Down the River, Out to Sea: Mobility, Immobility, and Creole Identity in New Orleans Regionalist Fiction (1880-1910)

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1. Louisiana Creoles and the “Third Space”

To explore the intersection of regionalism and transnationalism in New Orleans fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this essay will focus on the Creole characters in George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes* (1880), Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), and Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s “The Stones of the Village” (1900-1910). Very broadly, “in the early colonial period … Creole signified the offspring of Old World progenitors born and raised in the New World” (Stewart 1). In New Orleans, Creoles represent the fraught transition from signifying French or Spanish heritage to the inclusion of African ancestry, lending New Orleans a distinct regional identity through their inherently transnational mixture (Davis 195-98; Disheroon-Green and Abney 2-3). French and Spanish influence and the Code Noir led to a class of gens de couleur libre, or free people of color (Davis 196-98), such as Honoré, f.m.c. and Palmyre, in *The Grandissimes*, who operate within a socially mobile space between black and white. In studying these works, I will focus on the Creole as representing a nexus of North American, French, Spanish, African, Latin American, and Caribbean cultures (see Davis 200-206; Gruesz 108-11), and the challenge this hybrid character presents to the racial binary structure of the United States (Davis 186).

Considering critical developments on the intersections of literary regionalism and transnationalism (Fetterley and Pryse 214-21; Ammons and Rohy viii-xviii; Joseph 7), I would like to study the ways in which Creoles define and continuously alter the cultural landscape of New Orleans. My claim is that despite racial policing in this era, these works represent the actual fluidity of racial identity of New Orleans, which possesses its own
cultural values, social codes, language, and dialect based on international influences. In fiction written during a period when first-wave feminism and civil rights concerns allowed for a more positive, self-determined sense of social mobility (Ammons 3-6; Fetterley and Pryse 280-82), the Creole character, by representing racial mixture, challenges segregation as well as anti-miscegenation laws (Davis 215) and foreshadows the local/global intersections of contemporary society.

In Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, & Literature, Davis refers to “the promise and the failure of Louisiana as an alternative space for modeling a more expansive and less binary construction of race within the United States from the nineteenth century onward” (186). Her work provides an extensive cultural and historical foundation for the analysis of literature produced by a selection of black writers in the Deep South from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries. Drawing on Davis’s concepts and expanding on her field of research, my analysis focuses on the movement of culturally hybrid characters within regionalist novels of New Orleans between 1880 and 1910. I examine the tensions between geographic mobility and immobility, considering that Southern identity has traditionally assumed a fixed sense of place, race, and class. Following recent developments in the conceptualization of mobility and immobility in American cultural studies (for instance in the work of Klaus Benesch), this analysis takes into consideration both the positive and negative aspects of mobility, showing that positive assumptions of mobility may ignore the experience of forced movement of slaves or the exile of Creoles of Color who break the social codes, while the negative associations with immobility may fail to recognize that those who stay in the region are able to define its identity.

To study the various depictions of the Creole in these works, I will also take into account several definitions of “third space” as they apply to the international and multiracial influences on New Orleans (Davis 188, 286). The Creole characters of New Orleans that appear in these works represent cultural and ethnic border crossing, although segregation limits their ability to cross racial boundaries. Existing between black and white, the Creole characters represent a “third space,” if not yet one of resistance, then at least a sign of its possibility. As Bhabha writes,

> It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (55)

Such signs, including references to geographical border-crossings, by land, river, or sea, suggest a fluid notion of Southern cultural identity. In reading the potential of the “third space” as a site of resistance, however, such theories might fail to consider the complications of this positioning, not as wholly positive or negative, but containing elements of both. A focus on mobility and immobility allows the reader to test the modes of movement and resistance in these stories, to consider the experience of living in New Orleans from different vantage points and to imagine the possibilities inherent in the place and in the individual, beyond prescriptive racial categories.

This study attends to the various representations of the Creole by addressing canonical novels by white authors of the late nineteenth century, and a short story by Alice Dunbar-Nelson from the early twentieth century. “[M]arked from the beginning by the mixed white, black, and Indian of her Creole ancestral strains,” Dunbar-Nelson was light enough “to pass occasionally for white” (Hull xxix), yet by the “one-drop rule” she was...
considered black. In previous decades, critics considered George Washington Cable the preeminent writer of the Deep South in this period, while Kate Chopin’s novel was read from a feminist perspective, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s short stories, if acknowledged, would have been read in terms of race. However, a comparative analysis of their works reveals that their representations of the Creole demonstrate a common concern with national discourses of belonging, exclusion, and social mobility, not limited to a single gender or race, but arising from the complex racial and cultural history of New Orleans.

