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**CONTEMPORARY REVALUATION OF SOUTHERN LOCAL
COLOR FICTION**

**PŘEHODNOCENÍ LITERATURY MÍSTNÍHO KOLORITU
AMERICKÉHO JIHU Z HLEDISKA SOUČASNÉ LITERÁRNÍ TEORIE**

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Declaration: I declare that the following dissertation thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature indicated.

Prague, 27 April 2009

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dagmar Repová". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, decorative flourish at the end.

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Contemporary Revaluation of Southern Local Color Fiction

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I. INTRODUCTION: American Women Writers' Regionalism as a Genre that Represents and Culturally Codifies Forms of Difference

1.1 Introduction: Goals and Organizing Principles

The objective of this study is to offer an examination of the works of Kate Chopin and Grace King, representatives of the genre of Louisiana "Local Color" fiction, and to introduce a new perspective on their fiction that is equally distanced from the national/local dichotomy and the feminist interpretative framework. This study interrogates selected aspects of the category of race in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King in order to reclaim the importance of race for regional Aesthetics and to offer an alternative view on the existing interpretations that emphasize the feminist themes of their fiction and, ultimately, to expand such interpretations. A replacement of the existing theoretical frameworks applied to the works of these two authors by postcolonial theory offers a new perspective on the category of race in their fiction without reducing its complexity and interconnection with the category of gender and region. As a result, the insight into the formation of region-specific racial knowledge testifies to the complexity of the issue of race within the framework of Local Color fiction. The focal point of this examination is the representation of racial stereotypes in the fiction of Chopin and King.

The tragic mulatta stereotype and the mammy stereotype, in particular, enlighten the fundamental relationship between race and desire - the symptomatic concern of

postcolonial theory. Moreover, revisiting the existing scholarship on Kate Chopin, Grace King, and other representatives of Louisiana Local Color fiction, such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Sallie Rhett Roman, this re-examination of Louisiana Local Color indirectly illuminates certain aspects of the process of canonization of Chopin's *The Awakening* and sheds light on the role of the category of race in this process.

The outlined objective is reached primarily by examination of Kate Chopin's short stories from her collections *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897) with references to *The Awakening* (1899) and Grace King's collection of short stories *Balcony Stories* (1893), a novella *Monsieur Motte* (1888), and collection of partially autobiographical stories *Tales of a Time and Place* (1892). The parallel examination of Chopin's and King's fiction, with additional references to the work of their contemporary Louisiana women writers, such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson (*The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories*, 1899) and Sallie Rhett Roman (*Tonie*, 1900 and *Folette of Timbalier Island*, 1900) does not principally attempt to compare or contrast their works. Instead, it aims to address the parallel issues of race in the Louisiana Local Color fiction and reclaim the importance of race in this genre by refocusing on the representations of racial stereotypes and their consequent interpretation within the regional/national framework as well as their interpretation and re-interpretation in the nineteenth and twentieth century, respectively.

In order to establish its scope and subject the theoretical framework of this study includes feminist criticism, which reclaimed and canonized Kate Chopin's *The*

Awakening as an examination of female Otherness, by referring to the works of such critics as Elaine Showalter, Helen Taylor, Michelle Birnbaum, Anna Shannon Elfenbein and others. Theories of regionalism, introduced primarily by Marjorie Pryse, Judith Fetterley and Donna Campbell, illuminate another aspect of the interrogation of racial knowledge and stereotypes in Louisiana Local Color fiction. The crux of the examination of Chopin's and King's fiction is the application of Bhabha's theory of stereotype and mimicry, Said's definition of local (racial) knowledge, Patricia Yaeger's study of neglect and throwaway bodies, and Robert Young's examination of colonialism as the desiring machine. As a result of this examination, the fetishization of the black body, *i.e.*, the fear of the racial Other¹ and a coexistent desire projected towards the body of the tragic mulatta (and the mammy) is elucidated in its fully paradoxical nature of stereotype, defined by Bhabha as not only a confluence of knowledge and power but also fantasy and pleasure, which ultimately reveals not only the dominant power of those who create and circulate those stereotypes, but also their anxieties and fears. Such an examination undoubtedly offers fertile ground for re-interpretations of the category of race in regionalist fiction that extend beyond the framework of existing criticism.

