.

The second chapter provides an overview of the post-Reconstruction literature of African Americans. I argue that the fiction produced during this time provides an important part of the framework necessary to read both Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson’s work effectively. Because of the lack of literary criticism focusing on Creole subjectivity, I use scholarship centering Black women’s subjectivity in literature. Finally, this chapter provides short biographies and brief literary histories of Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson including criticism. Chopin was virtually shunned from social and literary circles after the publication of *The Awakening*. The scandalous criticism received hastened the end of her writing career. Dunbar-Nelson, though a prolific writer, only published two full-length works of fiction. Current criticism accuses her of missing the mark in having a voice in racial discourse by not engaging in overt racial propaganda in her writing. I argue that Dunbar-Nelson instead wrote about her complex and conflicting experiences as a Creole of color, thus, disrupting hierarchal racial dichotomies with her characters’ differences; and this was her unique addition in the discourse of racial concerns, especially those in conversations surrounding the impact of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision.

Black writers were expected to write about themes of racial tensions and to use black dialect in their works. This exact focus on creative fiction imposed on African American writers is what infuriated Alice Dunbar-Nelson (Ammons 60).

Chapter three provides a synthesis of chapters one and two. The history of the Louisiana Creole and its laws and systems with a brief literary history of genres, tropes, and themes work to provide a lens in which to read Creole subjectivity in Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson's short fiction. The literary tropes of the "tragic mulatta," symbols of domesticity, the law and narratives of passing are used to connect the stories under analysis to show each writer's differing, and at some points similar, positions in respect to gender and race. The intertextual analysis illustrates how each writer creates different texts of race and human experiences within a common Creole community.

The project is in no way final or complete but instead calls for an ongoing analysis and need for expansion. Nevertheless, this project provides a starting point, or rather, a start to a conversation containing voices and discourses often left silent. Not much scholarship exists regarding Creoles of color, especially in literature, and this project aims to add to those scarce conversations. Future expansion should add more voices to the dialogue and also by looking at queer sexualities and gender expressions. These additions can be done by expanding not only genre but also the time and space in which these literatures were written and take place. An analysis should look at how, politically, does Creole identity extend outside of the American South, focusing specifically on Caribbean women writers, such as Michelle Cliff.

Literary critic Elizabeth Ammons claims, "Criticism that purports to talk about 'women writers' but actually have in mind white women writers obviously reproduces the error of the scholarship it seeks to revise" (viii). By placing Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson side-by-side and

looking at their stories together, we can explore how their voices and experiences speak to each other about the oppressive experiences of racialized and gendered bodies in Creole communities in the South. If we are to find the truth about any subject, then literary and cultural critics and scholars must put all sides of the story together. Only then will we begin to hear the whole story.

NOTES

¹ While this is a crude definition, the system of *plaçage* will be discussed in further detail in Chapter one of this project.

² This era is also sometimes referred to as the Progressive era.

³ The debate as to what or who is Creole continues at the time of this writing. The argument was the subject for the documentary, *The Creole Controversy*, produced in the late 1980s.

⁴ This name derives from the government issued casket-like trunks that held the girls' possessions.

⁵ Recent scholarship (Martin, Dorman, Rankin) questions the actual existence of the *les filles à la cassette*. According to Joan Martin, there are no historical documents to support the alleged shipments (Martin 61). However, I have included Cable's account because many white Creoles claim to be descendants of these women as opposed to from free women of color.

⁶ Grace King is often described as "defender of Creole honor," arguing that Creole ancestry is "purely" white (Elfenbein 15).

⁷ Carl Brasseaux describes how George Washington Cable was "literally run out of New Orleans for suggesting in his works that blacks could be called 'Creoles'" (91).

⁸ Mary L. Schaffter states in her article, "Creole Women," published in 1892, that using the term to apply to any one or thing born and living in New Orleans and its vicinity was incorrect: "there is a broader misapplication common in some parts of the state, where fresh eggs, Louisiana cows, horses, and chickens are called creole eggs, creole ponies, etc." (346). It appears as a direct response to Cable's text, which Schaffter would have been familiar with.

⁹ In the forward to M.H. Herrin's book, *The Creole Aristocracy*, John Woodford remarks how Herrin's text is a "refreshing treatment and approach" (7) to the part of American culture known as Creole. He hopes it will undo the "besmirching [of] the character of the Creole as being of questionable origin and with a certain darkened shade of skin coloration" (7).

¹⁰ These are hypodescent racial classifications based on certain ratios of racial ancestry. Herrin's definitions for these classifications are: "mulatto, a person of half white and half Negro blood; ... quadroon, a person one-quarter Negro and three-quarters white; ... octoroon, a person one-eighth Negro and seven-eighths white; ... griffe, a person three-quarters Negro and one-quarter white" (29). It is interesting that Herrin lists the percentage of white blood first in his definition of "mulatto" and lists the percentage of "Negro" blood first in the rest. Grace King also makes these distinctions in *New Orleans, the Place and the People*. King further explains these terms as meaning, "one degree's further transfiguration toward the Caucasian standard of physical perfection" (333).

¹¹ "Free women of color," or *gens de couleur libre*, can actually be looked at as a misnomer. Though legally these women were free, they were allowed limited advantages within Louisiana's tripartite system. For example, the 1724 *Code Noir* and various other civil codes restricted legitimate marriages between free women of color to free white men or to enslaved black men. Laws also prevented these women from certain occupations, like selling alcohol, and from buying property.

¹² Virginia Domínguez quotes the law prohibiting marriage as: "Civil Code 1808, page 24, article 8 states: 'Free persons and slaves are incapable of contracting marriage together; the celebration of such marriages is forbidden, and the marriage is void; it is the same with respect to the marriages contracted by free white persons with free people of color'" (25).

¹³ Barbara Welter states in her text "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," published in 1966, that the phrase was used in "women's magazines, gift annuals and religious literature" (151). Welter lists and describes the four virtues women were expected to uphold: Piety, Purity, Submission, and Domesticity. "Put them all together and they spell mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power" (152). It is also referred to as The Cult of Domesticity.

¹⁴ Women's club movement at the turn of the century provided opportunities for women to have a powerful voice in the public realm. These clubs fostered self-education and involvement within reform movements—including social reforms and working to end lynchings (Ammons 6).

¹⁵ Obviously, the difference between "mulatta" and "mulatto" is to designate gender.

¹⁶ The earliest recorded use of the term is in Drake's *Voyage* in 1595 (Bender 516).

¹⁷ W.E.B. Dubois repeated the use of the phrase in his groundbreaking text, *The Souls of Black Folks* where he famously declares, "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (221).

¹⁸ Per Seyersted in his biography, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, published in 1969 and Daniel Rankin in *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories*, published in 1932. Emily Toth, in "The Shadow of the First Biographer: The Case of Kate Chopin," claims there is no existing record supporting this (287).

¹⁹ Alice and Paul separated in 1902 and she remained estranged from him until his death in 1906 (see Hull and Lutes).

²⁰ In 1988, The Schomburg Library published a three-volume collection of her writings, edited by Gloria T. Hull.

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