Current developments in transnational and hemispheric literary studies have influenced recent critical analyses of New Orleans history and literature. This essay reflects the direction of such scholarship, with a narrower comparative focus on the geographic and social mobility of Creole characters. Davis’s *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, & Literature* includes analyses of Créolité in New Orleans, but neither addresses the work of Cable and Chopin in detail nor Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s “The Stones of the Village.” James Nagel addresses New Orleans cultural history, regionalism, and the literary tradition of the short story cycle in *Race and Culture in New Orleans Stories: Kate Chopin, Grace King, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and George Washington Cable* (2014) but focuses on different texts than those analyzed in this essay. In comparison with these studies, I argue that New Orleans as a site of migration, immigration, and the slave trade motivates Cable, Chopin, and Dunbar-Nelson to explore the meaning of mobility and immobility through geographic movement, motifs of exile, and the symbolism of the sea. In sum, I will compare the ways in which these authors draw on transnationalism to represent the mobility of those who challenged the color line in “the country’s most linguistically and racially diverse city” (Gruesz 109).

I purposely use Creole in a broad sense, with reference to a current understanding of “syncretism” and “hybridity” (Stewart 6-7). To situate the distinct meaning of the Creole in each of the works I examine, I will explore how each author uses pairings of characters to explore the themes of mobility and immobility. Honoré and Honoré, f.m.c., a French Creole and a Creole of Color, experience integration and segregation, respectively, in *The Grandissimes*. The divergent experiences of exile by Honoré, f.m.c. and Palmyre, leading to his suicide by drowning and her survival, suggest the limits and possibilities inherent in geographic mobility. Interestingly, Chopin also utilizes the narrative structure of drowning and survival in *The Awakening*, when Edna, who denotes social and geographic mobility through her marriage to an upper-class French Creole, drowns herself out of despair for her perceived immobility in her status as wife and mother while Mariequita, who exists on the margins of the narrative and social structure, introduces a cultural and linguistic mobility that Edna fails to achieve. Finally, Victor Grabért, of West Indian ancestry, passes as white while his alter ego, Pavageau, a practicing lawyer who is considered black, reveals that he knows Grabért’s origins. While Victor collapses, haunted by his past, Pavageau maintains his ties to his community of origin. The persistence of images of life and death, drowning and survival, memory and exile, reveals the tensions between the benefits of mobility and its inherent losses. Together, these characters prefigure postmodern readings of borderland figures (Anzaldúa, 101-02) in their life and death struggles, and in their powers of translation and interpretation. They present the potential for greater social authority and economic self-sufficiency, which though desired was not yet achieved, as indicated by the persistent images of the sea and the reality or threat of drowning. Those who survive, Palmyre, Mariequita, and Pavageau, create a space for themselves through economic resources, cultural and linguistic fluency, self-
assertion and adaptation, even as they remain on the borders of these literary narratives of New Orleans.

2. The Exile of the Creole of Color in Cable’s *The Grandissimes*

George Washington Cable, a native of New Orleans but not a French Creole himself, is what Owen Robinson calls a “classic American ‘insider-outsider’ figure” (98). “Born in New Orleans in 1844 to a mother from New England Puritan stock and a father of German descent” (98), he takes an outsider’s perspective in *The Grandissimes* when describing New Orleans from the point of view of a migrating German family: “A land hung in mourning, darkened by gigantic cypresses, submerged; a land of reptiles, silence, shadow, decay” (Cable 9). This exotic description captures the threat, the danger lurking in the shadows; it also evokes the unspoken internal conflicts of those who fall between the categories of black and white. Interestingly, Frowenfeld, “an American by birth, rearing and sentiment, yet German enough through his parents” (8), the sole family survivor of an outbreak of yellow fever, provides a rational perspective on the racial conundrum of New Orleans and the Grandissime family in particular. Cable interweaves national, racial, and international identities in the French origins of the Grandissime half-brothers, and the exile of Honoré, f.m.c., and Palmyre in Bordeaux. With France as a “third space” because it exists outside the racial binary of the United States, these Creole characters imagine a new home based on their transnational identity, but their divergent paths reveal that geographic mobility does not ultimately resolve their outsider status.

Set at the time of the Louisiana Purchase, the novel depicts the hybridity of the region, which is shown to be French in language and social manners, yet irrevocably influenced by the American institution of slavery. Cable shows the border between white and black in the social division between the French Creole, Honoré Grandissime, and Honoré Grandissime, f.m.c. While the French Creole Honoré is able to operate freely, as shown in his prosperous business, his visibility within the text, and the fluency of his speech and writing, Honoré, f.m.c., lacks the same level of mobility and self-determination, as shown in his often hidden presence, his unrequited love for Palmyre, and his lack of fluency. Their father, Numa Grandissime, apparently had a *plaçage* arrangement with a woman of African ancestry, the mother of Honoré, f.m.c. (Johnson 79). Before marrying a white woman from a distinguished French Creole family (Cable 108), he provides for Honoré, f.m.c., in part to compensate for the racial injustice he will experience: “The father’s will—by the law they might have set it aside, but that was not their way—left the darker Honoré the bulk of his fortune, the younger a competency” (Cable 109). Despite holding property as a *rentier*, as the German immigrant Frowenfeld notes, Honoré, f.m.c., does not have the freedom such a designation would suggest:

‘It seems to me,’ said Frowenfeld, ‘that you—your class—the free quadroons—are the saddest slaves of all. Your men, for a little property, and your women, for a little amorous attention, let themselves be shorn even of the virtue of discontent, and for a paltry bait of sham freedom have consented to endure a tyrannous contumely which flattens them into the dirt like grass under a slab. ... As your class stands before the world to-day—free in form but slaves in spirit—you are—I do not know but I was almost ready to say—a warning to philanthropists!’ (195–96)
Despite the Code Noir (Davis 196) and the system of placage (Davis 213), which ultimately resulted in Honoré, f.m.c.’s status as a free man of color, Frowenfeld argues that his protected status merely exists to stifle rebellion. Honoré, f.m.c., understanding this allusion, responds: “Ah cannod be one Touissaint l’Ouverture. Ah cannod trah to be. Hiv I trah, I h-only s’all soogceed to be one Bras-Coupé” (196). He rejects the possibility of rebellion with reference to the leader of the Haitian Revolution, as he compares himself to the slave Bras-Coupé whose name (literally meaning “arm cut off”) symbolizes his separation from his tribe in Africa (Cable 170-1; Foote 114-16). Foreshadowing his brother’s ultimate decision to drown himself, Honoré observes: “‘True, it is only love for which he would have just now drowned himself; yet what an accusation, my-de’seh, is his whole life against that ‘caste’ which shuts him up within its narrow and almost solitary limits!’” (155). After stabbing the slave owner Agricola, Honoré, f.m.c. lives in exile in France, along with his beloved Palmyre. The captain, in indirect discourse, confirms, “They went to different hotels!” (330), thereby maintaining Palmyre’s chastity, referenced earlier as “that rarest of gifts in one of her tincture, the purity of true womanhood” (60). While she preserves her status as an exotic yet respectable woman in France, the statement indicates the prejudices that exist because of her African ancestry. France provides a temporary refuge from U.S. racism for both characters. However, Honoré, f.m.c.’s sudden disappearance at sea, as told from the point of view of a seaman, reveals his continued alienation: “The next morning, being at the water’s edge and seeing a number of persons gathering about something not far away, he sauntered down toward it to see how small a thing was required to draw a crowd of these Frenchmen. It was the drowned body of the f.m.c.” (331). This loss of a formerly central character emphasizes his anonymity and shifts the narrative from a tragic romance to a symbol of the scale of loss in the Black Atlantic in the passage of untold millions of slaves. In this case, the sea can be seen as a mobile entity, which carries the slaves across the Atlantic, and a static presence, which one can enter willingly. In The Black Atlantic, Gilroy references “the tales of slave suicide by drowning that appear intermittently in both African-American and Caribbean folklore” (204-5). Although Honoré, f.m.c. is not a slave, this death resounds with a history of slave crossings even as it signifies his estrangement from Palmyre. His geographical and social estrangement from Africa and the Caribbean, however, apparent in his comments to Frowenfeld, shows his personal sense of immobility, with his drowning suggesting alienation rather than solace or spiritual transformation.

Palmyre’s quadroon parentage resembles that of Honoré, f.m.c. (Cable 59-60), yet as Johnson argues, she resists the “tragic mulatto” stereotype (81) in her “mental acuteness, conversational adroitness, concealed cunning and noiseless but visible strength of will” along with the aforementioned chastity (Cable 60; see Johnson 85-86). In the end, she receives a generous inheritance from Honoré, f.m.c., after his death. Nevertheless, in Palmyre’s removal to France, Johnson argues that Cable emphasizes her exile and liminal existence:

Outside of death, Cable uses another common alternative in American literature to resolve the miscegenation issue by condemning Palmyre to this physical isolation.... Reflecting Palmyre’s inferior status in Creole society (i.e. the South), her foreign alias “Madame Inconnue,” (since ‘inconnu’ means outsider, alien, stranger, etc.) signifies her status as a displaced Southerner. (89)

Although I agree with Johnson that Palmyre is displaced, I interpret her agency as carrying more symbolic weight than her liminality. Cable suggests that her elegant presence, linguistic facility, and spiritual knowledge derive from her mixed ancestry,
“high Latin ancestry on the one side and—we might venture—Jaloff African on the other” (Cable 60; Johnson 81). Refusing to agree to a marriage with Honoré, f.m.c., she is not punished socially for her status as a single woman. In fact, she draws curiosity, as her observers in Bordeaux note that she is “apparently living at great ease, but solitarily, in the rue ——” (Cable 331). Indeed, her enigmatic social presence suggests her private mobility and financial security in France. In her vitality and potential, she provides a foil to Honoré, f.m.c., despite their common exile.

