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(MIS) CLASSIFICATION AND CREOLE IDENTITY IN ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON'S
THE GOODNESS OF ST. ROCQUE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with the New Orleans fiction of Alice Dunbar-Nelson. In particular, it examines *The Goodness of St. Rocque* and New Orleans as a site of racial and ethnic confluence. Dunbar-Nelson deals closely with racial and ethnic identities of Creoles in New Orleans during the late nineteenth century and attempts to show the ways in which markers of ethnicity and connections to other countries upset the influence of Jim Crow racial ideology, or a black-white racial binary, felt throughout New Orleans. Dunbar-Nelson uses spatial and sociocultural characteristics of space to comment on the ways in which classification is imposed upon her characters, but shows the disruptive and often dangerous consequences of this imposition. Through an examination of several short stories from Dunbar-Nelson's collection, I work to show the violence of classification present in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* and how categorization is something Dunbar-Nelson often presents to the reader, only to then reveal the reasons these racial taxonomies are harmful. Classification is inescapable but Dunbar-Nelson presents a way to expand upon the narrow views of racial and ethnic identities that were prevalent during the late nineteenth-century.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Throughout this thesis I explore Creole characters, their movements across landscapes, and how these movements begin to shape their identities in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's New Orleans fiction, particularly her 1899 short story collection *The Goodness of St. Rocque*. In these stories she focuses on Creole characters, both Creoles of color and European Creoles, and the shifting dynamics of gender, race, and ethnicity that shape their movement across the cityscapes of New Orleans. Dunbar-Nelson's treatment of these cultural identities elucidates issues consuming the nation at the time, such as reunification and the influence of Jim Crow racial ideology. However, in illustrating these national and racial value systems, Dunbar-Nelson then begins to subvert them and introduces her own definition of Americanness, which develops from Creole identities. Identity categories are central to Dunbar-Nelson's work and in her stories characters are constantly having their own identities classified racially or ethnically. Sometimes these characters naively try to resist classification from outside forces, which is unfeasible according to Dunbar-Nelson. Others attempt to compose their own identity by reappropriating the meanings of various ethnic and racial markers. Both of these actions are realized through a character's orientation to physical spaces and landmarks within Louisiana. It becomes apparent throughout Dunbar-Nelson's work that she considers classification to be a social dynamic, one that is particularly harmful to Creole characters

who do not comprehend that identity will be assigned to them and they have little control over that.

In chapter one I explore the ways in which characters' identities become entwined with their relationships to racially and legally circumscribed landscapes. Certain geographic locations hold historical and racial significance because of past ownership of those places or events that occurred there. There are also spaces that hold ideological significance because of the ways different cultural identities and practices moved into and existed here. Often, Dunbar-Nelson's black Creole characters believe that aligning themselves with blackness or whiteness, which is represented through Europeanness in Dunbar-Nelson's work, will be beneficial for them. In an effort to align themselves with one particular race or ethnicity, characters move to spaces that they believe represent racial and cultural identities. However, they fail to recognize that identity is also imposed upon them; it is often not a choice. It is the naïve thought that self-classification (by means of movement through geographic locations and alignment with ideological spaces) precludes the inscription of identities by outsiders that results in harm or expulsion to liminal spaces for the characters. In chapter two I explore the ways in which Dunbar-Nelson focuses on ethnicity and global market economies in an effort to counter the move in the country towards a black-white racial binary. For her, the typical white Anglo Saxon idea of Americanness needed to expand to include global markers of ethnicity, which she achieved through explorations of spaces connected to other countries. In my final chapter I look at several stories that use what are typically regarded as religious institutions to show the ways in which regarding these as safe spaces free of racial or ethnic prejudices is dangerous. In doing so, Dunbar-Nelson also demonstrates how naïveté regarding

classification-that is, the failure to recognize how one fits into specific classification imposed upon him or her by society-becomes hazardous. Ultimately, I hope in the following chapters to provide a sense of how Dunbar-Nelson uses characters' movements through physical and ideological spaces to exhibit the inescapability of classifications and illustrate the harm that accompanies it.

Dunbar-Nelson is frequently associated with the local color movement, probably because of her focus on specific locales. To better understand how she uses the genre to a subversive end, though, a brief overview of the field is helpful. Local color writing rose to prominence after the Civil War, as the nation longed for a sense of region that had been largely lost to national interests. The country, particularly the South, exhibited a nostalgia for the antebellum South and through local color writing attempted to “recapture the glamour of a past era” (Oxford Reference). A portion of Southern local color writing reflected the Lost Cause mentality, depicting noble slave owners, exotic slaves, and other romanticized versions of plantation life. Dialect, typically spoken by African American characters to achieve some effect of humor, is common throughout this type of writing. As Fetterley and Pryse note, just the term ‘local color’ is overshadowed by racism, “suggesting that the local against which the national defines itself is colored” (26). In the case of writing by black authors, then, this could be said to align a “local” version of blackness against national whiteness in a way that reifies race and racial difference. In this understanding of local color, there is little subversion of power structures, but rather a fortification of fixity-of racial hierarchies, prescribed gender roles, and geographic place.

Dunbar-Nelson's fiction, on the other hand, operates in a way that more closely aligns with Marjorie Pryse and Judith Fetterley's definition of regionalist literature-a category that is actually more expansive than it sounds. Pryse and Fetterley draw on Michel Foucault's understanding of resistance. Foucault sees resistance as emanating from a multiplicity of points, stating that "Often, one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds (Foucault 96). In situating resistance as such, Pryse and Fetterley frame regionalism in a way that allows authors and readers to take exception to assumptions regarding power structures, rather than examining the genre based solely on topography. Instead, "Writers of and from regions who locate fictions as points of resistance rather than as commodified 'local coloring' offer a set of textual sites where the process of 'fracturing unities and effecting regroupings' is given place, character, and regional voice" (7). I suggest that this is precisely what Dunbar-Nelson does in her fiction. She fractures commonly held perceptions of power structures and various racial, ethnic, and gender groups, while promoting hybridity over fixity. She does not allow the binary divisions that shape such power relations to stand without complicating them and showing the ways in which her characters deal with points of resistance. Pryse and Fetterley view regionalism as a genre that is often perceived to exist in the margins but in actuality challenges dominant discourses of power and moves to the center through this critique of power relations. This move destabilizes the margin/center perspectives, just as Dunbar-Nelson's New Orleans work does. Local color writing would leave her stories in

New Orleans, but she opens up this space and through movement disrupts our understanding of New Orleans as center, situating herself within the regionalist genre.

In Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, I propose, she attempts to eschew the local color status given to her work and to the work of authors similar to her. While married to the dialect poet, Paul Dunbar, Dunbar-Nelson was concerned about the racialized style he relied on so heavily. Dunbar-Nelson felt that, though publishers pushed for that dialect, it pigeonholed authors into one category. As Caroline Gebhard explains, "she worried that Dunbar would be remembered only as a dialect poet" (172). By using black dialect sparingly in her own work, I posit, Dunbar-Nelson demonstrates her desire to avoid identification as a purely a local color artist. She does not use solely black dialect, but a combination of French and Spanish patois. Dunbar-Nelson, then, is writing within the regionalist mode that Pryse and Fetterley describe, rather than the local color genre, through her challenge hierarchies based on dialect. She understands local color as a commodity that gets reified and confused. As a regional author, Dunbar-Nelson is able to disrupt the "subordinate status of regions [and] hierarchical structures of gender, race, class, and nation" (6). This also parallels her attempts to resist the binary imposed upon Creoles of color. Rather than writing black Creoles who fit neatly into a white Anglo-Saxon version of Americanness, she works to expand the definition of Creoleness.

In discussing Dunbar-Nelson's stories, I use a theory of classification that draws from Friedrich Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" and specifically from his assertion that there is no "true" subject. Characters in Dunbar-Nelson's fiction attempt to group like things into similar categories, diminishing difference and

uniqueness, while creating a sense of truth about that particular category. This is especially apparent in Dunbar-Nelson's work when it comes to race and ethnicity. Dunbar-Nelson acknowledges that classification exists and is inescapable, particularly during the nineteenth century when the notion of absolute racial types was widely accepted. Her readership categorizes various spaces and characters in some sort of absolutist manner, implicating them in these inescapable "lies," as Nietzsche terms this essentialism. The drive for classification is thus forced upon readers and characters in Dunbar-Nelson's work, implicitly pressing them to accept and participate in racial absolutisms. Once she has done this, Dunbar-Nelson then complicates these typically binary groupings and shows the dangers that exist for her characters when categorization is forced upon them or when they naïvely think that classification is something that cannot limit them. Other literature from this historical period can be examined in a similar manner, considered through a lens that accounts for more than racial absolutes. Specifically, examining other local color and regional texts with this framework in mind will help to expand the ways in which we consider texts that are often deemed limited and exclusive because of the places, customs, cultures and audiences to which they appeal. Classification, as Dunbar-Nelson deploys it, is inescapable, but it is not unsusceptible to change. Within a given space identities are capable of shifting because classification expands and changes based on the history embedded in or the ideological shifts occurring at that space.

Understanding Dunbar-Nelson's approach to classification as more expansive than a racial binary requires one to have some knowledge of the categories of race and ethnicity with which she dealt. Some of the classifications that Dunbar-Nelson discusses

are racial, some are ethnic, and some involve the coding of particular spaces. For instance, Creoles in New Orleans in the nineteenth century become a focal point of her works, but Creoles are defined in many ways by different authors and critics. There are Creoles of color, Spanish Creoles, and French Creoles, to name a few subcategories. The time during which she wrote in the nineteenth century saw the influence of Jim Crow ideology and a black-white racial binary that left many Creoles of color in liminal social spaces if they attempted to push against this rigid binary. Additionally, Dunbar-Nelson deals with geographic spaces that have a racialized or gendered history embedded in them. For instance, a plantation has a long racial history connected to it, which cannot be erased, even if the physical structure of the plantation is no longer used for the same purposes. Dunbar-Nelson includes many physical places with histories and meaning sketched into them in her fiction, and illustrates how these places impose racial and ethnic meaning on her characters.

Because she grew up in New Orleans, Dunbar-Nelson had a strong understanding of the geographic places within the city, which become central in her fiction. Dunbar-Nelson was born to a mixed race couple and was a Creole of African American, Native American, and European background. Dunbar-Nelson was born and grew to adulthood in New Orleans, attending Straight University, moving north to study at Cornell and Columbia Universities and begin teaching in Brooklyn, NY before moving to Washington DC to be near husband Paul Dunbar. After their separation and his death, Alice Dunbar-Nelson began to publish more poetry and essays, both of which reflected her move into the political realm. She remarried several times and became involved in several social movements, often doing public speaking for various causes. Some of the

causes that Dunbar-Nelson worked passionately for were the Women's Club movement, the suffrage movement, the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, and education for young black women. She was the executive secretary for the American Friends Inter-Racial Peace Committee and turned to journalism towards the end of her career, discussing issues openly that were only hinted at in her fiction ("Introduction" lvii-lx).

My argument aims to extend the critical conversation surrounding Dunbar-Nelson's work, which has always focused on her treatment of cultural identities in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* but has not always recognized its complexity. Though no longer given much credence, the first camp of critics was inclined to dismiss the role of race in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, positing that it wasn't until Dunbar-Nelson became more politically active in her later life that race became a central theme in her literature. These critics assert that her early fiction places more emphasis on gender, but they do not explore the nuances of the Creole identities of Dunbar-Nelson's characters. In opposition to this, current explorations of Dunbar-Nelson's work stress that though gender is evident and important in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, issues relating to race and ethnic identity, while not seemingly pronounced, are woven through the stories and should affect the ways in which one reads and interprets these tales. Though certain critics, like Gloria Hull, Violet Harrington Bryan, and Elizabeth Ammons, tend to examine race in Alice Dunbar Nelson's fiction and others focus on issues of gender, to fully understand Dunbar-Nelson's treatment of these two issues, one must consider the intersectionality of these matters.

Critics such as Margaret D. Bauer, Pamela Glenn Menke, Jordan Stouck, and Kristina Brooks are among those who focus on the nuances of race and ethnicity in the

stories of *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, and generally tend to hold views in opposition to Hull and Bryan, regarding race in this collection. Because the stories in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* and the idea of race are so closely linked with Creole culture, it is necessary to establish how critics interpret the term and how Dunbar-Nelson uses the term “Creole.” As Menke explains, eastern readers at this time would be familiar with Creoles because they would have read much work by George Washington Cable, Grace King, and Kate Chopin, authors to whom Dunbar-Nelson is often compared. For the most part, however, these readers would have been familiar with the European-influenced Creole described by these authors (80). Dunbar-Nelson, in her essay “People of Color in Louisiana,” defines what she feels a Creole is, saying:

It appears that to a Caucasian, a Creole is a native of the lower parishes of Louisiana, in whose veins some traces of Spanish, West Indian or French blood runs. The Caucasian will shudder with horror at the idea of including a person of color in the definition, and the person of color will retort with his definition that a Creole is a native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly apparent. The true Creole is like the famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of every-thing, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique (367).

I contend that the prominence of both race and ethnicity in her definition of a Creole suggests that Dunbar-Nelson’s Creole characters are also racially and ethnically mixed. This merely strengthens the arguments of critics who feel that race and ethnicity are meaningful categories within the stories of *The Goodness of St. Rocque*.

Throughout my thesis, I use the terms race and ethnicity as I refer to Dunbar-Nelson’s work. I believe that Dunbar-Nelson’s understanding of race is primarily one of construct. She is not a poststructuralist and I make no claim that she anticipates this contemporary intellectual move. However, she does decenter the subject in her fiction and show the “crucial role of politics and ideology in shaping race relations. Races do not

emerge full-blown. They are the results of diverse historical practices and are continually subject to challenge over their definition and meaning” (Omi and Winant 4). I see race as surpassing skin color in Dunbar-Nelson’s work and becoming more about the social and political discourses that shape and fracture power structures. Race is neither fixed nor mere illusion, but instead an unstable category. Despite this, Dunbar-Nelson writes during a time when the belief in racial blood and the “one drop” theory is widespread. I posit that Dunbar-Nelson sees race as something unstable, but she also believes in such a thing as racial blood, as evidenced by her definition of a Creole of color. In considering ethnicity, I draw on Omi and Winant’s ideas regarding racialization, as I theorize race and ethnicity as similar categories in Dunbar-Nelson’s work. Omi and Winant say:

We employ the term *racialization* to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group... Particularly during the nineteenth century, the category of "white" was subject to challenges brought about by the influx of diverse groups who were not of the same Anglo- Saxon stock as the founding immigrants (7).

In Dunbar-Nelson’s work, ethnicity, or groupings based on cultural and national backgrounds, becomes something unstable as well. Dunbar-Nelson’s characters tend to align European and “white” ethnic groups with racial whiteness and “non-white” ethnic groups are considered closer to blackness. Thus ethnic groups, previously racially unclassified groups as Omi and Winant say, become racialized. Ethnicity becomes a factor in a person’s race, which Dunbar-Nelson draws attention to and attempts to shift in her writing.