This study is divided into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the objective and the scope of examination and outlines the primary and secondary sources,

¹ This study expands the existing examinations of the encounter with the "Other" that exist on many levels: ontological (Emmanuel Lévinas), linguistic (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari), gender-based (Judith Butler), and cultural (Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, etc.), by interrogating the category of the racial Other in Louisiana Local Color fiction. Furthermore, this study traces the formation of racial stereotypes in regionalist fiction that are formed in response to such Otherness.

general organizing principles, and theoretical framework. The second chapter examines the status of regional writing and addresses the role of regional Aesthetics in the formation of racial knowledge while drawing on the works of such theorists of regional literature as Marjorie Pryse, Judith Fetterley, and Donna Campbell. The central part of this study, the third chapter entitled “Reinterpretation of the Tragic Mulatta Stereotype”, interrogates the category of race in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King in an attempt to reclaim the importance of race for regional Aesthetics. Furthermore, it attempts to offer an alternative view on the existing interpretations that emphasize the feminist themes of their fiction and, ultimately, to expand such interpretations. The analysis of this chapter focuses on the interrogation of local epistemology of race, *i.e.*, the production of knowledge about race as it is anchored in the Louisiana region, through the lens of postcolonial theory by situating the examination of the tragic mulatta stereotype within the theoretical frameworks of Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, Edward Said and Patricia Yaeger. In particular, by applying Bhabha’s theory of stereotype this examination helps to demonstrate the social and racial hierarchies of the Louisiana region outside the virgin/whore dichotomy that is typically used for the interpretation of racial and gender stereotypes in nineteenth-century Louisiana regionalist fiction. Moreover, the simultaneous fear and desire toward the racial Other in the fiction of Chopin and King becomes evident. The following chapter offers an additional perspective on the region-specific formation of racial knowledge by examining the contours of another stereotype – the mammy stereotype. Within the national discourse, this stereotype has had clear anti-abolitionist implications, yet within the Southern discourse the mammy stereotype

becomes a complex representation of double sexual codes and the resulting paradoxical definitions of black womanhood and motherhood. The controlling representations of the mammy figure, which include the category of the grotesque, the masculine, as well as the category of surrogate motherhood, further contribute to the region-specific race representations. To conclude, this study illuminates the importance of this innovative approach to the genre of Louisiana Local Color that allows for reinterpretation of racial stereotypes outside the restrictive theoretical framework of regionalist fiction (defined in opposition to national fiction) and feminist theory, and identifies its paradoxical global meanings.

1.2 Motivation: Quest for a Reconsideration of Difference

During the past four decades regional writing has become the subject of widespread critical rediscovery. An effervescence of theories of regionalism, of regional(ist) studies, and of “new regionalism” testifies to this phenomenon. Many literary critics, for instance Michael Kowalewski, have asked the following question: “Why has region [so far] been neglected as a critical category?”² Perhaps the answer to this question can be found if we begin to disclose the complexity of levels of regional identity defined not only in opposition to the national framework, but also in relation to the region’s minority groups.

² Kowalewski, Michael. “Writing in Place: The New American Regionalism.” *American Literary History* 6.1 (Spring, 1994), p. 174.

As a result of the primary tension between the global and local frameworks, literary regionalism resists the established critical categories and represents a Janus-faced category. Furthermore, the intriguing coexistence of the nineteenth-century interpretative framework of regionalist fiction, be it Louisiana Local Color, New England fiction or fiction of the Old Southwest, and its twentieth-century re-interpretation establishes a potential for exposing regional Aesthetics and its underlying paradoxes.