Palmyre and Bras-Coupé represent the possibility for rebellion against the racial hierarchy through their transnational connections to France, Haiti, and Africa, thus complicating the national story of two brothers, one black, one white, playing out their destinies according to race. In comparison with Palmyre’s escape to France as a free woman of color, the slave Bras-Coupé incurs fatal punishment when he strikes his white overseer, revealing the harsher side of the Code Noir (Cable 181) and prompting Palmyre’s visions of Haiti: “She had heard of San Domingo, and for months the fierce heart within her silent bosom had been leaping and shouting and seeing visions of fire and blood” (184). Through her visions, Cable connects Bras-Coupé’s action with revolution and explains the harsh consequences for his gesture of rebellion. When given his final rights—an ironic act considering the brutality of his punishment under the Code Noir—and asked by the priest, “Do you know where you are going?”, he answers “To—Africa” (193). He thus replaces the assumed answer designated by the Catholic Church with his stronger desire for a homeland. The references to the Haitian Revolution and, finally, Africa, serve as reminders of Bras-Coupé’s diasporic presence, showing his humanity in exile and condemning his inhumane treatment in the United States.

Bras-Coupé’s alienation echoes in the unstable existence of Honoré Grandissime, f.m.c., characterized by emotional pain and lack of identification. He seems to have a level of privilege, supported by his brother, but the death of Bras-Coupé serves as a potent reminder of the actual limits on his freedom. Through the Grandissime family, Cable traces racial mixing in New Orleans from the beginnings of its history, undermining the apparent racial hierarchy, and sets the stage for later writers to represent the interactions of light-skinned and dark-skinned characters. Mobile characters such as Honoré, f.m.c., and Palmyre occupy a “third space” outside of black and white and their associated class distinctions, feared and threatened with invisibility because they defy categorization. As they negotiate a place for themselves, in the literary imagination they are in exile, just out of reach of the narrative point of view; as is suggested by Frowenfeld’s image of New Orleans, they are in a shadowy place.

3. Mariequita’s Disturbing Presence in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin represents the French Creole Léonce Pontellier, who, like Honoré Grandissime, occupies a space of privilege but as a late nineteenth-century businessman, through property ownership and active engagement in the local tourist and transnational trade economies. Edna Pontellier, who marries into the French Creole society, by contrast, occupies an outsider position, failing to fully understand either the language or the social codes (Yaeger 216), resulting in her mistaking the flirtations of Robert Lebrun for a more devoted love outside of marriage. *The Awakening* brings
together the transnational and multiracial elements discussed, epitomized by a female hierarchy consisting of the white Protestant Edna, originally from Kentucky, the French Creole Adèle Ratignolle, and the quadroon figures who populate the text and who enable Edna, as Elizabeth Ammons notes, to maintain her romantic view of her life in New Orleans, since they take care of her children and her home (74-75). While the narrative point of view divides the population into white and black, those characters who resist easy racial identification disturb the text and Edna’s position within it. These figures are transnational, intrinsic to the regional identity of New Orleans, but potentially upsetting to the racial hierarchy of the nation, and by extension, the most conservative views within it, represented by Edna and her Confederate heritage.

These figures, I would argue, are Robert and Mariequita. Although Robert is usually read as a romantic suitor of Edna, younger and of a lower social class, his transnational experience, displayed by his linguistic facility and geographic mobility, prevent her from understanding or appropriately responding to his affections. The son of a widow who maintains a hotel and set of cottages reminiscent of plantation cabins (Birnbaum 313), he easily crosses social boundaries. Through knowledge of the cultural codes, in part through observation of those who stay at his mother’s hotel, “his equal familiarity with English, French and Spanish gave him no small value as a clerk and correspondent” (Chopin 6). While his use of French appeals to her self-image as a romantic, artistic woman with a younger lover, the fact remains that Edna cannot cross the cultural and linguistic border between them. His transnational mobility distinguishes him from Edna, raising issues about her inability to understand his perspective and experience. In particular, the omniscient third-person narrator states: “She was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others” (17). Their mutual friend, Adèle Ratignolle, reproaches Robert for flirting with Edna, referencing her cultural difference: “She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously” (20). Robert’s youth separates him from Edna, as does his connection with “darker” places and people and the sexuality they represent (Barrish 68-69), e.g. Mariequita and Mexico, which Anderson calls “Terra Incognita” (46-47).

Robert’s escape within the story to Vera Cruz, Mexico serves as a reminder of the region’s transnational origins south of the border (Gruesz 109-11) and introduces the connection with a subtly disruptive figure in the text: Mariequita. As a drifting character, Mariequita causes suspicion precisely because she does not have a fixed role in society, indicated by her “Spanish” origins (32), yet she learns to use her culturally fluid identity to her advantage. She plays several roles, indicative of her socially mobile presence, appearing infrequently yet noticeably in the narrative. As a local character, she helps Robert’s family receive tourists while representing the international influence on Grand Isle. While she appears as a free and independent young woman, she does not have the level of visibility of the French Creole characters, and has drawn critical attention precisely because she exists outside of the black/white binary, with undefined national and racial origins. At first introduced in the text as a “young barefooted Spanish girl” (32), the use of “Spanish” gives a broad identification consistent with her name and language suggestive of Latin America. Anderson reads symbolic parallels between the image of Mariequita and representations of Robert’s trip to Mexico, which seems plausible given the history of migration between Mexico and New Orleans. Yet one must also consider the broader connections between Louisiana and the Caribbean as well as the Americas (see
Certainly, as an unidentified “Spanish girl,” she fits in the space between black and white, what Barrish, drawing on the Africanist presence in Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, refers to as “Mexicanist” (65-67). As Barrish writes, “[t]he Mexicanist women are thus free to represent a wild space, one outside the regular rules and denominations of New Orleans society” (69). I would argue that Chopin’s ambiguous representation of Mariequita points to the possibility of transnational mobility, which parallels Edna’s undefined search for herself, even while her identity and her conflicts are fixed as those of a white, upper-class woman. Though the subject of gossip, Mariequita’s transnational origins influence her interpretive power, with her knowledge of different sectors of society and her ability to speak in different languages contrasting with Edna’s more mono-lingual and cultural experience.