Though many critics recognize that Dunbar-Nelson deals with race throughout her earlier story collections, many do acknowledge that it is not an overt treatment of the subject. There are several explanations for this, one of them coming from Pamela Menke.

Menke reasons that Dunbar-Nelson was aware of the tense climate in relation to race and gender roles. Menke attributes these turbulent times to a narrow tolerance on the part of the readers for treatment of race in fiction by a Creole woman. (84). It is the ambiguity of racial meaning within the stories that several critics have picked up on. Judith Irwin-Mulcahy firmly believes that Dunbar-Nelson's most definitively Creole characters are the ones who actively resist racial coding and fixed identities, instead fluidly possessing many changing characteristics. Irwin-Mulcahy explains, "Dunbar-Nelson's racially ambiguous characters...are not cast as a way to avoid questions about race or deny black positivity. By writing about racially ambiguous characters, Dunbar-Nelson actually forced other scales of identification to the front of the fiction" (131). Though Kristina Brooks agrees that the absence of clear racial identifications in Dunbar-Nelson's is intentional, she has slightly different ideas than Irwin-Mulcahy as to why Dunbar-Nelson hid this information. For Brooks, this was Dunbar-Nelson's way to "insert a regional boundary in the reading experiences of her audience" (8). As Brooks notes, many of the racial markers in these stories exist in minute details, such as street names, New Orleans traditions, and geography of neighborhoods, with which non-local readers would not be familiar. Brooks suggests that this "hidden boundary" between local readers and non-local readers is analogous to the "hidden boundary" that free people of color found themselves crossing in New Orleans during this time. Just as these people passed for white in New Orleans, "several of Dunbar-Nelson's Creole characters are able to pass in their encounters with non-local readers" (8).

Ultimately, Dunbar-Nelson's work is grounded in both physical places and ideological spaces. Dunbar-Nelson establishes character movement through physical

place, signaled by street names, buildings, churches, ports, etc... In addition to these tangible geographies, though, Dunbar-Nelson moves her characters through ideological spaces and identifications. They pass through spaces and flow between people and groups that are culturally, racially, and ethnically coded. By presenting racial and ethnic identification as something geographically imposed upon characters, as well as chosen by them, rather than biologically determined, Dunbar-Nelson upsets the Jim Crow racial binary of the nineteenth century. Characters who are unable to recognize the inevitability of this classification are pushed to the margins of society and often suffer some type of violence, whether it's physical harm or violent social expulsion. Dunbar-Nelson's stories and her representations of space, rather than biology, as a racialized discourse of classification present New Orleans as an open cell, subverting the fixity of space and power structures that regionalism is typically viewed to hold.

CHAPTER 2

LEGAL SPACE, LANDSCAPE, AND HYBRIDITY

From its introduction into the United States, Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, has encompassed a multiplicity of cultures, races, social practices, and ethnicities. The region functioned as an open cell, “a cultural landscape shot through with links to external histories” (Irwin-Mulcahy 122). For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on Creoles in late nineteenth century Louisiana and the ways in which Creole identity relates to New Orleans as a space of confluence, which offered the possibility of a multiethnic, multiracial, and often ambiguous, character. This opportunity, however, did not always come to fruition, as the political and social freedoms that black Creoles were afforded throughout the nineteenth century were infringed upon and limited in the postbellum period. Creoles of color during the late nineteenth century, the period during which Alice Dunbar-Nelson writes about the city, found themselves in liminal spaces, both in terms of race and history. The shifting political discourses in the nation at this time served to marginalize Creoles of color and the influence of Jim Crow racial ideology resulted in some type of racial certainty, typically a black-white binary. As we shall see in what follows, New Orleans felt this influence from outsiders, causing the city to become a space of contestation because of the tension between insiders and outsiders and the differing views that accompanied each group regarding racial and ethnic plurality. Thadious Davis discusses this tension, writing, “*The Goodness of St. Rocque* emerged out of the Creolite contained within a stratified and race-assertive Louisiana in the late

nineteenth century, when the Americans had finally won out over the surviving Creole elite in terms of instituting laws mandating segregation and having those legal restrictions upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson*” (225). The landscapes and geographies in the city, too, came to represent this struggle and saw race mapped onto them. Many places became synonymous with specific racial classifications, due to local residents or non-natives entering the area and attempting to claim and then racially code certain spaces.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson examines New Orleans as a regional space in her collection of short stories, *The Goodness of St. Rocque*. Her stories portray the ways that the influence of Jim Crow ideology during the postbellum period classifies her Creole characters, racially and ethnically. Creoles of color, here, are distinct from European Creoles in that they are classified racially more often than European Creoles. This is a political and violent distinction during the nineteenth century, and one that Dunbar-Nelson feels is foolish. In her stories, this push for racial clarification typically comes from other characters, either of clear black or white racial makeup or those not *from* New Orleans, who attempt to force taxonomies on Creoles of color. More often than not there are markers of her characters’ races, but Dunbar-Nelson never confirms a definite racial or ethnic identity for them. In doing this, Dunbar-Nelson suggests that nobody is every free of classification, but also that it is a tenuous thing, constantly shifting and never stable. The reader is implicated in categorizing the characters, too, through the ways in which he or she interprets and adds meaning to these markers. According to Thompson, “Above all, ‘being Creole’ binds together a group of cultural insiders able to discern a specific meaning from the vagueness of the term and distinguishes them from cultural

outsiders who, in having to ask what *Creole* means, will never completely understand” (13). Dunbar-Nelson’s fiction functions in the same way for her audiences. Insiders, or locals of New Orleans, will understand the multiplicity of meanings of Creole status, thus they will understand the lack of a definite classification. Outside audiences will attempt to categorize Creoles and will see the harm in that through the ultimate outcome of Dunbar-Nelson’s characters. By writing characters that are often weakened, marginalized, or dying from classifications of their identities, Dunbar-Nelson comments on the dangers that result from attempting to fix categories of identity as something absolute.

Oftentimes these classifications are forced upon female characters in Dunbar-Nelson’s work. However, Dunbar-Nelson depicts a handful of male characters that are given more freedom to make decisions regarding their racial identities, rather than having it imposed upon them. Women are not given that same agency and despite their best efforts to reclassify themselves racially, Dunbar-Nelson ultimately shows how other characters, often white men of European ancestry, categorize these females, either allowing or prohibiting them from entering certain black or white racialized spheres. Through her depictions of men who choose where they locate themselves, racially, Dunbar-Nelson reinforces the notion that classification is harmful, as these men still suffer and succumb to weakened bodies or death as a result of racial alignment. So, even through characters with more freewill and autonomy regarding their racial orientation, Dunbar-Nelson illustrates the naiveté of racial self-categorization in a reductive black-white binary. This self-categorization is often fatal when Creoles of color choose blackness, but Dunbar-Nelson also writes several stories in which the Creoles of color

pass as white and still perish, demonstrating the ways that in-betweenness becomes a “material prison” (Davis 226).

In nineteenth-century New Orleans various legal and social processes encoded specific landscapes, neighborhoods, and public buildings with racial meaning. Outsiders, as well as legal institutions, attempted to impose strict binaries on a city and society that had a slightly more flexible racial system than the racial dichotomy that became prevalent in the United States after Reconstruction. Despite ideological differences regarding race between New Orleans and the rest of the country, Dunbar-Nelson depicts Creoles of color¹ continually attempting to cross racial boundaries in “Odalie,” “The Fisherman of Pass Christian,” and “Stones of the Village.” She does more than simply represent the lack of clear binaries within racial discourse in New Orleans, however: through links to legal and geo-spatial histories, which local audiences would have recognized, she illustrates how Creoles are pushed to liminal spaces. For Creole characters there is only a marginal space in which they are able to exist, after rejection from (or rejection of) both a white and a black sphere. Ultimately, Dunbar-Nelson depicts a racial landscape that appears to be fluid and easily traversable for black Creole characters, but in which legal and institutional forces constantly attempt to secure a rigid binary of black versus white.

A crucial aspect of Dunbar-Nelson’s stories is the way that landscape connects to legal discourses of race. Race is something constructed, not an essential trait, and nineteenth-century audiences tended to view it as something able to be ascribed to a person. I assert that the physical space in which Creoles of color, as well as Dunbar-Nelson’s characters, live, work, and occupy racially codes them. These physical spaces

¹ In her essay “People of Color in Louisiana,” Dunbar-Nelson applies the term “Creole” to refer to people with some percentage of black ancestry.

represent racial histories. Sometimes the buildings become sites of racial memory and the land has been linked, through contracts and deeds, to a racial past. As Elizabeth Abel writes, “Redefining space as the dynamic medium through which history occurs, rather than the static backdrop to historic action, they [Lefebvre, Soja, and Jameson] contended that space . . . becomes a charged and dynamic medium, a sphere of contestation and negotiation through which multiple histories are enacted and identities produced” (17). Dunbar-Nelson’s Creole characters seem to understand geography as a dynamic space that alters identities, but her European or outsider characters do not view space in this manner. Because of this, we often see her black Creole characters conforming to conventional (i.e. white European) ideas about fixed space and identity, trying to fit into a place by conforming to that mentality. The city is an open cell (Irwin-Mulcahy 122) that becomes a site in which there is the possibility of a multiracial and multiethnic identity, but it becomes a space on which outsiders begin to impose their views through legal means. By writing her characters into particular spaces that have histories of slavery, white ownership, and legal documents deeding land to African American families, Dunbar-Nelson makes connections between the law and landscapes. Though these spaces may be reappropriated, which I discuss at greater length in chapter three, the legal history and ownership of the land may never be erased.

In “Odalie” and “The Fisherman of Pass Christian,” Dunbar-Nelson depicts racially ambiguous female characters in their efforts to align themselves with European men, through marriage and racial self-definition, as they traverse the Louisiana landscape. Ultimately, neither alignment is successful; both women are pushed to the margins of society, showing the ways in which racial classification, or even an attempt at

it, is harmful. “Odalie” is the story of a girl who is implicitly identified as a Creole of color and whose strict father does not allow her to leave the house often. Upon going to church with her Tante, Odalie becomes enamored of a young Frenchman. However, when she sees him speaking with another female, Odalie is unable to remain at home and seeks refuge in a convent. Similarly, in “The Fisherman of Pass Christian,” Annette, a racially ambiguous character without a sense of her maternal heritage, vacations at the Mexican Gulf Hotel, where she meets a mysterious Frenchman, Eleazar LeConte, and begins a courtship with him. After Annette and her father return to New Orleans, they realize that Eleazar is a world-renowned opera singer. However, the joy of this discovery comes to an abrupt end when Annette finds out that he has married his co-star the night before. Now, rather than pursue a trip to Paris, as she had planned, Annette chooses to remain in New Orleans. As I will discuss later, both Odalie and Annette seem to “pass” and move fluidly through different social and racial groups, but neither is ever able to fully assimilate into those spaces because society attempts to force a white-black binary on them. The white sphere rejects Creoles of color and Creoles of color often reject the black sphere, leaving only a marginal space in which these characters can function.

Dunbar-Nelson constantly draws attention to this fact - race is not just a legal abstraction; it is a spatial, social, and familial system that is often imposed to force stability.

Dunbar-Nelson depicts the greater degree of autonomy that male Creole characters have in choosing their identities, but comments on the inability to escape classifications and the harm that accompanies rigid racial classifications these men assume. Through her use of Victor Grabert as her primary character in “Stones of the Village,” Dunbar-Nelson exemplifies the greater freedoms that black Creole men have to

leave a space that racializes and confines them; despite this apparent freedom, racial formation and categorizations of blackness are ultimately harmful for Creole men too. Grabert grows up with his grandmother and does not realize that he is black, because of his light skin, until other boys begin to denigrate him for his race. Grabert's grandmother sends him to Louisiana where Victor chooses to pass for white and becomes a well-respected judge. During his tenure, he is known to hate any person of African American descent. After he marries and has a child Victor becomes increasingly anxious that another Creole lawyer, the only person who knows Victor's secret about his identity, will share this information with others. Ultimately, Grabert dies, a result of the anxiety caused by his racial status. This inability to fully exist within a white sphere is important, as it shows the harm that results from this racial binary. My later discussion of gender will help to clarify the ways in which Dunbar-Nelson establishes differences in movement of black Creole men and women within a given landscape-her female characters strive to align themselves with certain landscapes that represent a black or white racial history but they are continually pushed off this land; her male characters establish lives and families in these places associated with a racial binary, but their own choices to identify with these spaces ends violently.

The history of blackness and racial formation in New Orleans plays a significant role in the fixity and hybridity that Dunbar-Nelson explores in her stories. The attempts to eschew a likely African lineage represent the anxieties of both Creoles of color and white residents surrounding people of mixed race in New Orleans during the nineteenth century. Considering the cultural, historical, and legal context in which these stories were written is important, as identities and spaces typically associated with certain cultural or

historical significance often become racially coded through legal means. By first outlining various historical cases and aspects of Creole identity in nineteenth century New Orleans and then considering the ways in which these formations of identity appear in the stories of Alice Dunbar-Nelson, it becomes clear that Dunbar-Nelson draws upon the historical atmosphere of anxiety to depict the ambiguity and marginality embedded in black Creole identity.

2.1 Racial History in New Orleans

Because New Orleans only became a part of the United States in 1803, the people of the area had to learn to navigate the nuances of identities in a new context, as there were Native Americans, French, Spanish, African Americans, and Americans intermingling. However, Louisiana's change in state status doesn't mean that indefinite identities or racial formations only emerged with the Louisiana Purchase. At the end of the eighteenth century the process of racial formation was in flux, and as Spear writes, "One's [class] in New Orleans was not determined solely by racial ancestry but also by social status, including whether one was free or enslaved. In addition, rather than the presence of African ancestry, it was the percentage of European blood that suggested one's racial identity" (155). This mentality was the precursor for the ideas that Dunbar-Nelson and her characters shared about navigating racial identities.

Early on, the people of Louisiana and the characters in Dunbar-Nelson's writings recognized that it was not to their benefit to maintain an ambiguous identity, and instead attempted to align themselves definitively with whatever race carried the most positive connotations at the time. For instance, Dona Clara Lopez de la Pena was a native of New Orleans who wished for the error on her daughter's baptism certificate to be fixed. Her

daughter had been entered in the “Negro registry.” Both women were mestiza libres, or free women of mixed Native American ancestry, and Pena denied that having Indian ancestry made her “non-white” (Spear 155). Pena downplayed certain parts of her ancestry in court, while emphasizing her familial connection to the well-known French Mandeville family. Essentially, she attempted to author her own heredity. The desire to construct a white- or at least non-black- racial identity, through legal discourse and familial links, affected New Orleans residents at the time when Dunbar-Nelson lived and wrote in New Orleans.