In particular, Louisiana Local Color is infused with the unique regional identity of Louisiana, which is underscored by its specific relation to the rest of the South that can be defined in geographical, political and cultural terms. Many would agree with Suzanne Disheroon-Green that Louisiana “has long been considered a strange and mysterious place, home to gumbo, voodoo, bayous, and French Creoles [and] in many ways a region as foreign to the Southern culture with which it is most closely associated as the South is to the larger United States.”³ The idea of the South as a homogeneous region is further undermined by Louisiana regionalist fiction due to its portrayals of stereotyped (and often sentimentalized) localized characters, speech patterns, and a regional landscape, the lattermost of which later became its hallmark. Such a regional perspective is apparent across the spectrum of Southern regionalist fiction since the publication of the (Virginia) plantation novel of John Pendleton Kennedy in 1832 up to the Southern “domestic” fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King of the *fin de siècle*

³ Disheroon-Green, Suzanne. “Romanticizing a Different Lost Cause: Regional Identities in Louisiana and the Bayou Country.” *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*. Ed. Charles L. Crow. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, p. 307.

Louisiana. In the context of Louisiana regionalist fiction, the portrayals of romanticized myths of the valor and pride of the Creoles and the portrayals of benevolent white paternalism of the *Ancient Régime* served as devices supporting the unique nature of Louisiana's regional perspective.

Apart from pathos-infused exaggerations of the Lost Cause, which support the "mythologies of the South",⁴ the most common rhetorical device frequently used to romanticize the *Old South* was a specific treatment of slavery: the institution of slavery, one of the constitutive elements of the *Ancient régime*, was depicted as a form of benevolent white paternalism. It was inherent in the plantation romanticism that the slaves were routinely referred to as "servants"; and as the following example from the *Swallow Barn; or a Sojourn in the Old Dominion* suggests, they were also portrayed as being expressly happy while performing their duties:

...at this spot, the family linen is usually spread out by some sturdy negro women, who *chant shrill ditties* over their wash tubs, and keep a spirited attack [...] upon sundry little besmirched and bow-legged blacks, that are continually making somersaults on the grass, or mischievously waddling across the clothes laid out to bleach.⁵

Clearly, such a perspective on race relations, where Frank Meriwether, the stereotyped master of the plantation, is convinced that the slaves are not merely content, but are

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 307

⁵ Kennedy, John Pendleton. *Swallow Barn; or, A Sojourn in the Old Dominion. The Literature of the American South*. Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998, p. 60.

happy under his dominion, significantly deviated from the dominant antebellum and postbellum national opinion on the race issue.

Moreover, as recent criticism shows, the examinations of the position that the genre of Local Color occupies in literary history lead to intense questioning of its relevance for the study of the reconstitution of the literary canon. As Barbara Ewell points out:

...the precipitous decline of these [local color] stories in the next [20th] century from extraordinary popularity to a “minor” place in literary history raises provocative questions about literary fashion, about shifting canons of taste and value, about definitions and persistence of genres, and about the cultural purposes literature serves.⁶

The resulting consensus is that the role of Local Color is not limited to the reiteration of nostalgic and sentimental stereotypes of the ante-bellum South and “nostalgic portraits of preindustrial rural communities and people...who seemed to have escaped the dubious improvements of a stronger and more integrated urban economy”⁷. Rather, it includes a genuine attempt to continue the search for “specifically ‘American’ literary expressions”⁸. With respect to this consensus, the interpretations of Local Color fictions are becoming more complex, as their traditional (and often formulaic) interpretations

⁶ Ewell, Barbara, C. and Menke Glenn, Pamela, eds. *Southern Local Color: Stories of Region, Race, and Gender*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002, p. xiv.

⁷ Foote, Stephanie. *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001, p. 3.