Significantly, Mariequita appears at three key points: on the boat to the Chênière Caminada in chapter 12 (32-33), in Mlle. Reisz’s reference to a rivalry between Victor and Robert Lebrun in chapter 16 (47), and in the final chapter of the novel (106-8). When Edna first summons Robert for a trip to the Chênière, Mariequita is described from a distanced perspective as “other” in the text:

> Robert knew the girl, and he talked to her a little in the boat. No one present understood what they said. Her name was Mariequita. She had a round, sly, piquant face and pretty black eyes. Her hands were small, and she kept them folded over the handle of her basket. Her feet were broad and coarse. She did not strive to hide them. Edna looked at her feet, and noticed the sand and slime between her brown toes. (32-33)

“[H]er brown toes,” further indicating a difference from Edna’s whiteness, also signify an earthiness and barefoot freedom, which Edna does not possess. She communicates with Robert in Spanish, and demonstrates her knowledge of the cultural codes that evade Edna. Mariequita easily slips in and out of the scenes with Robert Lebrun, speaking their common language. “Does she understand?” (Chopin 86), Mariequita asks Robert, suggesting the possibility of Edna’s linguistic and cultural misinterpretation. Her transient presence as she comes in and out of the narrative action, while Edna presides in her home, on the beach, and at the table, suggest a kind of mobility that Edna has never known. At the same time, “the two women are mutually fascinated and mildly competitive with each other” (Birnbaum 315). In particular, Edna’s financial stability, elegance, and sensuality contribute to her social authority, while Mariequita’s sexuality leads to Mlle. Reisz’s commentary, “a sly one, and a bad one, that Mariequita!” (Chopin 47). Mariequita displays her freedom in contrast with Edna’s obsession with her marriage, which suggests a financial arrangement reminiscent of *The Grandissimes* rather than an individual choice. In comparison with Edna’s ruminating presence and fear of the water, Mariequita exists comfortably both at sea and on land. Her characterization allows for a reading of the “sea” not only as that nebulous place that haunts the text in its associations with slavery, as in Edna’s drowning in response to “the soul’s slavery” (108), but also in suggesting adventure and exploration beyond Edna’s experience. Mariequita, from Mlle. Reisz’s perspective of her as “a bad one,” represents the stereotypes of “Spanish” women who were seen primarily as sexual objects in the early twentieth century; and yet we see her as a self-defining, speaking, motivating character, who not only observes but acts, and whose actions take on a type of self-conscious performance, confronting those who would try to pin her down to a certain identity. In reality, she is quite fluid.
While from Edna’s perspective, Mariequita operates outside of a white, upper-class realm, her mobility enables her to exist in different settings, without surveillance though she raises criticism. She plays with traditional gender roles: she gathers shrimp, easily exists outside in the sun, and in the final chapter, hands Victor nails for the roof while confronting him about his love for Edna (106-07), complaining that “since it was the fashion to be in love with married people, why, she could run away any time she liked to New Orleans with Célina’s husband” (107). Her mobility contrasts with Edna’s apparent caged feeling, which she only partially resolves through her flirtation with Robert, and later, Alcée Arobin. Indeed, Mariequita suggests the alternative way of life Edna seeks but fails to find, first through an affair, then through finding her own home, and then, in the sea. Edna, imagining her “soul’s slavery” (108), chooses her death at sea, reminiscent of the suicides of slaves, and symbolic of the immobility of her social status as an upper-class woman in a traditional society. As one of the last people Edna sees before her death, Mariequita is not only part of the regional setting but intrinsic to the action as a foil for Edna’s increasingly problematic self-perception as a captive of some undefined captor. She is also a triangulating presence to the white Protestant and French Creole which Edna and Robert respectively represent, someone who plays the role of the servant but is well aware of her mobility and level of access in the social dynamic. Chopin shares this with the reader through Mariequita’s discussions with Robert, reminding the reader of his potential alienation from the wealthy class Edna represents and his travels south of the border.