Dunbar-Nelson’s short stories capture complexities regarding changing racial and ethnic identities that reach back to the legal ramifications of the Louisiana Purchase, the Haitian Revolution, and the influx in Haitian immigrants. Anglo-Americans began to migrate to Louisiana and attempted to “transform the city’s racial system into a binary one that equated blackness with enslavement and whiteness with freedom” (Spear 179). The legal discussion surrounding the classification of mixed race citizens heated up and in 1856 the Louisiana Supreme Court was forced to recognize free Creoles of color as their own racial category. Despite this ruling, both the legal system and people within New Orleans tried to degrade the rights of these Creoles and pushed to align them with slaves (Spear 188). Connecting residents of mixed race with absolute blackness helped to ease the anxieties of Anglo-Americans and European Creoles that mixed race Creoles would “pass” for white with simplicity. This connection also worked to normalize New Orleans with national ideas of race. Additionally, it gave white US citizens freer access to property and entitlements in Louisiana. Because Louisiana had just entered the United

States, aligning itself with typical American views of race as either white or black, rather than Creole, connected the state to a more national identity.

With the shift in racial demographics of New Orleans rose the problem of interracial relationships, particularly when offspring were involved. The main characters in Dunbar-Nelson's stories, and their missing mother figures, are representative of this problem of racial identification. In New Orleans during the nineteenth century, in biracial relationships females were typically the black partners. The *plaçage* tradition flourished in New Orleans, allowing white men to attend quadroom balls and select a woman of color to live with (10). These men often legally had a white wife and children, but still carried on relationships with the Creole women from the balls. Concubinage was similar to *placage* but without the contract. White men entered into relationships with Creoles of color. They had children together but usually never married. For these reasons, and a number of others, people at the time commonly held that the matrilineal blood acted as the "raced" side of mixed race families in New Orleans in the nineteenth century. Dunbar-Nelson's local readers, likely familiar with this conception of the "raced" maternal line, probably brought these perceptions to their own readings of the stories. Because of this, when a character has an absent maternal figure, in conjunction with other racial markers, readers impose a racial identity on that individual, assuming that the mother is black.

2.2 "The Fisherman of Pass Christian"

The idea of an ultimately inflexible racial identity becomes apparent in Dunbar-Nelson's "The Fisherman of Pass Christian." She expresses her attitude towards racial identities; Dunbar-Nelson makes it apparent that she feels pressure is placed on Creoles

of color to align themselves with either whiteness or blackness through landscapes and laws, but ultimately they're never able to accomplish this. Dunbar-Nelson, as Robert Clark points out, was meticulous about tracing history and landscapes through her stories, and "Pass Christian" is no different (164). This is a story in which the main female character's mother is absent, but her father and aunt are present. In the absence of a maternal identity, Dunbar-Nelson depicts Annette as attempting to align herself with Frenchman Eleazar LeConte. As there are subtle indications that Annette may be a Creole of color, such as her location in certain landscapes, her interactions with other Creoles of color, and her maternal heritage, it is logical that she works to manipulate her own racial identity by linking herself to somebody of desirable European heritage. However, Annette's character performs this alignment in a way that links her directly to the invisible, racially coded history of a landscape, or the vernacular landscape as Richard Schein terms it (8).

The history behind the land in Pass Christian will become important in tracking the different locations in which Annette situates herself throughout Dunbar-Nelson's story. This history of the Pass Christian landscape is grounded in the legal world, which racially codes it. In the late eighteenth century, the Widow Asmar, also known as Julia de la Brosse, was the owner of 17,884 arpents or land, or nearly 15,000 acres, which make up what is known as Pass Christian (First Ladies 2). Shortly after the death of her husband in 1796, de la Brosse drew up her own will, in which she named twelve slaves to whom she left the majority of her land. She also crafted a *Deed of Gift* on November 5, 1799, which left 800 arpents of land to a former slave, Charles Asmar, whom she had freed years before (First Ladies 3). This particular tract of land made up the central

downtown area of Pass Christian. “The area roughly covered a short distance west of Market Street to east of Lang Street; and from the sandbeach of the Gulf to the marshes of Bayou Portage” (First Ladies 3). Because this land had been given to Charles Asmar as a *Deed of Gift* after his emancipation it was honored and legally recognized as his property, racially coding it black. However, the other slaves whom de la Brosse had designated as beneficiaries of her land were not given this property, thus it was not racially coded with blackness, as Asmar’s property was. Her will was disregarded and the rightful heirs to her land never saw their inheritance (First Ladies 6). Instead, Marie Theresa Labat, the executor of de la Brosse’s will, had a daughter, Marianne whose Spanish husband, Bartholomew Pellerin, pursued and was granted the 17,084 remaining arpents of de la Brosse’s land in 1810. This aligned Pellerin’s land with Europeanness. Charles Asmar’s land continued to be passed down to his heirs after his death in 1836 (First Ladies 7). Several parties bought Pellerin’s land grant before it fell into John Henderson’s hands, a white man who established Henderson Point, a significant location in Dunbar-Nelson’s “Fisherman of Pass Christian.” Because it began and ended as land owned by white families, this tract is coded white and European, but the history of black exploitation associated with Pass Christian represents its fractured history.

Dunbar-Nelson documents many of the aforementioned locations in her story. It is through these locations that the reader is given subtle clues that Annette may be a Creole of color. From the beginning, Dunbar-Nelson writes, “Arm in arm with Philip, she was strolling slowly down the great pier which extends from the Mexican Gulf Hotel into the waters of the Sound” (37-38). The Mexican Gulf Hotel is significant for two reasons. First, this is the very first location in which the reader sees Annette positioned.

Presumably, this is where she and her family are staying during their time in the Pass. Second, the Mexican Gulf Hotel was located on the corner of Second St. and Davis St., placing it squarely in the middle of the racialized tract of land which Charles Asmar and his black heirs owned. By writing her characters into this setting, Dunbar-Nelson is placing them in a space that is legally bound to freed slaves. Because Dunbar-Nelson typically wrote to a local audience, this is something that may have escaped all readers but the ones from the New Orleans. This is the first clue that Annette may have been a Creole of color.

The second hint comes from a postcard released in 1901 (*Fig 2.1*). Though it isn't a detail written into Dunbar-Nelson's story, it is still important in aligning Annette with blackness. The postcard, shown below, is an image of the pier across which Annette and Philip walk. On this postcard, there are three African American people standing on the pier, but no white people. Because this picture was released so close to the date Dunbar-Nelson published her stories (1898), it is safe to assume that there was not a drastic change in demographics visiting the Mexican Gulf Hotel over the course of three years. Therefore, this image offers us more evidence that this particular area and hotel was not exclusively white, but actually saw many Creoles of color and black visitors, thus connecting Annette to a black Creole identity.

Dunbar-Nelson includes other small indications of Annette's identity in discrete ways. For instance, Dunbar-Nelson writes, "Annette and Philip paused midway the pier... With heads bared to the breeze, they stood in clear silhouette against the white background of sea" (38). Here, the distinct and explicit use of the word "white" to



describe the sea, in juxtaposition with Annette's silhouette, carries the connotation that she is a woman of color. In a scene following closely after this, a young Creole girl, Natalie, approaches Annette at the hotel and invites her to a hay-ride that evening. To this, Philip says, "But when the natives, the boys and girls who live there, make up their minds to have fun, you may depend upon its being just the best kind" (43). The fact that Annette is at such ease with the Creole girl and identifies more easily with the hay-ride given by the Creoles of Pass Christian than with the "summer boarders and Northern visitors" (42) places her in a black Creole sphere. Lastly, Annette's relationship with Eleazar LeConte has subtle implications of concubinage, as Alecia Long defines it. Dunbar-Nelson describes their romantic walks hand-in-hand, but also mentions Annette's promise to LeConte in which she says, "I promise that I will never speak of you to anyone until I see you again. I promise that I will then clasp your hand wherever you may be" (56). This secretive relationship, which LeConte acknowledges is to his benefit, has echoes of white men who carried on discrete relationships with Creoles of color. LeConte took Annette as his mistress, while ostensibly also carrying on a relationship with Madame DuBeau, a French woman, before marrying DuBeau. Because the concubine tradition is so rooted in race and gender hierarchies, this insinuation nods to Annette's own black Creole identity. These signals never definitively identify Annette as a Creole of color, but their presence in Dunbar-Nelson's story likely would have swayed readers to bring their own preconceptions of Creoleness to their readings and pushed audiences to impose a black Creole identity on Annette.

However, as already stated, Annette resists this connection to Creole characteristics. In the absence of a maternal figure, Annette attempts to create her own

identity. Even if Dunbar-Nelson did not intend to depict her as a woman of color, Annette's efforts to align herself with Eleazar through movements across land, as well as through a romantic relationship, represent the anxiety people in New Orleans had about identity during this century. The evening when Annette becomes lost in the waters, she encounters Eleazar LeConte, the fisherman, and asks him to guide her back to Henderson's Point, which is the land that was taken by Europeans from the slaves to whom it was supposed to be left. It is here that Dunbar-Nelson shows Annette attaching herself to both a Frenchman and a Europeanized (by Pellerin) and Americanized (by Henderson) expanse of land. By associating herself with legally European and American people and landscapes, Annette works to detach herself from any possible connections to a black Creole identity that are imposed on her by other characters, as well as Dunbar-Nelson's readers. Positioning herself in geographic places that have a legal history of white ownership legitimizes Annette's attempts, as the law has, up to this point, imposed meaning and identity on land and people. From this point on in the story, Annette is always seen in places that are part of the land taken by Europeans.

However, Alice Dunbar-Nelson's larger message seems to be that, despite the connections women try to form to construct new identities separate from their black lineage, identity is imposed upon them by outside sources. The law, often through landscape, forces an either-or alliance of whiteness or blackness. This is precisely the classification that Dunbar-Nelson condemns. Dunbar-Nelson never conclusively defines Annette's identity, keeping elements of her identity ambiguous, because Dunbar-Nelson understands that categorization is unproductive (and often harmful) when identities shift so frequently. As discussed earlier, this racial binary alludes to the changing racial

politics nationally, at a time when Louisiana was trying to integrate itself into the larger American identity. In places outside of New Orleans, race is more of a duality-black or white-than in the city, where Creole identities complicate it and add another ambiguous racial group.

Nevertheless, Dunbar-Nelson's stories connect landscapes to the larger message that no space is free of prejudices. In "Pass Christian" this is best shown in Annette's inability to secure a marriage to Monsier LeConte and her ultimate retreat back to New Orleans. There is a gap that cannot be bridged between Annette's identity as a woman of mixed race and LeConte's French identity, established early in the story, with which she strongly desires to align herself. When Annette realizes this gulf cannot be bridged and that her identity is unalterable, she decides that she doesn't "care to go to Paris, after all" (64). Her identity is unalterable, not because it is innately immutable, but because society makes it this way. The decision to remain in New Orleans functions in several ways. First, it signifies Annette's resignation to the racial identity imposed upon her and her acknowledgement that she will be unable to successfully exist in Europe. Second, it indicates that Annette feels stable in this Louisiana space. However, within New Orleans there was a racial hierarchy, just as there was in Pass Christian, suggesting that even in landscapes that Annette thinks are less aligned with race, legally, there is little escape from racial identity. Ultimately, the women in her stories fail to achieve new selves and retreat to spaces that they feel are safe from the legal prejudices against blackness.

2.3 "Odalie"

Dunbar-Nelson writes a story with a similar pattern of racial coding in a legal sense in "Odalie," which also depicts a woman trying to shun any possible connection to

black Creole blood. In this story, Odalie, the main female character, is also without a mother. Her father, Monsieur le Juge is a formidable presence of Spanish and French blood. In the absence of her mother, Odalie also has a “duenna Aunt” (185). A duenna is a governess or nanny for European families, specifically Spanish or Portuguese. This suggests either that Tante Louise is Monsieur le Juge’s sister or that there is no biological relation to the family whatsoever, leaving the question of Odalie’s matrilineal race wide open.

Due to this maternal absence, Odalie tries to align herself with Pierre, a Frenchman and an “impecunious young clerk in the courtroom”, as she realizes that remaining fastened to a racially ambiguous Creole identity will force her to continue living in the secluded atmosphere into which her father forces her (186). However, the particular landscapes she navigates are racially coded and, ultimately, she is never able to escape that. Within her own home in New Orleans, Odalie is living in a metaphorical prison. Her father is defined as a “haughty judge” and has sentenced Odalie to live in “convent-like seclusion,” likely because of her Creole of color associations (185). Monsieur le Juge, like Philip in “The Fisherman of Pass Christian,” seems to understand that the black Creole identities of females in New Orleans can only be altered so much. This is apparent when Dunbar-Nelson writes, “Monsieur le Juge was determined no hawk should steal his dove; and so, though there was no mother, a stern duenna aunt kept faithful watch” (185). Within this line, the references to a void in her mother’s identity and a watchful Spanish governess place the first part of the sentence in context. Monsieur Le Juge doesn’t want a black identity imposed on Odalie, a dove or pure, white bird. In doing so, she would no longer have the chance to align herself with whiteness and would

thus be permanently identified as a Creole of color. Instead, Monsieur le Juge confines Odalie to the house, so the dangers of boundary crossing in the outside world cannot harm her.

Ultimately, Odalie's desire to connect herself to Pierre and erase her own black Creole identity, presumably through a legal marriage, fails. Classification in a black-white binary is both unattainable and emotionally harmful for her. She does not understand the complicated workings of identity and so Odalie tries to retreat to a space in which she feels she will be safe and free of racial assignment. However, the Ursuline Convent that she enters at the end of the story offers just the opposite hope for Odalie. Because Dunbar-Nelson was so thorough about the details in her stories, it seems to be no accident that she chose to affiliate Odalie with the Ursuline order of nuns. This order came to New Orleans in the early eighteenth century and established its convent on the border between the French Quarter and Faubourg Marigny, an historically Creole neighborhood (Schein 8). The Ursuline nuns in New Orleans worked closely with Creole girls and their convent was one that had many Creole women of color living there.

Even within the convent there was a racial hierarchy and classification. There were two classes of nuns: converse nuns and choir nuns. Choir nuns within the Ursuline convent were the more esteemed of the two classes and they typically did the more "respected" work, such as teaching, running the hospital, and tending to orphans. The converse nuns were relegated to the more physical, demeaning work (Clark 71). This hierarchy reflected class and racial standing within New Orleans. Clark describes one nun in New Orleans, writing, "Born of an Indian mother and a French father, the metis Marie Turpin knew that she would be a servant if she pursued a life in religion...Marie Turpin's

mixed-race background alone might have been enough to consign her to converse status” (71-72). However, Clark also says that “the New Orleans Ursulines did not need converse sisters as domestic sisters: enslaved Africans filled these occupations. Their retention of the converse category indicated a social conservatism that dictated an individual’s role in the community according to...race” (72). These distinct racial categories are important to Odalie, as she would likely become a converse nun based on her race. However, just as there is no clear white-black binary in New Orleans society, despite the strong Jim Crow ideology present at the time, there is no clear white-black distinction within the convent. Odalie would operate in a middle ground, in which she represents an indistinct black Creole heritage. She is not an enslaved African at the bottom of the social order, nor is she a white woman capable of choir nun status. In trying to escape racial coding after her failure to align herself legally with Europeanness, Odalie finds herself in a landscape equally as discriminatory, showing that there is no erasure of race from spaces or identity for black Creole women in Dunbar-Nelson’s stories. In any space, whether or not it is obviously associated with racial or legal coding, race is determined for Creole women because society affords them little flexibility in their identities. They have little power in establishing their own identities; these taxonomies are forced upon them, but they often result in unhappiness and harm.