⁸ Ewell and Menke, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

are being displaced by interpretations, whose focal points include not only Local Color picturesqueness and dialects, but also race, gender, and social implications.

Having exposed the crucial underlying elements of Southern Local Color fiction, we may claim that the motivation behind the recent surge of critical interest in Chopin and King stems from the fact that regionalist or “Local Color” fiction is a genre especially interested in representing the non-normative communities and cultures to a national audience; and thus it is the most effective genre at discussing and mediating the place of the social and cultural difference itself. This approach to the Louisiana Local Color fiction has recently been advocated, by Barbara Ewell and Pamela Glenn Menke in these terms:

[W]hat also characterized local color was its interest in difference: not simply “realistic” portraits but portraits of some “other” places and experience, a role that the South – with its lively frontier humor traditions, racialized family structures, slaveholding rebel past, and renewed attractiveness both to tourists and investors - played like a natural.⁹

According to such an interpretation, regional writing is a genre dedicated to “culturalizing” and codifying all forms of difference and mediation between the non-normative (regional) and normative (national). In both Chopin and King, the represented difference is found especially within the realm of race, gender, (creole) culture and the Louisiana setting. In this context, the dedication of the Local Color fiction to the representation of difference strongly resonates with many contemporary

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii

social and literary theories, such as post-structuralism, feminism, queer studies, Orientalism and post-colonialism and their quest for a reconsideration of difference. To offer an example of literary analysis interpreting regionalism as a broad category of critique of the universal subject, we can quote, for instance, the following argument of Stephanie Foote, which appeared in “What Difference Does Regional Writing Make?”: “The project of mining regional writing for its representations of the ‘foreign’ or the ‘unAmerican’ suggests that one of the most important functions of regional writing was to rectify exclusion”.¹⁰ In other words, conceptual frameworks have been created to reconsider difference on many levels and it remains to be seen to what degree regionalist literature offers a similar reconsideration of difference (and minorities).

The focal point of the abovementioned theoretical approaches lies in their quest for equality for underprivileged categories and the exposition of their representation in society and literature with respect to the changing social and ideological emphases. Correspondingly, they reveal that aesthetic value ceases to be the sole criterion of a work of art, and that other extra-aesthetic rubrics, such as the political, the ideological, and the social bases for Aesthetics, are becoming relevant. In his book *The Rules of Art* in the chapter entitled “To Understand Understanding”, Pierre Bourdieu engages in an analysis of essence and illusion of the absolute artistic value and claims:

The experience of the work of art as immediately endowed with meaning and value is an effect of the harmony between the two aspects of the same historical institution, the cultivated habitus and the artistic field, which mutually ground each other. Given that the work of art does not exist as such,

¹⁰ Foote, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

meaning as an object symbolically endowed with meaning and value, unless it is apprehended by spectators possessing the aesthetic disposition and competence which it tacitly requires, one could say that it is the eye of the aesthete which constitutes the work of art – but only if one immediately remembers that it can only do so to the extent that it is itself the product of a long collective history, that is, of the progressive invention of the ‘connoisseur, and of a long individual history, that is, of prolonged exposure to the work of art. ¹¹

As a result of an equally innovative valorization resulting from the “collective history”, feminist interpretations have become the dominant mode of literary criticism aimed at the female writers of the *fin de siècle* American South. Traditional interpretations applied to Kate Chopin utilizing the pejorative category of “domestic fiction” or “popular women’s fiction” have thus become either obsolete, or they are “undergoing reexamination since it became clear they were used to bury much of value on specious assumptions.”¹² For instance, such critics as Elaine Showalter and Joanna Russ, who have been consistently undermining the myth of absolute (“normative”, “male”) Aesthetics, identified the category of the Other as the Feminine and focused on its representation in literature. Furthermore, Elaine Showalter considered *The Awakening* “a transitional female fiction of the *fin de siècle*, a narrative of and about the passage

¹¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 289.