The darker figures in the text, the quadroons, who support Edna’s role as a disaffected mother and wife, effectively support her search, as she awakens to both her sexual feelings and her desire for a more artistic life (Ammons 74-75). Scholars have noted that the quadroons support Toni Morrison’s view of the “Africanist presence” in canonical literature, silent and easily overlooked within the text (Ammons 76; Barrish 65-66; Birnbaum 301, 316), certainly not occupying the place of cultural authority that Davis explores in the work of contemporary writers of the Deep South. Instead, the figures with mobility are those outside either the constricting space of the white woman or the black women who serve her. Characters such as Mariequita and Palmyre find ways to function within an exclusive society even as they experience prejudice and relative social isolation. This “third space” where she is not known provides some freedom from the social dictates that define Edna’s existence. The subtle Mariequita, who comes and goes outside of Edna’s consciousness, potentially serves to undermine the worldview which she desires to be true: i.e., that Robert will return her affection, that his own feelings and motivations do not exist outside of her power of interpretation. The narrative counters this perspective through omniscient narration that combines her views and his: “She wondered why Robert had gone away and left her. It did not occur to her to think he might have grown tired of being with her the livelong day. She was not tired, and she felt that he was not” (Chopin 39). Robert and Mariequita escape Edna’s power of interpretation, suggesting a tension between their realities and her own. As transnational subjects of French and “Spanish” origin, they possess a degree of geographic and cultural mobility which disrupts her conservative Southern view of a fixed and predictable racial and class hierarchy. She ignores or misreads their emotional reality and fails to predict their movement; their presence exists outside the reach of her consciousness.

Indeed, in the final scene, haunting images of her own exile, her father’s voice and the clanging spurs of the cavalry officer appear before the final immutable symbol: the iconic
flowers, the “pinks” of the feminine South (109). By leaving the traditional Southern way of life for her marriage in New Orleans, she is caught in a trap of her own creation. Her dramatic decision to drown herself recalls her devotion to a “tragedian” in her younger years (18), the tension between swimming and death, and conversely, the intentional drowning of the Creole of Color in The Grandissimes. She becomes her own tragic subject as she cannot imagine a way out which would, as the pianist Mlle. Reisz warned her, involve strength and courage: “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings” (79). Such prejudice, Chopin shows, may be used against her, but she also may be blind to the realities and motivations of her own society. In the end, the disabled bird parallels Edna: “A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (108). Despite her class and racial privilege, she is somehow broken in her view of herself and her situation; in this respect, she stands in contrast to Robert and Mariequita who have mastered the sea rather than succumbed to it. Because of their geographic mobility, they possess the cultural and linguistic skills to interpret their surroundings and survive in a broader social context than that provided by the local island. In their implicit connections with a “third space,” suggestive of Mexico, and more broadly, Latin America, they occupy a territory between black and white, a symbolic space of possibility that no longer exists for Edna.


24 Writing from the other side of the color line in “The Stones of the Village,” Alice Dunbar-Nelson directly criticizes the city’s racism and segregation. Indeed, the Plessy v. Ferguson case (1896) arose from a conflict in New Orleans, in which Homer Plessy, “a Creole of Color,” “was jailed for sitting in the ‘White’ car of the East Louisiana Railroad. ... The Plessy decision set a precedent that ‘separate’ facilities for blacks and whites were constitutional as long as they were ‘equal’” (Wormser). This short story describes the emotional and spiritual struggle of Victor Grabért, a light-skinned Creole of Color who lives with his grandmother, an immigrant from the West Indies (Dunbar-Nelson 3), as his mother has died “and [n]o one ever spoke to him of a father” (4). His father, assumed to be white, has abandoned his son, leading to Victor’s tangential connection with home, and his struggle to find his place within a racially segregated neighborhood.

25 His West Indian grandmother, representing local and national prejudices, will not let him associate with the “little black and yellow boys of his own age”; and the “other little boys, whose faces were white like his own,” taunt him with racial epithets (5). Furthering his outsider status, his grandmother forces him to speak English rather than Creole, but she finally admits that he must leave the village for New Orleans in order to make progress in life. The ambiguity of racial identity in New Orleans, despite legalized segregation, allows his upward trajectory. While the readers know his story, his contacts suggest that racial identity cannot be easily detected and that it should not determine one’s choices and opportunities. His grandmother sends him to live with a friend, Mme. Guichard, and he finds work in a bookstore with an owner who does not press him about his address or racial identity. When the bookstore owner dies, he unexpectedly leaves Victor with a scholarship to a boarding school in order to enter Tulane University, which was segregated until 1963 (Jamison).
Victor thus follows the trajectory of a white man, familiar to those who have studied the novel of passing, and the phenomenon in New Orleans in particular (Anthony 297). Seeking upward mobility, Victor becomes a lawyer, then a judge, and finds himself in the uncomfortable position of consistently deciding against African Americans in anti-segregation cases, and marrying a white woman to whom he does not reveal his black ancestry. The ambiguity of his origins is reminiscent of Mariequita in Chopin’s novel. After years of hiding his racial background and fighting his own empathy for those in a situation he has avoided, a colleague, Pavageau, a black lawyer and “his bête noir” confronts him with the truth of his origins (Dunbar-Nelson 24). In a narrative twist, Pavageau reveals his identity as the nephew of Mme. Guichard, the friend of Grabért’s grandmother and confirms that he knows that Grabért is passing as white (28). This revelation demonstrates that the black characters live in a tightly knit community, resistant to the escape that passing would suggest. In fact, images of his grandmother sitting “on the steps of the tumble down cottage in the village” haunt Victor, suggesting that he has left her behind in a foreign land although both remain in the United States (32-33). He imagines his grandmother “bidding him give an account of his life since she had kissed him good-bye ere he had sailed down the river to New Orleans” (32), the language here evocative not only of migration but of slaves “being sold down the river.” Although he lives as a white man, Victor’s ancestral origins are never far from his mind. The incongruities of his life and the loss of his identity and connections with his former life lead to a nervous breakdown and death. Contrasting Victor and Pavageau, Dunbar-Nelson questions the viability of his choice to pursue a white way of life, or whether he could have achieved the same goal while maintaining his connections with his family of origin, represented by his grandmother.