2.4 Identities of Race *and* Gender

In considering the place of Creole women in Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s work, it becomes necessary to assess the male characters, too. The men, for the most part, seem to have more autonomy in choosing their racial identities. When Dunbar-Nelson writes male characters that possess black Creole identities, or at least markers of Creoleness, they are

able to choose the racial markers with which they want to be aligned. Despite that, Dunbar-Nelson shows the dangers in aligning oneself with a rigid racial binary, as these men tend to meet a fatal end. For instance, in “Stones of the Village” Victor Grabert sheds his black heritage completely, marries a white woman, and becomes a respected judge. In the end, Dunbar-Nelson makes the statement that neither the landscape nor the law allows an escape for Creoles from their actual identities because both try to confine identity to something very narrow. Creole identity is diverse and ambiguous, both things that landscape and law are not in Dunbar-Nelson’s story. Another lawyer exposes Grabert’s true identity, showing that the legal system is only able to recognize certain identities to a point before pushing back. When his “true” race is made known, Grabert can no longer exist as a white man and he suffers a heart attack and dies (Dunbar-Nelson Vol 3). Dunbar-Nelson’s male character functions in several ways here. First, Grabert shows that Creole men are allowed more flexibility in their constructed identities than women are at this point in history. Though Grabert ultimately dies, he accomplishes more than Annette or Odalie do and for a period, he is able to closely align himself with whiteness. However, his ultimate demise suggests Dunbar-Nelson feels that Creole men, though able to flow through racially coded spaces more easily than Creole women, are still unable to ever fully attain a European or American character. They are forced back into a Creole status of blackness. Attempts at a black or white categorization fail and fail violently in Grabert’s case.

Dunbar-Nelson’s non-fiction writing is suggestive of this point about the inexorable character of racial policing and its use to keep those without power out of power. She, herself, was a Creole woman of color in New Orleans and spoke out about

the difficulties she suffered because of that. In “Brass Ankles Speaks” Dunbar-Nelson describes the lack of place for her in society and how she was never able to fully assimilate into a white or black race. Describing the prejudices she faced, Dunbar-Nelson says, “I have lived in many other communities. Save for size, virulence, and local conditions, the situation duplicates itself” (Essays). This theme manifests itself in her short stories as well. There is no retreat or escape from the ambiguities that accompany a Creole identity, though people attempt to force an alignment with blackness or whiteness. Every landscape is somehow racially coded, some more obviously than others. It becomes clear that Dunbar-Nelson recognizes this when she declares, “The... ‘Brass Ankles’ must bear the hatred of their own and the prejudice of the white race...tens of thousands feel, like myself, that there is no gain socially in [going over to the other side], though there may be some economic convenience” (Essays). This statement embodies the message that Dunbar-Nelson encodes in her stories: there is no gain or power to align oneself with whiteness, but there is also no place for a Creole of color in the world of blackness. Identities are something ascribed to Creoles by outside and inside forces. In the cases of Annette and Odalie, these forces come in the shape of landscapes legally coded a particular race. They lose all power over determining their own identities.

Overall, Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s writing encapsulates the complex racial and gender dynamics that were present in nineteenth century New Orleans. As a new entity of the United States, New Orleans seemed to be attempting to align its own system of racial order with that of the larger national order-black or white, but no in between. However, as Dunbar-Nelson shows through her writing, for Creoles of color, there was no clear place for them within either this white or black classification. Their attempts to align

themselves with white identities failed, and in their attempts to retreat to spaces that seem to be neutral and free from racial coding, identities are still imposed upon them by societal pressures. Ultimately, there is no escape from Creole identities, despite Dunbar-Nelson's characters' attempts to align themselves with European qualities, through landscapes and relationships.

CHAPTER 3

AMERICANIZATION AND CREOLE IDENTITY

New Orleans in the nineteenth century was undergoing a process of “Americanization.” This movement had its roots in the early nineteenth century and the Louisiana Purchase, but its effects were felt into the beginning of the twentieth century. Louisiana and New Orleans may have been racially and ethnically diverse at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as the region was composed of French, Native American, Spanish, Cajun, Acadian, Anglo-American, German, Irish, and African American residents among others. However, by the time during which Alice Dunbar-Nelson writes, this heterogeneous mix of racial and ethnic identities was increasingly organized by a black-white racial binary. There was a drive for racial absolutism, as white Anglo-Saxon origins became the gold standard and blackness became the antithesis of this paradigm, leaving little middle ground for racial differences and nuanced differentiation. As Jordan Stouck writes, “Racial distinctions became increasingly significant during the post-bellum period of Southern history. By the early twentieth century, ‘creole’ was defined either as meaning people of colour or as meaning whites of European ancestry” (270).

This drive to impose racial absolutism on New Orleans stems, in part, from the place that New Orleans occupied in the South and in the nation more broadly. New Orleans, during the nineteenth century, functioned as a space of confluence. As Jennifer Rae Greeson writes, the South “is an internal other for the nation, an intrinsic part of the

national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole” (1). A similar claim may be made about New Orleans; it stood as the Other within the South. For my purposes, I examine New Orleans as a site set apart from the larger national body, yet one on which outsiders often enter into and attempt to impose their own logics of identity. It also serves as a site that outsiders juxtapose with their own identities. While New Orleans represents cultural diversity to outsiders, the rest of the country represents stricter racial stratification. Within New Orleans, the possibility of an array of identities exists, largely because of the diverse racial and ethnic makeup of its residents. However, in Dunbar-Nelson’s works, that possibility is often never achieved. New Orleans brings together racial, ethnic, and transnational cultures, yet Dunbar-Nelson illustrates how acceptance of this diversity cannot exist within a space that feels the pressures of a black-white racial binary being forced upon it from outsiders.

In the postbellum period, after Reconstruction, New Orleans saw an influx of legal restrictions on Creoles of color. Jim Crow laws took effect and the region became subject to separation and discrimination based on race. These laws legalized segregation, and though the North was certainly not free of racial prejudices, it did not see the same forced racial stratification as the South. Important for examining Dunbar-Nelson’s work is the way in which African Americans were disenfranchised by Jim Crow laws in this New Orleans space. As George Lipsitz writes, “The history of New Orleans has made the city a place where multiple languages, national histories, and traditions collide, conflict, and coalesce” (265). It was a site of diverse cultures, understood as such by locals and insiders of the region. Outsiders, typically Americans and Europeans from the North, then attempted to impose their own racial ideology on the region, forcing a racial

stratification and making the realization of that confluence a rare occurrence. In her stories, Dunbar-Nelson constantly describes insiders and outsiders of the region and she often refers to processes that connect her work and characters to transnational practices. Dunbar-Nelson's work can thus be read as a critique of imperialism in the ways that she critiques racial imperialism imposed on certain racial subjects. This conjures comparisons to Pryse and Fetterley's definition of regionalism, as that too works to critique and resist power structures common in the nineteenth century. Dunbar-Nelson's stories become about the ethics of how we enter new spaces and engage with different nations and cultures.

In Dunbar-Nelson's work, insiders often attempt to leave a space, while outsiders try to enter a space and impose their own notions upon it. Thus, movement through spaces is prevalent in Dunbar-Nelson's work. Without the possibility of infiltration of one of these spaces from the other and the movement from location to location, there would be no contrast between inside and outside space. Instead, these spaces would merely be one large entity. Dunbar-Nelson explores movements, as she often positions her characters in peripheral spaces, both geographically and ideologically, and shows them relocating to more central locations, though not always by choice. New Orleans society in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, influenced by racial ideology that conforms to a black-white binary, tends to push Creole characters to a middle ground. Dunbar-Nelson's characters move between physical locations that often represent or hold some type of cultural value or racial ideology.

The enforcement of a black-white binary did not occur overnight, but instead gained momentum over the course of the nineteenth century. As Hellen Lee-Keller points

out, anxieties over racial difference and the subsequent push to conflate differences into a racial binary typically occur following periods of unrest, increased immigration, or war, when a struggle for resources follows (199). The Louisiana Purchase represents the beginning of racial unrest, war, and increased immigration in New Orleans, which was then followed by the Civil War and Reconstruction. While the Louisiana Purchase introduced questions about the confluence of racial and ethnic identities in New Orleans, Reconstruction served to exacerbate these questions and saw legal restrictions and racial ideologies become more prevalent and strictly enforced. After the Louisiana Purchase, Anglo-Americans sought to integrate the city into an Anglo-American hierarchy, taking drastic measures to do so. For instance, manumission was restricted, interracial marriages were regulated, immigration was limited, and property ownership for non-white citizens was made increasingly difficult (Spear 179). Essentially, the Louisiana Purchase instigated a push for control and the Civil War and Reconstruction intensified this push. As Spear says about New Orleans after the Civil War:

Despite the sheer number of Asians, Southern Europeans, and Latin Americans who were immigrating and integrating into society, both across the nation and in the South...white Southerners who feared being outnumbered by freedpersons (read Black persons) and immigrants (read other racialized persons) adopted and instituted strictly binary racial politics in the South (200).

Because New Orleans culture and the multiethnic identities of its residents fit into neither a black nor white racial category neatly, the impact of Jim Crow ideology, often from outsiders of the region hoping for a national racial binary, was especially difficult for New Orleanians.

This phenomenon of changing and imposed identities is not new to the region and ties closely to Lee-Keller's concept of unrest. Within seventy-five years, New Orleans

experienced four changes in government. While it is tempting to look at these documented changes as concrete points of changing attitudes, the reality is not so straightforward, as the literature of the period suggests that the response was not one of quick ideological change. Dunbar-Nelson's New Orleans stories, for instance, show the ways in which beliefs and government are out of sync. The narrative of belief is what we should pay attention to; this is what really shaped identity. A change in institutions does not immediately signal a change in ideological and philosophical beliefs. With the changes in government during the nineteenth century, the political, racial, and cultural identities and views of the residents did not quickly shift. Literature, like that of Dunbar-Nelson, demonstrates the ways in which there is a counter narrative that needs to be attended to. Such quick reversals in governance would logically create unstable social situations, which people sought to ease with rigid racial classifications. Lee-Keller notes that Creoles tended to establish their identities based on ethnicity, religion, and language, rather than nationality, which I posit is a result in part because of this constant shifting of government but gradual change in beliefs (204).

The ways in which Creoles of color in New Orleans responded to this drive for a racial dichotomy demonstrates both the restrictions placed upon this group of people and the cultural, economic, and social importance that this classification held. To understand who was most affected by this conflation of racial identity and how they responded, it is useful to first refer back to Alice Dunbar-Nelson's notion of what it means to be Creole. In an essay she wrote, "People of Color in Louisiana," Dunbar-Nelson says, "The person of color will retort with his definition that a Creole is a native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly

apparent” (367). The promotion of a Jim Crow binary typically came from outsiders of New Orleans. Outsiders, showing the ways that a national discourse exerted pressure on New Orleans residents to conform to a typical “American” racial identity, pushed this “un-American” identity to the periphery. The response of the Creole community, both Creoles of color and European Creoles, to this mindset was largely divided. Many of the legal cases during which Creoles attempted to be legally coded white suggest that at least a portion of Creole residents in the South viewed the classification of Creole as something negative, often because of the economic and social disadvantages it offered. Conversely and more central to my overall argument, a large number of black and European Creoles worked towards their own conception of what it meant to be American. There was much to be lost for this group in being forced to participate in a strict black-white categorization, so they instead emphasized their Spanish and French heritage. As Lee-Keller says, “it was precisely through French and Spanish colonization that they had originally acquired their social, economic, and political privileges, which were being eroded with the incursion of Northeastern US-American merchants, industrialists, and politicians” (206).

Alice Dunbar-Nelson, writing during this period of turmoil and imposed racial binaries, uses several of her stories as responses to the reduction of ethnic and racial plurality. Instead of merely focusing on black or white characters, Dunbar-Nelson often incorporates threads of French, Latin American, and Caribbean culture in her works through various means, like character identities, global foodways, tensions between various ethnic groups and unions, and embedded racial or ethnic histories in her stories, which emphasize movement, travel, and confluence of identities. In doing so, I claim,

Dunbar-Nelson is putting forth an alternative to the strict black-white binary. She places more emphasis on ethnicity in most of her stories than she does race, though the two are closely linked in her works and it is often hard to separate them, a move on Dunbar-Nelson's part that I believe to be intentional. By writing characters and places that revolve so crucially around identities and exchanges outside of a black-white racial stratification, Dunbar-Nelson is proposing a way to make the "un-American" American. Her characters with global connections are still very much a part of the American culture that she illustrates, particularly the economic aspects of it. She is disturbing the concept of racial absolutism gaining momentum at the time and instead emphasizing and celebrating ethnic differences as ways of viewing identities. To use the language of Pryse and Fetterley, Dunbar-Nelson resists the power structures that have "regionalized" her characters (7).

Two stories by Dunbar-Nelson, "Mr. Baptiste" and "When the Bayou Overflows," deal with waterways and migration of bodies and goods, incorporating various aspects of different ethnicities and cultures, and working to both expand the view of what it means to be American and complicate the notion of a black-white binary within the region. "Mr. Baptiste" portrays a poor Creole man in New Orleans whose livelihood depends on discarded fruit and food from the dockworkers, or longshoremen. Mr. Baptiste is pushed to a social periphery, whereas Sylves' in "When the Bayou Overflows" is pushed to a geographical periphery. He spends his days collecting these foods and bringing them to the women in town, in exchange for meals and shelter. While eating with a friend one afternoon, Mr. Baptiste laments over the striking cotton workers and finds himself caught up in the union labor strikes shortly thereafter. In "When the

Bayou Overflows,” Dunbar-Nelson depicts a mother, a son, and the son’s fiancée, living in Franklin County along the Bayou Teche. Sylves Mouton, the son, makes the decision to move to Chicago and roll cigars there, rather than doing the fieldwork in Louisiana that he has tired of. During his return to Louisiana, Sylves falls ill on the train and passes away, leaving behind a distraught mother and fiancée. As I will discuss in more detail further in this chapter, Dunbar-Nelson intricately weaves markers of national identity and references to historical figures into her narrative, ultimately in an effort to show that race is something that cannot be clearly delineated and something that should not be privileged over ethnicity. There is a sense that ethnicity does not prohibit integration in the same way that race does. Somehow race becomes rigid, whereas ethnicity does not. This will become particularly relevant when I move into a discussion of the Irish characters in “Mr. Baptiste.” An examination of both works helps to showcase Dunbar-Nelson’s message that race and ethnicity are constructions that are not defined in one absolute way. She introduces aspects of global cultures and ethnicities into her stories in an effort to illustrate this concept.