The differences between this story and the previous texts reveal Dunbar-Nelson’s position and the circumstances in which she could imagine passing. Her mother was a former slave and later a seamstress who moved to New Orleans at the end of the Civil War; her father “had a limited presence in her life, if any” (Menke 81). In her essay “People of Color in Louisiana: Part II,” published in the Journal of Negro History, she describes a “caste system” in Louisiana which includes free people of color (61). In “Brass Ankles Speaks,” she writes about her awareness of the implications of passing and the harshness of intra-group racism for those who are light-skinned and identify themselves as having both black and white parentage, concluding that “there is no gain socially” in passing “though there may be some economic convenience” (321). In “The Stones of the Village,” Dunbar-Nelson shows that the leaders of this multicultural region ignore the varied transnational strains of identity as they impose a binary division between black and white. The foreignness of his Afro-Caribbean ancestry, referenced as West Indian, leads to Victor Grabért’s status as an outcast. When he considers telling the truth about his life, he associates his own neighborhood only with the threat of violence: “It was the old problem of his life in the village; and the boys, both white and black and yellow, stood as before, with stones in their hands to hurl at him” (17). Notably, “both” indicates the binary that does not encompass the multiracial reality. Once Victor crosses the color line, he can never return. He has effectively lost his culture of origin and the people associated with it. In his new life as a white man, nobody presses him for details of his earlier life, leaving him effectively without a past or history (11; 16-17). Despite the appearance of attaining a comfortable home, then, Victor’s secrecy about his ancestry actually leads to social isolation and personal alienation, a form of homelessness. Dunbar-Nelson shows that the
tragedy of Victor’s life results from his desire for an education and future greater than his origins would allow, a desire irreconcilable with America’s racism at the time. The fact that he cannot return to his former life suggests the themes of migration and exile examined in the works of Cable and Chopin. A “third space” of freedom beyond black and white does not exist legally in the United States, so in his personal creation of such a space for himself, Victor lives up to his potential in educational and professional achievement at great personal cost.

As difficult as his journey has been, Victor has effectively mastered the codes of upper-class whiteness, represented in the educated diction which contrasts with his grandmother’s and his earlier use of dialect, “the soft, Creole patois” and English which the indirect narration retrospectively criticizes as “a confused jumble which was no language at all” (5). Victor’s cultural and linguistic fluency are reminiscent of the facility displayed by Palmyre in The Grandissimes and Mariequita in The Awakening. Indeed, his professional and personal lives run so smoothly that nobody would suspect that he is actually passing, which leads one to question the sanctity and immutability of racial codes: if one can “pass” convincingly through language, manners, education, and connections, then what substance exists in such divisions in the first place? Dunbar-Nelson’s challenge to the stereotypes associated with race, held in place by the provincial “village” and the nation, would lead the reader to question the definition of whiteness, which influences the notion of upward mobility. As Anthony writes, “[t]he frequency of passing is further evidence of the fraudulence of race as a meaningful construct for other than divisive exploitation” (310). Although Victor’s life journey could be read as a variation of the “tragic mulatto” story insofar as his decision to leave his family of origin, defined by his race, ultimately results in his death, the reader must admit that the inhospitality of the village contributes to the tragedy. Following the black lawyer Pavageau’s confrontation, when the truth has risen to the surface, Dunbar-Nelson opposes Victor’s talent and respectability with his potential ruin. Although he wants to share his truth, he cannot reconcile his past and present, and he feels he would have no home to return to: his grandmother has died; he suspects his wife would not accept his black ancestry. With the image of his grandmother as his final memory, Victor’s West Indian origins remain in the background, haunting him, and suggesting that his economic privilege leads to the suffering of permanent exile. As a foil to Victor, the “brown” (24) Pavageau also occupies a “third space” in asserting his racial status and pursuing his career within the white judicial system. As he retains his cultural and familial ties, his self-assertion and persistence inspire Victor’s “admiration and respect” (63). As a foil to Victor, Pavageau offers an alternative path, as he pursues social mobility while maintaining a sense of community. Even as he fights losing battles, his insistence on justice presages a change in laws of segregation and a reconfiguration of the racial identity of New Orleans, a city, like the nation, with roots around the world. By remaining in place, acknowledging his origins and maintaining his career in the city, Pavageau represents the positive aspects of upward mobility as he makes a viable place for himself in New Orleans.