Characters in Dunbar-Nelson’s works attempt to re-classify themselves by changing location, though not successfully. Houston Baker notes that, “all fixed points are problematic...Fixity is a function of power. Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the traditional” (qtd in Davis 186). I argue that fixity in Dunbar-Nelson’s work is, as Baker puts it, “problematic;” it is often, though not exclusively, the characters lacking power that are fixed. Yet it is also the case the mobility functions as a liability for marginalized characters and for male characters in particular, as this is an attempt by these male

Creoles to cross racial and class boundaries. In *Southscapes* Thadious Davis sees Louisiana as, “An alternative space for modeling a more expansive and less binary construction of race within the United States” (186). Though Davis is correct in asserting that Louisiana is an expansive multiracial space, she does not account for the influence of outside ideology to shape New Orleans into a city that adheres to a clear classification of race into terms of white and black. It becomes apparent in the works of Dunbar-Nelson that classification in these terms weakens characters and is not without dangers. Ultimately, Jim Crow classifications are imposed on Dunbar-Nelson’s characters and she attempts to combat those through her portrayal of an alternative Creole culture; however, her Creole characters naïvely think of themselves as free from this racial stratification and as a result are unable to move from liminal to central spaces, geographic or ideological, instead ending in a middle ground.

3.1 When the Bayou Overflows

In Dunbar-Nelson’s story “When the Bayou Overflows,” she writes about a man, Sylves’, trying to provide for his family by moving to Chicago to roll cigars. Sylves’, his mother Ma’am Mouton, and his fiancée Louissette, live in Franklin, near the Bayou Teche. Each year Sylves’ makes a trip to New Orleans to roll cigars, but he has recently tired of the manual labor he does year round and the increasingly difficult search to find cigar-rolling jobs in Louisiana. Sylves’ is denied full access to the space in which he lives so he must go elsewhere or adapt to living in the margins. In search of more money, more excitement, and a place to live without the same pressures of racial stratification, Sylves’ travels north to Chicago and vows to return to Louisiana each year when the bayou

overflows. However, the Chicago weather proves to be too much for his health and Sylves's return by train ends tragically, as he dies hours before arriving in Franklin. For someone like Sylves' Chicago might easily represent a space that conforms more closely to a racial binary than New Orleans, yet holds more flexibility for movement through the space because there is no legal imposition of segregation like the Jim Crow laws that exist in the South. During the early part of the twentieth century when Dunbar-Nelson was writing, Northern papers like *The Chicago Defender*, printed articles encouraging southern African Americans to migrate north. One particular article from this paper says, "[The] New Orleans States editor says that the Northern white people are unfriendly. Well, let us see what he means by unfriendly. He does not lynch you. Your schoolteachers and your doctors and your lawyers do not have to ride in Jim Crow cars" (Chicago Defender 13). Throughout this editorial Chicago and New Orleans are put in contest with one another and the author works hard to emphasize the lack of Jim Crow laws and the economic and social opportunities available for African Americans in Chicago. Though the North was certainly not a romanticized space free of discrimination, articles like this one attempt to paint it as such, making it likely that Sylves' may have had a similar impression in mind when he left for the "White City." Additionally, northern cities, like Chicago, were often represented in literature as industrial capitals, removed from plantation histories and ties to slavery. This move towards modernity and away from plantation life likely appealed to Sylves', as he specifically mentions his excitement about "cars [that] went by ropes underground" in a letter to Louisette (103).

To understand the ways in which Dunbar-Nelson advances the notion that firm black-white dichotomies are restrictive, and oftentimes dangerous, a closer examination

of “When the Bayou Overflows” is necessary. The first way that Dunbar-Nelson achieves this is through characterization of space within the text, or rather the ways that her characters consider geographical spaces. The Creole women in her story refer to Chicago as a “mistily wicked city,” whereas Sylves’ “don’t lak’ New Orleans” (97). He states that it is too near Franklin. In a sense, Dunbar-Nelson’s characters are exhibiting the mentality that is constantly forcing itself upon them—they seem to classify the Northern and Southern spaces in reductive, juxtaposed ways. Living about 100 miles from New Orleans, the characters are still very much linked to Louisiana and New Orleans traditions. Sylves’ moves to escape the South and earn more money for his family, but I also argue that he attempts to remove himself from an atmosphere that has begun to influence the way that he and his family members consider racial and ethnic identity. New Orleans, as discussed, represents one of the more ethnically diverse cities in the South during this time period and is attempting to push against the racial binary influencing the rest of the nation, though not entirely successfully.

Dunbar-Nelson’s mention of Mardi Gras is particularly important in this sense, as it contextualizes New Orleans as a space defined by and representative of diverse ethnic origins. However, social reversal is allowed on this day only. It offers opportunities for social challenges, but these are not constant year-round. Mardi Gras is “New Orleans’s annual pre-Lenten celebration of Mardi Gras, or Carnival, long a ritual of both civic self-definition and cultural conflict, owes its origins to the region’s French, Spanish, and Afro-Caribbean population” (Boyer 471). Sylves’ specifically mentions Mardi Gras as a tradition that he has tired of. I argue that he has tired of the binaries imposed upon this seemingly hybridized city and strives to inhabit a space that allows more than just one

day of upheaval of social conventions and cultural identities. In characterizing Chicago as a place “where there was no Mardi Gras,” Dunbar-Nelson suggests that Chicago is the antithesis of the vast cultural and ethnic space of New Orleans (103). Theoretically, Chicago offers more opportunities for various races and cultures, or at least it does not have legalized discrimination in the form of Jim Crow laws. Thus, Chicago does not need Mardi Gras once a year because the city had not seen the devolvement of political and legal rights for Creole residents in the way that New Orleans had. Because those rights were not violated in the same way as they were in New Orleans, Mardi Gras was not needed as an annual escape from cultural conventions. By singling out Mardi Gras and then casting it off, Sylves’ rejects the idea of a place that only allows him to exhibit his Creole Americanness once a year and instead tries to embrace a place that does not legally force him into racial absolutism. In a letter to Louissette, Sylves’ even writes, “Why, [Chicago] was always like New Orleans at Mardi Gras with the people” (99). Sylves’ seems naïve in thinking that Chicago will be free of the performance of racial roles and identities, as no place is, particularly not a Northern space. This naiveté becomes more apparent throughout the story as Sylves’, knowingly or not, begins to slip into a racial stratification. Sylves’ race in this story is fairly inconsequential; it is his ethnic origins, as he is clearly identified as “a true ‘cajan,” or a person of French descent, that hold more importance because with his integration into this black-white binary Sylves minimizes this ethnicity.

It is his naiveté in thinking that he would travel to a place free of classifications that disallows Sylves from reentering the South. As the story progresses Dunbar-Nelson includes small indications that Sylves abandons his Creole identity. For instance, while

he is still in Franklin, Sylves's speech is peppered with French words and phrases, suggesting an embrace of his Cajun heritage. The very first words he speaks are, "Bon jour, Louissette...Eh, maman!" (96). He often uses phrases, like "non, non, ma chere" when speaking to Louissette and Ma'am Mouton (98-100). As the plot progresses and Sylves moves to Chicago, the language in his letters changes and his family (as well as Dunbar-Nelson's readership) no longer sees Sylves speaking or writing in the same manner. Instead, his language seems to have conformed to a more traditional English structure, as Dunbar-Nelson writes, "Chicago was such a wonderful city, said Sylves" (101). This reflects Sylves's adoption of an "American" standard of English. It isn't until Sylves' wishes to re-renter the Southern Louisiana space that French is mentioned again. In his attempt to escape a place that feels constricting, Sylves' migrates to a space that ultimately influences his identity as well. Dunbar-Nelson writes, "'I know the bayou must be ready to overflow,' went the letter in carefully phrased French...I am not so well, and Monsier le docteur says it is well for me to go to the South again" (33). The very clear indication that this letter was written in French, as well as Sylves's return to French phrases, like "Monsieur le docteur," indicates that when he wishes to reintegrate into a space dominated by ethnic cultures and diversity, then Sylves' can adopt this speech again.

However, despite his attempts to reintegrate and reclaim his French roots, Sylves is unable to reenter the Southern space and dies en route. Sylves's exodus from the Southern landscape and then death upon his attempt to reenter this space complicates the story and exemplifies the ways in which it is difficult to re-classify oneself. It also illustrates the dangers in naively thinking that one is free of classification, even upon

entering a new space. Interestingly, Dunbar-Nelson never identifies whether or not Sylves' is seated on the Jim Crow car when he travels back to New Orleans by train. Instead, she leaves him in a liminal space, dying on an ambiguous car, in between North and South. Sylves' fails to re-accommodate himself to a racially and socially stratified context as much as a geographical context. There is a failure by Sylves' to alter racial codes, unlike the Irish immigrants I will discuss in relation to "Mr. Baptise." Sylves' also exemplifies a movement counter to the migration North that African Americans typically made during the postbellum era, which suggests a naiveté on his part in thinking that he can exist free of categorization in Chicago.

Also embedded in this story are many points of tension, including tensions between Creole and American identities and national and global interests. Alice Dunbar-Nelson is known for writing stories that seem relatively straightforward on the surface but have much complexity and history written into them, which local readers were more equipped to understand (Brooks 3-4). "When the Bayou Overflows" is no different. The character names and setting of this story are not inconsequential, as I claim that Ma'am Mouton's name recalls that of Alfred Mouton, an *Acadian* Confederate general during the Civil War, an ethnicity that ties him closely to Sylves' Mouton, a "true 'cajun.'" Cajuns are an ethnic group that descended from:

Eighteenth century exiles from Acadia and other ethnic groups with whom these exiles and their descendants intermarried in southern Louisiana... The Acadians also intermarried with other ethnic groups in southern Louisiana, including French, Spanish, and German Creoles. It was this process of ethnic interaction that transformed the Acadians, as well as those with whom they intermarried, into a new people—the Cajuns" (Oxford Encyclopedia).

General Mouton's grandfather, Jean Mouton, was among the first people exiled from Nova Scotia to come to the Louisiana area and settle in the Lafayette Parish. Alfred Mouton grew up with a brother named Franklin, which certainly would have evoked connections for contemporary readers between the area of Franklin where Sylves' and his mother live. Over the next several pages I argue that Dunbar-Nelson named her characters Ma'am and Sylves' Mouton to evoke the memory of the General and the ways in which his history shows the dangers that accompany rigid categories. By aligning her characters with Mouton through name, ethnicity, and geography, Dunbar-Nelson furthers her argument that it is essential to acknowledge more than just a black-white dichotomy. As will be discussed, ethnicity and a sense of "Creole Americanness" should not be collapsed into strict racial categories.

Throughout his time in Louisiana, General Mouton was heavily involved in military efforts and fought in the Civil War. However, before Mouton entered these battles, he spent ten years of his life farming and planting on his family's land, similar to the ways in which Sylves, "jus' dig, dig, [and] work in de fiel" (Dunbar-Nelson 97). Alice Dunbar-Nelson (and her characters) would certainly have been familiar with Mouton, as he was quite famous and revered in the area, suggesting that the naming of Ma'am Mouton and Sylves' Mouton was intentional. This is further exemplified by General Mouton's participation in the Battle of Shiloh in 1862. During the Civil War, his brigade did not have enough money to supply all of the troops with grey uniforms so many of the men had to wear blue uniforms, similar to those worn by the Union soldiers. Because of this there was much friendly fire on General Mouton and his unit, as there was little distinction between Northern and Southern troops. Arceneaux describes the

battle, saying, “Suddenly [Mouton’s] men were caught in a fire of cannons and muskets from the right. The fire was coming from Confederate troops who had been misled, Mouton assumed, by the blue uniforms worn by many of the Acadians” (45). This incident is a thread by which Dunbar-Nelson connects Sylves’s Cajun identity to the General, as well as one by which she shows the complications of classification in the nineteenth century. During this battle Mouton was shot in the face and injured, a direct result of categorization as a Northern soldier.

During the nineteenth century there was a popular awareness of Mouton and his military achievements, evidenced by Jefferson Davis’s acknowledgement of the General. After the Battle of Shiloh, Davis announced that he was promoting Mouton to the rank of brigadier general, making him one of the youngest generals in the Civil War (Arceneaux 53). By drawing connections between Alfred Mouton and Sylves’ Mouton, Dunbar-Nelson suggests that identity is far more complicated than mere geography or physical traits, but informed by both features. I would like to suggest that Dunbar-Nelson also draws these parallels in an effort to maintain a Southern audience, in addition to suggesting that there is a danger in strict sectional, black-white taxonomies. Because Mouton was a Confederate general, Dunbar-Nelson’s audience would likely recognize the name and associate it with misclassification in the Battle of Shiloh.

In an attempt to promote an alternative to the white Anglo-Saxon image of Americanness, Dunbar-Nelson draws connections between the South and transnational processes and goods. This connection gains more momentum when considering cigar rolling in “When the Bayou Overflows.” Rather than reinforce the black-white binary, Dunbar-Nelson begins to examine issues relating to the global south. Howard W. Odum,

in 1936, identified a problem in the cultural mindset when he wrote, “Sectionalism itself has constituted a major crisis..., conditioning itself to isolation, individualism, ingrowing patriotism, cultural inbreeding, civic immaturity, and social inadequacy” (qtd. in Peacock and Watson 1). Dunbar-Nelson’s fiction defies Odum’s ideas of the South and Southern literature, as it situates the everyday lives of its characters in a global context. For instance, Dunbar-Nelson’s references to the cigar trade immediately link New Orleans, the Bayou Teche, and Chicago to one another, as well as to Cuba and Latin America. New Orleans acted as a major hub for tobacco shipments and cigar factories beginning shortly after the Louisiana Purchase (Hyman). Until Samuel Gompers traveled to New York and established the Cigar Makers’ International Union in 1863, much of the cigar industry was found in the South (Cooper 10-11).

New Orleans operated as a hub for tobacco and cigar shipments, due to its location on the water. Nearly all of the Midwest states had to use the Mississippi and other waterways to transport cigars and cigar-rolling materials to and from New Orleans (Hyman). Because of tariffs enacted in 1861, many Cuban cigar manufacturers relocated from Cuba to Key West and New Orleans in an effort to avoid higher costs (Hyman). These foreign ties between New Orleans and Cuba are significant in Dunbar-Nelson’s story, as they serve to connect both the North and South to international relations and identities. The South is no longer solely connected to the cigar trade in Latin America, foreign relations are shaping Northern cultural and economic interests, and there is no clear distinction between these geographical spaces as far as the tobacco industry goes. As Irwin-Mulcahy explains about Dunbar-Nelson’s writing, “unlike black regionalists...she did not draw upon the rural South’s plantation idiom, something linked

to stasis and slave-based epistemologies. Instead, her writing is an occasion for examining the ways region functioned as a sort of open cell, a cultural landscape shot through with links to external histories” (Irwin-Mulcahy 122). It seems, then, that Dunbar-Nelson’s efforts to make the cigar trade a central part of her story function to critique the idea that there is one insular American identity. Sylves’s movement north represents his understanding that the cigar industry disrupts the racial binarism in Chicago, but it also illustrates his naiveté in thinking that this disruption applies to the racial ideology of the whole city.

In *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, James Weldon Johnson does something similar in that he sets part of his novel in a cigar factory in Jacksonville, Florida. Johnson depicts a character that is legally black but visibly white; however, he complicates this simplified binary by then showing the Ex-Colored man living and working with Cuban men, drawing connections to Latin America. Johnson writes a character that rejects the ontology of racial categories and instead embraces aspects of Latin ethnicity. Had he remained within that strict black-white categorization, the Ex-Colored man would have suffered financially. It was only because he learned Spanish and immersed himself in Latin culture and customs that he was promoted to be a reader in the cigar factory, earning far more money than the four dollars he was making initially. And it was this money that allowed him to buy a piano, an instrument that becomes significant his absorption into American culture and ragtime music. Ultimately in the cigar factory scenes, like Dunbar-Nelson, Johnson shows a way to be American that does not fit neatly into the black-white racial binary Americans were using to define themselves against at the time.

3.2 Mr. Baptiste

Just as “When the Bayou Overflows” advocates for a version of Creole Americanness, “Mr. Baptiste” incorporates instances of international trade to complicate racial binaries and depict the ways in which these binaries, or more specifically, classification by others within these binaries, can be dangerous. In this story Alice Dunbar-Nelson writes about a homeless Creole man who wanders the docks of New Orleans, collecting discarded fruits and vegetables that have come in off the boats. Various residents around the city cook for Mr. Baptiste and give him places to stay in exchange for some of the fruit. On this particular day Mr. Baptiste walks to the docks to observe the strike by the cotton stevedores, as this conflict disrupts the fruit trade and threatens Mr. Baptiste’s livelihood. In the process, Mr. Baptiste aligns himself with the African American workers, cheering them on, and enraging the white Irish cotton workers on strike. Ultimately, it is Mr. Baptiste’s refusal or inability to fit neatly into a black-white binary, but the desire by others to place him within this social space, which leads to his death.

Within American culture at the end of the nineteenth century tensions ran high between immigrants and Americans. However, “Mr. Baptiste” illustrates a unique situation and complicates the idea of a black and white binary. Because much of the action in “Mr. Baptiste” revolves around the dock strikes and the various factions taking part in these labor movements, it is useful to explore the history of Irish immigrants in America more closely. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Irish immigrants began coming to the United States in large number, fleeing caste systems (which also included racial discrimination in this context), oppression, and poverty in their home country.

Upon arriving in the US the Irish faced prejudices and difficult living conditions at times. However, as Noel Ignatiev argues in *How the Irish Became White*, this ethnic group became aligned with whiteness in a black-white binary, despite the cultural and ethnic differences between the Irish and Anglo-Saxon Americans. Bryan Giemza then focuses primarily on Irishmen in the South, pointing out that they sometimes received a warm reception from Southern whites, as they were viewed as allies against the black population, particularly during and after the Civil War (37). Giemza goes on to nuance these claims, but does acknowledge that it was not uncommon during the nineteenth century for people to align the Irish with whiteness in a binary structure, rather than considering this group as its own unique cultural and ethnic category. The conflation of race and ethnicity is important because Dunbar-Nelson uses it in a way that implicates the audience in this move to condense the Irish men in “Mr. Baptiste” into one general category of whiteness, which I will attend to later in this chapter.

Though “Mr. Baptist” centers on an aging Creole man during the labor strikes of 1892, the foodways and trade routes function in equally important ways to draw attention to globalization as a challenge to the idea of a clear black-white society. In blurring lines of nation and identity, Dunbar-Nelson parallels Mr. Baptiste’s own ambiguous Creole identity and origin, which will be discussed at length later, as it is said that “He might have had another name...Some one had christened him Mr. Baptiste long ago in the dim past, and it sufficed. No one had ever been known who had the temerity to ask him for another cognomen” (111). One way in which Dunbar-Nelson begins to break down lines that delineate national identities is through the exchange of commodities and food in “Mr. Baptiste.” Of the foods mentioned in the story-bananas, mangoes, oranges, citrons,

plantains, molasses, sugar, bread, meat, and coffee-nearly all of them were imported from other countries in the 19th century. Bread and meat are the only two foods in this story that originated in the United States during this time, while most of the others either came from Latin America or the West Indies.

Relations between Latin America and the US were established early in the 19th century. In 1823 the Monroe Doctrine went into effect. This “established a myth of hemispheric unity, according to which common experiences and beliefs supposedly linked North and South Americans in a shared commitment to the ‘Western hemispheric idea’” (Boyer 286). During the 1880s and 1890s, Latin America was exporting nearly \$176 million worth of goods, whereas the United States was exporting only \$58 million worth of goods (Bethell 89). Because of this discrepancy, James G. Blaine, an activist for foreign relations, proposed an inter-American system that would reduce Europe’s stake in Latin American and US trade and help mediate conflicts. Instead, there existed a “belief that the United States had to play a greater role in Latin America and gain more prestige...[The United States government] reacted with an emotional, nationalistic posture conditioned by sharpened feelings of international rivalry” (Bethell 91). It was because of this mentality, though, that many US citizens felt that the world was being closed by expanding empires in the 1890s and the country was finding itself increasingly isolated.

By specifically choosing foods for her story, such as bananas and coffee, which came largely from Latin America, Dunbar-Nelson implicitly comments on the state of the US as an isolated nation versus transnational entity. Just as she shows how there are no clear, insular identities that can be defined by another (i.e. black is defined as somebody

who is not white, Southerner is defined as somebody is not a Northerner), Dunbar-Nelson makes connections to international affairs to show how there can be no insular American identity. At the end of the 19th century there was certainly a myth of a collective American identity, much like there was a myth of hemispheric unity within the Americas, but Dunbar-Nelson's nod to these Latin American relations deconstructs this myth of American identity. It is no longer isolated in her stories. Though Dunbar-Nelson often portrays New Orleans as an open cell, she does not claim that it completely defies all forms of national homogeneity. Instead, the efforts her characters make to escape the influence of Jim Crow ideology characterize New Orleans as an open cell that is still capable of being influenced by national discourses of race and ethnicity.

Within "Mr. Baptiste," these histories of food as cultural practice and social medium and commodity are significant, as they work to define and encode ethnic origins. For instance, the cotton workers conjure images of slavery and racial binaries tied to slavery--black and white. The people in the sympathetic mass that surround Baptiste upon his death, however, are ethnically coded, merely through association with different commodities and goods. Mr. Baptiste, cheering on the black cotton workers, is killed by an Irishman, and while he is dying, Mr. Baptiste is surrounded by "Fishman and vegetable marchands" (122). Because New Orleans operated as a port that received so many fruits and vegetables from Latin American, Caribbean, and Asian countries these image patterns come to represent people and their ethnicity. They are no longer referred to by name, but are now associated with a link to their role within a commodity market culture. This is something that Dunbar-Nelson does frequently in her writing when describing Creole characters. For instance, in "When the Bayou Overflows," Dunbar-

Nelson often uses metonymies to represent Louissette, describing her as “the red mouth” or “the small brown hands” (96). Because Baptiste typically intermingles with people of many ethnicities throughout the story, when he is forced into a situation in which he must choose between Irishmen, representing whiteness as I will discuss shortly, and black cotton workers, he is unable to exist outside of his normal middle ground. The people connected to the various foodways, and identified by those foodways, come to represent that culturally diverse society that Mr. Baptiste had existed in until he was forced into a classification.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s tendency to draw on historical events is more apparent in “Mr. Baptiste” than in most of her other stories. The strike that Mr. Baptiste witnesses is based upon a major point of racial and ethnic tensions in New Orleans. In the 1890s cotton exporting was quickly becoming the largest industry in New Orleans and Mr. Baptiste’s words, “Dose Cotton! Hit will drive de fruit away,” indicate the unease surrounding the situation (115). White and European cotton workers refused to work with African American laborers any longer at this juncture and went on strike, a situation which seems to exacerbate the racial binaries of the time. This is where the fears of some New Orleans residents, echoed by Mr. Baptiste, originated. Mr. Baptiste worries, “Les veseaux, dey lay in de river, no work, no cargo, yaas. Den de fruit ship, dey can' mak' lan', de mans, dey t'reaten an' say t'ings. Dey mak' big fight, yaas. Dere no mo' work on de levee, lak dat. Ever'body jus' walk roun' an' say cuss word, yaas” (Dunbar-Nelson 115-116). Thus, the racial tensions surrounding the Southern cotton industry in America begin to effect many aspects of foreign trade and commerce.

Amazingly, during the period from 1880 to 1894, black and white New Orleans dockworkers “saw biracial cooperation on a heretofore unknown scale, running counter to the social trends of the rest of the country. Unionized labor became highly effective as black and white locals united in two powerful organizations” (Grandt 48). However, after the depression of 1893, these relations began to break down. Shippers hired black workers who were willing to work for less than the minimum union wages, inciting anger in white dockworkers and resulting in a strike. In October 1894, a group of about 200 white longshoremen broke onto the ships of black laborers and destroyed much of their equipment. This violent attack lasted for days, with little police intervention, and *The Picayune* reported that “the mob seemed to be LED BY A MAN CALLED DICK, who...had a very florid complexion, and red hair, with a light mustache” and Grandt states that, “presumably [Dick] was of Irish extraction” (49). This detail makes it particularly clear that Dunbar-Nelson was familiar with the details of the incident, as she writes about two Irish dockworker named Finnegan and McMahon who harass Mr. Baptiste and represent the dangers of classification within a unyielding racial binary (Grandt 49).

I argue that Dunbar-Nelson’s purpose in tying this racial and ethnic violence to her story was not to separate Creole identity from American and European identities, but to show the ways in which American society is already intricately tied to global cultures, thus promoting a way to reconsider “Americanness,” separate from the rigid racial binary that was widespread at the time. Through Mr. Baptiste, Dunbar-Nelson details the dangers that come from falling into this binary. It is implied that Mr. Baptiste is a Creole man of Latin heritage when Dunbar-Nelson writes, “He was small: most Creole men are

small when they are old...It must be age that withers them sooner and more effectually than those of un-Latinised extraction” (111). On the other hand, he is often referred to as a “Frinchman,” thus Dunbar-Nelson constructs Mr. Baptiste’s identity around ethnicities rather than race. In his interactions with the New Orleans residents, Mr. Baptiste constantly crosses ethnic lines and he embodies a sense of what it means to be Creole American for Dunbar-Nelson. For instance, Madame Garcia, presumably a Spanish Creole woman, cooks meals for Mr. Baptiste. He is rarely without his basket, carrying fruit from various international countries. A “big, brawny Irishman” converses with Mr. Baptiste, and refers to him by name, about the docks about the cotton and labor strike, insinuating a former relationship (117). It isn’t until Mr. Baptiste begins to cheer the African American dockworkers, who stand for one half of a strict racial divide, that passing through multiple racial boundaries weakens him. Mr. Baptiste is forced to choose sides between whiteness and blackness, as his livelihood depends on the conclusion of the strike, and in being forced to classify himself in such a way, he is harmed. Until this point, Mr. Baptiste was not defining himself against other Louisianans and identities, but rather navigating between them. In doing so, Mr. Baptiste was always well fed and cared for by New Orleanians. Like Sylves’, passing out of a varied ethnic world into a racial binary weakens Mr. Baptiste and inflicts violence upon him. Though Sylves’ elects to leave his ethnicity, while Mr. Baptiste is forced, ultimately they both suffer the same fate.

Ultimately, Dunbar-Nelson works to upset the predominant ideas about American identity in the nineteenth century. By depicting characters who are enter into racial binaries, often for economic reasons, Dunbar-Nelson comments on the dangers to which this alignment leads. This entrance into a limited racial sphere, rather than a multiethnic

one, often weakens her characters and there is little chance to reintegrate into culturally diverse spaces or societies. By encoding certain characters or landscapes with racialized or ethnically significant histories, Dunbar-Nelson clues the reader in on her proposed Creole American identities. However, by that same token, because she embeds her stories with ideologies and mindsets that were widespread in the nineteenth century, like that of the Irish as white, Dunbar-Nelson also implicates the reader in this classification. She leaves little room to think of the Irish workers in “Mr. Baptiste” as anything other than opposing the black workers, i.e. white. This categorization imposed on her characters by either readers or other characters is something which Dunbar-Nelson tackles in other stories, specifically works involving religious institutions, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Much as in the first two chapters, the imposition of classification in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's work on characters and space is significant here. While chapter one examined the relationships among racial meaning, landscape, and human identity and chapter two discussed the pressures to conform one's identity to a national racial binary, this chapter will illustrate classifications within social and religious institutions. More specifically, I will examine marriage, concubinage, and convents in "Sister Josepha" and "Tony's Wife" by means of my ongoing attention to space in Dunbar-Nelson's work. In looking at these stories, I intend to dissect the ways that certain characters exhibit a naïve faith in the sanctity of the cultural classifications regarding these spaces and cultural practices. Oftentimes the convent is regarded as a retreat, or safe space, from a society wishing to impose racial and ethnic classifications on women. What Sister Josepha fails to realize is that the convent is not free from classification or harmful cultural mores that infiltrate the convent walls, nor does she fully conceive of the ways that taxonomies will be imposed upon her both inside and outside the convent walls. She idealizes these spaces and is made vulnerable to potentially harmful situations as a result. Similarly, Tony's wife maintains a naïve trust in her partner and the sanctity of their relationship until his death, thinking that their common law marriage will persuade him to leave her financially supported after he dies. It is these misunderstandings of the ways that cultural identities

and cultural spaces interact that leave each woman vulnerable to violence. Ultimately, the convents and marriages in Dunbar-Nelson's work, which I will discuss throughout this chapter, serve as metaphors for the ambivalent value of classifications.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson's work is grounded in both physical places and ideological spaces. Dunbar-Nelson establishes character movement through physical place, signaled by street names, buildings, churches, ports, etc... In addition to these tangible geographies, though, Dunbar-Nelson moves her characters through ideological spaces and identifications. They pass through spaces and flow between people and groups that are culturally, racially, and ethnically coded. One site frequently employed by Dunbar-Nelson that represents the convergence of physical place and ideological space and identity is the convent. It is a physical institution—a walled building housing nuns—but it is representative of many religious, racial, and gendered ideologies. Thus, when I refer to institutions I am gesturing to ideologies and value systems that can typically be located in a common physical place like the convent, or a marriage, which is grounded in a particular domestic place. It is within these cultural institutions that problems regarding cultural identities arise and are parsed out.

Within a group or community, there are multiple cultural identities and differences that should not be overlooked. Henrietta Moore discusses this notion, in relation to feminist identity theory, stating that:

Differences are never singular; they are always contextual and relational...[W]omen have different contexts and histories, they have suffered multiple and various forms of subordination and discrimination, and their situation in the world is the product of differential relations between groups of people—classes, nations, races, ethnic and religious groups (1130).

Historically, convents were often grouped together and differences among the factions were left unconsidered when it came to religious factions and Holy Orders in Louisiana. This conflation occurred when outsiders of New Orleans considered various sexual relationships, like placage, prostitution, and concubinage as well. Erasures or disregard of differences within these communities became common, which I will discuss in relation to each story. This erasure is a concept that Bernice Johnson Reagon mentions in her discussion of coalition politics explaining how the context of a word like “woman” holds a different meaning for each person that approaches it, thus there is never one true and definite meaning to be ascribed to it. It becomes dangerous to consider only absolute ways to define a group (Coalition Politics 5). Recognizing differences within social practices like placage and concubine allows for one to begin to de-exoticize the practice and consider relationships on individual levels. This is a move that Dunbar-Nelson starts to make in her short stories by recognizing and documenting differences within social practices that are typically categorized as something that one type of person takes part in.