5. Conclusion

In each of these examples of New Orleans regionalism, the characters and their memories extend from the Deep South to the diaspora, representing the history of colonialism,
slavery, and immigration. Light-skinned characters of European origin such as Honoré and Edna motivate the narrative plots, yet the silenced stories, those of Honoré, f.m.c., Mariequita, Victor, and his grandmother, demand further interpretation. In these narratives, the stories of the nation come together in a confluence reminiscent of the muddy, winding Mississippi river and the vibrant port of New Orleans. These regionalist authors make the local familiar through the material signs of New Orleans history, language, dialect, religion, local place names, and references to the sea. New Orleans possesses a unique place in American culture because of its transnational, multiracial history, inspiring the American literary imagination. Writing in a time of regionalism and realism, these authors allow for an intercultural reading as they express the otherwise inexpressible experience of those who occupy spaces beyond black and white. The cultural memory which these characters carry with them, in the French and African ancestry of the Grandissime brothers, Palmyre’s knowledge of voodoo and visions of Haiti, Mariequita’s ambiguous “Spanish” identity, and Victor Grabért’s West Indian grandmother, serve as reminders of the international origins of New Orleans beneath the racial divisions imposed on the region by the nation. New Orleans, then, occupies a “third space” beyond the nation, a combination of the transnational and the local, with the national laws of segregation existing uneasily alongside the fluid ethnic and cultural identity of Creoles of Color. Literary art allows for the representation and conception of place, with the spoken and unspoken memories of Creole characters in New Orleans fiction contributing to a deeper understanding of the intersections of the local and the transnational. The representations of cultural border-crossings, and the abilities suggested in multilingual fluency, intercultural negotiation, and social fluidity, prefigure the time when such mobility will become neither an uncanny peculiarity nor a resistance to unjust laws but a necessity.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES

i. Gloria Hull writes that “The Stones of the Village,” which she identifies as a “Typescript,” appears in Stories of Women and Men, “a manuscript volume that Dunbar-Nelson probably worked on between 1900 and 1910” (Dunbar-Nelson, “Stones” 3). The story was submitted to The Atlantic Monthly and received a rejection letter in 1900, stating that “at present the American public had a ‘dislike’ for treatment of ‘the color-line’” (Hull xxxvi).

ii. I am indebted to the work of Elizabeth Ammons for providing a model for comparative analyses in Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century, as well as the cultural and literary analyses of Werner Sollors, including Neither Black Nor White Yet Both and Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture.

iii. I would like to acknowledge Klaus Benesch’s ongoing work on mobility and, more recently, immobility, in American culture and literature, which has influenced my study of these concepts in New Orleans fiction.

iv. Although the term is in general use in scholarship, I would like to acknowledge Davis’s use of the term in Southscapes (228-29), which I found helpful in distinguishing racially defined Creoles in this project.

v. Homi Bhabha’s statement that the “productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance,” functioning as a hybrid space (38), as well as Edward Soja’s attention to spatial geographies (6), contribute to Davis’s reading (2-3; 31-32; 286; 377 nn5-7). Within the essay, I use the term “third space” rather than Bhabha’s “Third Space” or Soja’s
“thirdspace” because the cultural and historical context of segregation in the United States in this period complicates a direct application of their concepts, though I still find their terms useful in studying hybridity and geographical borders in these works.

vi. Créolité is a term often used in critical readings of the Caribbean, influenced by the works of Edouard Glissant. See also Stewart 222.

vii. See López’s discussion of advertisements, illustrations, and short stories in magazines of this period (27-30); see also Birnbaum 303.

viii. For the significance of racial and class mobility in passing, see Sollors, Neither 250, 259.

ABSTRACTS

This essay examines the meaning of mobility in New Orleans regionalist fiction, focusing on Creoles of Color, including Honoré, f.m.c. (free man of color) and Palmyre in George Washington Cable’s The Grandissimes (1880), the ambiguously raced Mariequita in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening (1899), and Victor Grabért, of West Indian ancestry, in Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s “The Stones of the Village” (1900-1910). I argue that each of these characters represents a transnational identity, allowing for a degree of geographic, cultural, and social mobility, beyond the racial divisions imposed by segregation. Considering Davis’s view of New Orleans as “a potential model” (189) for a multiracial and transnational society, I analyze the potential of the hybrid, geographically and socially mobile subject to resist social norms (Bhabha, Soja) as well as the difficulties of such transience. I will address both cultural mobility and immobility, focusing on motifs of migration and exile, considering the associations of the sea with slavery (Gilroy) and the hope for a new way of life.

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Keywords: Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Creole, George Washington Cable, Kate Chopin, mobility, New Orleans, race, region, segregation, transnationalism

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