New Orleans, often a site of social and cultural confluence, embodied a culture of its own in the post-Reconstruction era. The city became known for its “exotic and sensual reputation,” its segregated sexual culture in the Storyville neighborhood, and its Creole protest tradition (Boyer 551). This reputation is quite different from the one on which the city was founded. New Orleans has its roots in French Catholicism and its religious history dates back to the seventeenth century. Interestingly, Alice Dunbar-Nelson details the collision of these two worlds-European religious ideologies as opposed to perceived “exotic” non-white New Orleans sexual licentiousness- in her short fiction as a way of showing how the two spheres constantly penetrate one another, making it difficult (and

often violent) to attempt to classify and segregate these worlds. She does not put only sexuality and religion in conversation with one another. Dunbar-Nelson also blurs the lines between ethnic and racial ideologies through differing versions of Creole and European sexual and religious cultural identities.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson's New Orleans fiction constantly deals with and dissects various institutions and sacraments, such as marriage and the convent. Through many of her stories, and especially in "Tony's Wife" and "Sister Josepha," Dunbar-Nelson examines the notion that these cultural institutions are regarded as safeguards meant to protect their participants by several of her female characters, but this is flawed thinking on their parts, as they are never truly safe to begin. Much as in her treatment of racial and ethnic identity, Dunbar-Nelson presents certain traditions in an ambivalent light, helping us recognize the danger for her characters in naïvely considering these spaces as sacred or protected. In seeking out these religious institutions, typically classified as havens from the stresses and violence that await those who do not fit into the American notion of white, Anglo Saxon men, Dunbar-Nelson's (typically female) characters end up placing themselves in positions where dangers, often sexual, permeate these boundaries. They make themselves vulnerable by placing faith in these institutions and ignoring nuanced differences, like the ways that their cultural identities shift how others view them in these places. As Elizabeth West states, "In Dunbar-Nelson's fiction, Christianity is not the medium through which the heroine emerges into ideal womanhood. Nor does Christianity facilitate domestic bliss and security" (6). In situating her stories in this way, Dunbar-Nelson comments on the naïveté of characters who put faith in classifications of cultural

and social institutions, which then makes them susceptible to violence associated with this categorization.

4.1 Sisters of the Holy Family

As Dunbar-Nelson centers many of her stories on convents, I will begin with a brief history of the formation and politics of religious orders in New Orleans during the latter half of the 19th century, so as to then later illustrate why this history is important to the subversions of convents as safe spaces in her literature. As Dunbar-Nelson constantly references various Catholic convents, traditions, and sects, I focus specifically on the Sisters of the Holy Family (SSF), the Catholic sect established in 1842 primarily to aid women of African American descent in New Orleans. The SSF had origins in the Ursuline Sisters, laborers who were the first women to take it upon themselves to catechize slave children and free people of color, and would evolve into an African American congregation, led by Henriette Delille (Brett 114). As the Ursuline Sisters found that it was increasingly difficult to continue their mission after the Louisiana Purchase they sought the help of Delille in establishing and running a school for children of slaves and gens de couleur libre. Significant to my larger argument about Dunbar-Nelson's works, Delille became a sort of religious godmother to these pupils and, though the antebellum laws of New Orleans made it impossible for the femme de couleur libre to formally become a religious sister, she reappropriated the signifier and referred to herself as "Sister" (Brett 115). Through this, it is apparent that Delille attempted to shift the ideologies present within the cultural institution of the convent. Bernice Johnson Reagon's argument about cultural categories is relevant here, as Delille does what Reagon encourages-she nuances the meaning of a cultural identity and expands it to

include non-traditional identities or members. Delille reframes what a pious nun looks like at that time, recasting the white, chaste, European nun to now include Creoles. In doing so, Delille also pushed against the view that the black Creole population in New Orleans was incapable of disengaging from the sexual underbelly of the city.

Though Henriette Delille and her other sisters (also *femmes de couleur libre*) cite 1842 as the founding year of the SSF, laws still prevented them from going through formal novitiate programs or taking religious vows, thus making them nothing more than pious laywomen (Fessenden 190). Over the course of the next decade Delille and her other sisters, through various charitable acts, financial assistance, and the support of Archbishop Blanc, were able to circumvent the laws prohibiting them from becoming a legitimate religious group. This was done in ways that are still unclear, as there is little documentation of the ways in which the SSF came into discrete being. By 1852, Delille had fulfilled her novitiate requirement and the SSF became “an authentic religious congregation of vowed sisters,” though “In such an environment it was unwise to make public the fact that Archbishop Blanc had approved a community of free women of color” as such (Brett 117). Despite the great efforts that the Archbishop and Delille took to ensure that the SSF was an authentic organization, Brett notes that:

From copious extant documentation, however, it is known that until well into the 1870s church leaders in New Orleans never referred to the Holy Family community as one of sisters or nuns... Indeed, in 1862 when Henriette Delille died, her obituary in *La Propagateur Catholique*, although replete with praise for her and the work of her community, never refers to her as ‘Mother’ or ‘Sister,’ but only as ‘Miss Henriette Delille’ and ‘this poor maid’ (117).

Delille and her fellow sisters strove for many years to achieve the classification as an authentic religious order that they felt they deserved. Before they achieved this classification, the Sisters re-appropriated the terminology associated with the Church,

thus enacting a sort of self-classification. As I will discuss later, Dunbar-Nelson's stories often comment on the ways in which re-classification is something that does not necessarily offer any sort of salvation for her characters. When the sisters of the SSF did achieve a "stable" classification, acknowledged by some members of the diocese, the SSF did not suddenly become an institution with a secure identity and a safe space for its members. In fact, with this classification as a Holy Order, the SSF faced many dangers.

First, with the taxonomy of a religious order, the Holy Family Sisters were subject to much infighting regarding the race of their members. I posit that this is partially due to the exact categorization that they desired. Now that the SSF was designated as a legitimate religious organization, they had to be more cognizant of the laws and social standards at the time, prompting them to reevaluate who was subject to membership in their order. For a time, because of this, only lighter-skinned free women of color were allowed admittance into the convent. This is reminiscent of the Ursuline Order mentioned in conjunction with "Sister Josepha" in chapter two, which revolved around a racial hierarchy within the order. Political and racial tensions began to converge and Father Gilbert Raymond, the spiritual director for the SSF, was now allowed to play a role in determining how the order was run, a direct result of the legitimation and categorization of the SSF as a religious order. When Father Raymond and several of the Sisters disagreed about the admission of a particular dark-skinned woman into the Order, Father Raymond rented another house, declared it the mother-house for the order, and the Congregation was split in two, living between separate residences. This was a point of racial tension only compounded by the fact that the sisters of the SSF owned slaves themselves (Fessenden 195). He then asserted his position as priest-chaplain, demoted

several women who did not agree with the admittance of a dark skinned woman, Chloe Preval, and appointed a new woman to assume the position as mother superior (Brett 119). In evaluating this particular incident, it becomes clear that the Sisters of the SSF desired to be viewed in a way that would align them with mainstream notions of what and who constitutes a female religious order (i.e. they wished to be placed in the same category as white nuns and convents), but were also intent upon racial classification and stratification within their own Order. They strove to show that women of African American descent had the moral character to serve in religious orders. In doing so, they demonstrated a tension in resisting the imposition of a particular identity (what outsiders deemed the order to stand for-Creoleness and sexuality), while at the same time striving to be classified by outsiders as a different type of religious organization (pious and like white European religious orders). There was a recognition that the sisters of the SSF needed to position themselves within a larger racial hierarchy, so they worked to categorize themselves in the most advantageous way. However, with this attempt at self-classification they faced the danger of subjection to another person's will, particularly a white, Anglo Saxon priest outside of and superior to their own racial caste.

An examination of the SSF's fight to wear the religious veil in the late 19th century proves to be an instance in which classification becomes harmful and, though it pre-dates W.E.B. DuBois's concept of the veil, similarities resonate throughout. The veil serves to simultaneously hide and elucidate identity and protect and endanger the women who wear it. Through Reconstruction, members of the SSF were unable to wear veils. Tracy Fessenden describes how the Catholic Church of Louisiana initially prohibited veils for the SSF because of a popular, though false, anti-Catholic and pro-slavery

sentiment, which held that Catholic slave owners would free any slave woman who desired to take religious vows. The Church was fearful that the sight of non-white woman in habits would give credence to this misconception (187). In particular, the Sisters of St. Joseph, one of the oldest and most well renowned white orders in New Orleans, objected to the habits the SSF wanted to wear, stating that they were too similar in style and design to theirs and would result in racial misrecognition. It is through this example that we see how the veil could impose identity on nuns, though that categorization could often be false and blur racial and class lines. When Josephine Charles, one of the co-founders of the SSF with Delille and Mother Superior of the order, sent a young novice to the Archbishop in 1872 to model a veil, which Charles hoped the other Sisters would then be allowed to wear, Archbishop Perche mistook the novice for a white nun. When he realized his mistake he became angry, threw the nun out of the doorway, and became verbally abusive. After this incident, Mother Josephine was again forced to rely on Father Raymond for help and by the end of the year, the order was allowed by the church to wear its first blessed religious habit. However, it was this legitimation of the order that made the Sisters targets of violence. Fessenden writes, “Once dressed in their habits, the sisters confronted taunts and insults, including being pushed from sidewalks... These abuses may have been perpetrated by racist white Catholics as well as by Protestants eager in their anti-Catholicism to prove their ‘Americanness’ in culturally Latin New Orleans” (188). I argue that these abuses came as a result of the demand for classification, as there was such resistance in nineteenth-century New Orleans to deeming the SSF a legitimate religious order, largely because of the cultural perception that Creole women could not possibly separate themselves from the sexual culture in the city.

The induction of the veil for the sisters of the SSF becomes more complex when considering the function of a veil and the effects that it achieves. Fessenden suggests reading the veil as both a physical garment and a “veil of race” (189). I see this as enacting a concept that DuBois would later discuss in his theory about the veil, though: “[the American Negro] simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (11). Here, though, that theory is applied more specifically to the racialized religious order. Instead of an inability by some (read white and European citizens) to see blacks as “American,” there is an inability by some to legitimize the SSF and see them as an authentic religious order because of the race of the sisters. Consequently, the SSF’s strong desire to be seen outside of what “white America” deems them to be is evident through the racial hierarchies that they attempt to impose within their order.

4.2 “Sister Josepha”

The history of the SSF is particularly relevant when considering Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s story, “Sister Josepha,” about a young (likely) Creole novitiate. Sister Josepha, also called Camille, was given to the convent, du Sacre Coeur, as a young orphan fifteen years earlier. The reader sees Camille, now eighteen, struggle with the confinement of the convent- the social restrictions within the convent, the hierarchy amongst the sisters, and the absence of a definite identity-throughout the story. A couple comes to the convent one afternoon, hoping to bring Camille home with them, but a quick judgment by Camille prevents this from happening. Dunbar-Nelson writes, “Untutored in worldly knowledge, [Camille] could not divine the meaning of the pronounced leers and admiration of her

physical charms which gleamed in the man's face, but she knew it made her feel creepy, and stoutly refused to go" (49). After this experience, Camille takes the veil and officially becomes a nun. It is during these times that she vacillates between emotions of entrapment and thankfulness for a place to reside, which flare when she meets eyes with a handsome young man during a church carnival one day. Plotting her ultimate escape from the convent to "rely on the mercies of the world to help her escape from this torturing life of inertia," Camille overhears two Sisters discuss the dangers she would face in the world as someone with no discernible nationality or identity (52). Thus, she decides to remain in the convent, to live unhappily forever.

There are many ways in which "Sister Josepha" bears resemblances to the history of the SSF and the risk of classifying the convent as a safe space comes to the forefront. The most obvious of these instances is the permeation of the convent walls by sexual predators. In this space, which is meant to be Camille's escape from the world, as the Sisters believe that she will be unable to exist outside the church walls, a "creepy" man is permitted to come inside. The church is a "paradoxical institution of refuge and repression," one which Josepha and the other sisters have naively classed as "safe" (West 15). Just as history cannot be erased from spaces, space can be eliminated of infiltration of harmful outside influences, illustrating why it is dangerous to think otherwise. Dunbar-Nelson uses the convent as a site of convergence between two worlds-sexual vice and European religion. Though the SSF was established to aid the poverty-stricken black population of New Orleans, the sexual history of the city links Creoles, and the SSF in particular, to sexual depravity and subordination. New Orleans sexual culture was largely founded upon the exploitation of Creole women through traditions like placage, quadroon

balls, and concubinage. The fact that the SSF comprised Creole women and that the order purchased an old quadroon ball hall, something I will discuss in more detail shortly, marks this convent as a site of confluence of cultural traditions, religious and sexual. The convent, then, stands an apt metaphor for Dunbar-Nelson to use in discussing spaces with multiple histories and meanings imposed upon them. Through the convent, she is able to talk about multiple cultural identity categories, as so many are mapped onto this space historically, racially, and sexually. Camille cannot exist free of sexual predators in the space outside the convent, as the Sisters make clear when discussing her, but even within the church boundaries, Camille becomes an object of sexual desire. The other Sisters even encourage the sexual exploitation of Camille. Despite this, the church is often denoted as a safe area by other characters in the story. Sister Francesca describes why it is best for Camille to remain at the convent, suggesting that it is a secure place for a young Creole woman without any protection outside the church walls. There is a danger in denoting the convent in this way, as it becomes clear throughout the story that the church walls are not invulnerable to sexual dangers.

The links to the SSF become stronger when read alongside the sentence, which states, “It was Camille this, Camille that; she was pretty, it was to be expected. Even Father Ray lingered longer in his blessing when his hands pressed her silky black hair” (49). Notably, Father Raymond was instrumental in attempting to bring black women with darker skin into the SSF and imposed his power as a white, male spiritual leader on the organization. It is likely not coincidence then that Dunbar-Nelson names the priest in her story Father Ray and aligns him with a lust for Camille’s “silky *black* hair” (49 emphasis mine). Father Raymond was connected, historically, with blackness and the

integration of darker skinned nuns into the SSF, thus Father Ray's predilection for and Dunbar-Nelson's specific mention of the blackness of Camille's hair seem to tie the two figures together. This represents yet another instance of the dangers of classifying this sacred space as secure or the naiveté in thinking that any space can be considered safe. It is vulnerable to an imposition of power by white male leaders onto the Sisters and nuns of the convent. Now the convent acts as a space that becomes threatened by sexual predation largely based on racial makeup. Bernice Johnson Reagon's metaphor of the "barred room" of the identity category "woman" comes to mind here. She describes a place of refuge and solidarity but also of vulnerability when she says, "Sometimes you get comfortable in your little barred room, and you decide you in fact are going to live there and carry out all your stuff in there" (358). As soon as this happens, though, you decide to let others into the room and "the room don't feel like the room anymore. And it ain't home no more. It is not a womb no more. And you can't feel comfortable no more" (359). The room, or the convent in "Sister Josepha," still operates within a larger system that one cannot easily challenge from within the room.

In addition to the categorization of the church as safe space, the characters in "Sister Josepha" are constantly concerned with ascribing meaning and labels to other spheres and identities. For instance, Camille, at several points in the story, codes the "outside world" as caring and safe. She sees the convent as confining, describing it as a "home of self-repression and retrospection" (52). In initially coding the outside world in such a way, Camille shows her naiveté and fails to recognize the dangers of marking it as safe. For Camille, the way that she labels various spaces shifts throughout the story. When she feels that outside forces are sexually exploitative, she turns to the convent,

failing to acknowledge the same sexual exploitation lying there. When she feels that the convent is dull and restraining, though she never deems it unsafe, Camille longs to escape to an outside world that she incorrectly feels will have mercy on her. In deeming various spheres as caring and safe, Camille demonstrates her inability to perceive the dangers awaiting her in these spaces and the blind faith she's placed in the cultural spheres.

Despite that, she is the character who seems to demand classification the most. Dunbar-Nelson writes, "In a flash she realized the deception of the life she would lead, and the cruel self-torture of wonder at her own identity. Already, as if in anticipation of the world's questionings, she was asking herself, 'Who am I? What am I?'" (53).

Classification of her own identity evades yet preoccupies Camille and the other characters for much of the story, but during the instances when she is assigned a particular identity, Camille is put at risk of sexual and hierarchical dangers. When others align her with Creole qualities, through signifiers such as tropical and dusky-eyed, Camille is put in a position of sexual prey, conjuring associations with the placage tradition prevalent in New Orleans at the time. At other times, when others classify Camille as a part of the convent, often as a favored member, she incurs the jealousy and resentment of the other girls in the order. Thus, when Camille becomes aligned with a specific identity, usually not of her own doing, she becomes the subject of the dangers associated with classification in Dunbar-Nelson's work.

Because sexual exploitation is a theme that runs throughout "Sister Josepha," a brief explanation of the placage tradition and sexual culture of New Orleans will help to understand the ways in which these ideas function in Dunbar-Nelson's work. In her introduction to *The Great Southern Babylon*, Alecia Long discusses the reputation that

New Orleans held between 1865-1920 for its sexual licentiousness and market of prostitution. In parsing out this reputation and showing the ways that space was delineated to both expand and partition off this sex culture, she discusses the notion that the placage tradition is very much associated with this New Orleans culture. This convention has been examined in several ways, with some scholars emphasizing the degradation and racial implications of it, while others tend to focus on the financial and social benefits of the arrangement. Thadious Davis defines placage in the following way, stating:

The idea of 'place' in particular becomes most slippery in the convention of placage, the practice of 'placing' women Creoles of Color with Creole men, specifically wealthy and white men of European extraction, but rarely those of 'American' background. The idea of placing the women, establishing them by contract for financial security with a 'protector' who provided a house and money, in and of itself involves a destabilizing of the marriage contracts within the Catholic Church, and it also undermines racial separation by making a recognized space within the community for interracial liaisons and mixed-race offspring (213).

Oftentimes, these relationships are depicted in literature and scholarship as temporary, lasting only until the white man has found a white wife. At this point in time, the Creole placee is then abandoned. Again, this is a notion that is contested, as many of these placage relationships, historically, lasted years or decades, and as Davis points out, there is a degree of financial stability and property ownership for the Creole women involved. What is typically agreed upon, however, is that this is a racialized system of sexual exchange in which Creole women are the targets.

Significantly, the SSF, in 1881, recognized that its population was increasing and they purchased the Orleans Ballroom in the French Quarter of the city to act as their primary space. "The Orleans ballroom had been the site of the notorious 'quadron balls,'

where Henriette Delille and other women in her circle had earlier in the century been expected to seduce the white men who would keep them in the relative luxury of placage” (Fessenden 192). In the context of my larger argument, I read this to mean that by purchasing a site that used to have such significance in the ways that New Orleans racialized sexual culture operated, the SSF took a large step in re-appropriating the violent history and meaning of that space. What was a site of sexual exchanges was re-classified as a space for the same Creole women who would have been subjected to this sexual culture to now escape and remain in a “safe space.” However, “Sister Josepha” complicates our view of this attempt to re-categorize a space, as it shows that there is still a danger in this classification. The site of the convent, though no longer demarcated for the quadroom hall purposes, is not impervious to those sexual impulses and exchanges. As scholars have noted, Dunbar-Nelson imbued her stories with history from the areas about which she writes. By setting “Sister Josepha” in a convent, Dunbar-Nelson is nodding to this attempt to re-appropriate history, while simultaneously acknowledging that it is impossible to erase a racialized history entirely from a space. In fact, any imposition of space effects a kind of violence and produces a vulnerability to violence.

4.3 Tony’s Wife

In another show of this re-appropriation of various conventions, places, and categorizations, Dunbar-Nelson writes “Tony’s Wife,” about a European couple in New Orleans. In this story, Tony, an Italian immigrant living in New Orleans, owns a shop that his nameless “wife,” a German immigrant, helps to run. Tony is cruel towards this woman and their relationship revolves about the economic prosperity of their store. Tony’s wife is described as constantly knitting and her expertise in this field is valued

and sought out by neighbors. In the story Tony falls ill and becomes physically immobile. When the doctor visits he tells Tony's wife that Tony will not survive, as he has nothing to live for, and at this point Dunbar-Nelson makes it clear that Tony and his "wife" were never officially married. She begs him to take the sacrament of marriage before his death, which he stubbornly refuses, as he does not want her to inherit any of his money. Instead, Tony's brother, John, comes to town and inherits all of Tony's money, leaving the woman to fend for herself.

There are multiple strands at work here, the first of which is the way that classifying herself as Tony's wife (as well as having this moniker imposed upon her) and entering into what seems to be a safe relationship ultimately turns out to be harmful for the woman. Interestingly, though she is classified as Tony's wife, she is simultaneously unable to achieve classification as Tony's wife through him. The institution of marriage is never realized and Tony's wife is unable to benefit financially at the end of the story. Additionally, Tony physically abuses her, and Dunbar-Nelson writes, "He hated her in a lusty, roaring fashion, as a healthy beefy boy hates a sick cat and torments it to madness. When she displeased him, he beat her and knocked her frail form on the floor" (7). Even in enacting the sacrament of marriage, without the contractual aspect of it, physical security for her does not exist. Thus, the classification of this relationship as a marriage, whether or not it was officially so, shows the ways in which there is a violence involved in attempts to categorize.

One aspect worth noting about "Tony's Wife" is that there are a large number of ways in which the relationship mirrors the conventions of concubinage. Long describes concubinage as "living with a man in a committed relationship without the benefit of

marriage” (10). The convention of concubinage typically took place between a white European man and a female Creole of color. In the following pages, I argue that Dunbar-Nelson subverts this and uses these two European characters to mirror the concubine tradition as a way to de-exoticize this notion and appeal to a Northern audience. As Lee-Keller writes, Dunbar-Nelson frequently attempted to “communicate intimate stories about New Orleans to Northerners that demystified New Orleans and showed New Orleanians as unique Americans, but US-Americans nonetheless” (269). Dunbar-Nelson’s language throughout the stories suggests that, as she writes things like, “His English was unaccented,” suggesting that this convention is not limited to specific races, but functions across ethnic and national lines as well (6). While we see Dunbar-Nelson exposing her audiences to a Creole version of Americanization in other stories, she does the opposite here, showing her audience a European version of a Creole-linked tradition. Ultimately, Dunbar-Nelson comments on the classification of concubinage as something solely located in New Orleans among white men and Creole women, suggesting that there it is reductive to categorizing it in that way. In certain southern spaces there is a romanticization of certain conventions and exploitations of black women, as shown through the idea of concubinage, but by subverting the race and ethnicity of these characters Dunbar-Nelson is showing the dangers in this reduction. The more naturalistic and less romanticized version of a convention similar to concubinage located in “Tony’s Wife” appears to be an attempt to draw the attention of a Northern audience to this particular violence.

Alecia Long details the concubine relationship between Joseph Mathis and Adeline Stringer in late nineteenth-century New Orleans and while this relationship is not

the only one of its kind, it is documented in court records. There are several similarities between the Stringer-Mathis relationship and the relationship Dunbar-Nelson depicts in “Tony’s Wife,” which may not have been coincidental, considering the attention that the *Stringer v. Mathis* court case received in 1887. Several parallels stand out. First, Joe Mathis and Adeline Stringer were involved for nearly thirty years and upon Joe’s death, Adeline was provided with no financial security. Much like John in “Tony’s Wife,” Joe Mathis’s brother, Louis, inherited Joe’s money. Additionally, Long notes that Joe owned a house at 14 Dryades Street, which spatially places Joe Mathis and Adeline Stringer within four blocks of Prytania Street, where Dunbar-Nelson locates “Tony’s Wife.” These physical places are important, as they represent the changing attitudes toward concubinage over the latter half of the nineteenth-century. While prostitution remained popular in New Orleans, “white men and women of color who engaged in committed relationships found themselves subject to rising social disapproval and the passage of laws that sought specifically to end the existence of concubinage across the color line as the nineteenth century came to an end” (Long 11). As a result of this disapproval, respectable people who entered into these relationships had to relocate more and more to less respectable buildings or neighborhoods. Dunbar-Nelson identifies Tony and his wife as the lowliest residents in their neighborhood who had “two tumble-down shop” (21). Though these links between the case Long describes and “Tony’s Wife” do not mirror each other and are certainly not supposed to be the same instance, the similarities between them would have likely evoked the notion of concubinage in the minds of Dunbar-Nelson’s readers.

From the beginning of the story, Dunbar-Nelson makes it clear that Tony's wife is the more dependent of the two people in the relationship. She isn't identified by her own name in the story, as people refer to her only as Tony's wife. Within the first several sentences, Dunbar-Nelson intimately links this couple to economy and *lagniappe*, mentioning "the dingy nickel" that a young girl gives her to contribute to the profit from Tony's store and the "pink candy fish for *lagniappe*" which Tony's wife gives the girl in return (6). In making this connection, Dunbar-Nelson is drawing parallels to the exchange of goods and economic means. *Lagniappe* is a French term that refers to the exchange of gifts as a show of generosity. Though this exchange takes place between Tony's wife and a young Jewish girl, the act of exchange and economic means is planted in the reader's mind from the beginning. Because the concubine convention is so intimately connected with economic dependence, it is hard to ignore the fact that Tony is the primary earner and sole supporter of his wife in the story. Ultimately, when he refuses to marry her, she is left destitute. This seems to reflect the ways in which white men often financially supported their Creole mistresses. These Creole women depended on these white men and sometimes, when the white men found a white woman to marry, the Creole women were left without any sort of financial means, as that money went to other "legitimate" family members, like John in the story or Louis in *Mathis v Stringer*. This also carried over to offspring from these relationships, who were left without any sort of inheritance from their fathers. However, some scholars argue that it was precisely this tradition that enabled Creole women, at the expense of social acceptance, to maintain a middle-class lifestyle and achieve some semblance of economic security while the relationship was going on.

In “Tony’s Wife,” this relationship is based on economic security. Tony’s wife remains with him, despite the physical abuse and the “ringless hands,” because she is aware that she will be unable to support herself otherwise. Tony himself acknowledges this as one of his anxieties as he states, “Think I’m a-going to give you a chance to grab my money now? Let me die and go to hell in peace” (10). It is Tony’s “lack of race pride...in selecting his German spouse” that equates him with the white European men who typically participate in concubinage (9). As I previously stated, the views on concubinage shifted throughout the nineteenth century and Dunbar-Nelson depicts a cultural marginalization for characters trapped between these shifting political ideologies. The postbellum sexual culture saw stricter laws enforced regarding relationships of romantic and sexual natures. Tony and his “wife” were caught in a marginal space between these shifting political views of cultural sexual practices.

After Tony’s brother, John, comes to New Orleans and inherits Tony’s money upon his death, “Tony’s wife, since she was not his wife at all, [was] sent forth in the world penniless, her worn fingers clutching her bundle of clothes in nervous agitation, as though they regretted the time lost from knitting” (10). Knitting and sewing frequently appear in this story and Lee-Keller discusses this task at great length in her dissertation. Lee-Keller focuses on immigrant labor, specifically, immigrant women who sewed for a living. Because this was not deemed a respectable means of supporting oneself, these women did not often live up to and meet typical middle-class standards (278). Lee-Keller identifies the ways in which casual prostitution, though the women involved would refer to it by no such name, became a way for these immigrant needle workers to mimic or live out notions of a middle class lifestyle” (279). Though this is by no means a clear

reflection of Tony's wife's situation, as the two have a common law marriage, there is a way that the similarities to concubinage and the ties to sewing conjure images of an exchange of sexual favors for financial stability.

Ultimately, Dunbar-Nelson paints what are typically viewed as sacred spaces and institutions as spheres that necessitate questioning. For instance, much like in "Tony's Wife," the story "Miss Sophie" shows a wedding ring, something meant to signify security, as fatal in the end. This convention is common within Dunbar-Nelson's stories and she is constantly forcing her reader to classify spaces and institutions themselves, only to then show how those classifications are dangerous. Kristina Brooks intuits this and writes, "By forcing the reader to recognize his or her own complicity with maintaining or respecting boundaries based on ethnic, racial, class, and regional identity, Dunbar-Nelson points the way towards demythologizing the natural status of any such identity category" (3-4). Similarly, forcing the reader to recognize that cultural institutions act not only as places of refuge, but as spaces in which female characters become prey, enables Dunbar-Nelson to depict the ways in which history and race are never fully erased from a space, thus the political and hegemonic implications that accompany race in the New Orleans setting infiltrate these spaces supposedly free of them.

Dunbar-Nelson's collection of New Orleans stories, *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, stands as an example of fiction that worked to disrupt national positions on local color writing, racial formation, and Creole identities, through movement around cityscapes. Her characters struggle with the influence of Jim Crow ideology on New Orleans and a limiting definition of what it meant to be American in a space so intricately connected to the rest of the world. We see them constantly moving through landscapes, shifting and reconciling, shedding and reassuming, their racial and ethnic identities, usually to no avail. This failure tends to come from the lack of realization by these characters that other people and places can impose an identity on them. Often, they attempt self-classification, but disregard cultural institutions and how these institutions respond to varying cultural identities. It is this disregard or naiveté that leaves Creoles, usually Creoles of color, marginalized. They are unable to achieve any sense of belonging to either a black or white sphere. As Fetterley and Pryse write, "To be in the 'world,' one must be 'raced,' and in a world where so much depends upon race, not having a specific racial identity may be the worst oppression of all" (284). The stories in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* address this oppression and then offer ways to counter it. They propose new or different ways to interpret Americanness. They depict the harm that accompanies a limited view of racial categorization. They show the influence of the law on labeling groups of people. Ultimately, Dunbar-Nelson's work stands as a challenge to the influence of Jim Crow ideology on the South and the common notion of Americanness as insular during the nineteenth century.

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