¹² Lauter, Paul. “Caste, Class and Canon” *Feminisms: an Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Robyn R. Warhol, Diane Pierce Herndl. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991, p. 244.

from the homosocial women's culture and literature of the nineteenth century to the heterosexual fiction of modernism."¹³

From this perspective, it is becoming more and more obvious that the study of American regionalist literature, as a form of codification of (cultural and racial) difference, may provide insights of equal importance as the insights offered by other theoretical genres dedicated to the reconsideration of difference, such as feminism, queer studies, and post-colonialism. Queer studies, a theoretical category represented most avidly by Judith Butler, whose attempts to examine the encounter with the Otherness of a different "gender", draw primary attention to categories that are no longer traditional. Butler's attempt to attack the totalitarian dogmatism of the Normative acquires a brand new dimension. Butler's performative definition of gender, according to which the "regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies"¹⁴, poses new questions for the debate of gender, which is typically carried out in terms of constructivism or essentialism. Orientalism, in the works of Edward Said, also examines the encounter with the Other. Said's work reflects primarily on the relation between the Oriental and the Occidental in an attempt to reconsider the difference of the colonial Other. He is equally interested in the undermining of the totalitarian normativity of the general Orientalist attitude which, according to him:

¹³ Showalter, Elaine. „Chopin and American Women Writers.“ *Kate Chopin. The Awakening: an Authoritative Text, Biography, Contexts, Criticism*. Ed. Margo Culley. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. Second Edition, 1994, p. 314.

¹⁴ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 2.

...shares with magic and with mythology the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are because they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter.¹⁵

Therefore, Said identifies the definition of the field of Orientalism as the underlying problem of the academic discipline of post-colonial studies. Attacking the post-colonial discourse strategies for their utilization of generalizations and representative figures, Said accentuates the parallels between knowledge and power in the Occidental study of the Orient. He clearly recognizes the danger of infusing the definition of the Other with propaganda by defining the oriental in opposition to the occidental.

Within the context of post-colonial theory, Said's theses were developed (and partially refuted) by Homi K. Bhabha who, being influenced by poststructuralist theorists such as Derrida and Foucault, focused on the deconstruction of the discourse between the colonizer versus the colonized. Cognizant of the ideological misuse of stereotypes by the colonizers, Bhabha focuses on the study of stereotypes. His definition of stereotypes is rather sophisticated and he refuses the definition of stereotype as a straightforward tool of power and manipulation used by the colonizer. The most interesting aspect of his definition of stereotypes is his critique of the "limiting and traditional reliance on the stereotype as offering, at any one time, a secure

¹⁵ Said, Edward. "Imaginative Geography and its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental" in: *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 1978, p. 70.

point of identification.”¹⁶ Furthermore, he argues that a stereotype is “a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive, and demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives, but that we change the object of analysis itself.”¹⁷ Such a paradoxical notion of stereotype foreshadows Bhabha’s accurate observations of the acknowledgement of interactions between stereotype and identity that can be further explored in the context of regionalism. The interdisciplinary terrain of post-colonialism and its relation to regionalism has recently been explored by Desai Gaurav and Nair Supriya who realize that: “Postcolonial scholarship in its contemporary guise [...] is enabled by the institutional rise of literary theory in the Western world. The (post)structuralist shift from questions of literariness to questions of textuality associated with thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault.”¹⁸ Therefore, it is evident that the recurring theme of the aforementioned theoretical studies opposes any marginalization of forms of Otherness; and it is equally evident that the major problem of these theories, be it feminism, queer-studies or post-colonial studies, is the problem of being able to fully understand the Other and to engage the Other. Since regional writing is a genre especially interested in representing the non-normative communities and cultures to a national audience, Louisiana Local Color literature is an example of the exploration of the epistemology of the Other. Via the prism of the abovementioned theories, the theoretical articulation of

¹⁶ Bhabha, Homi, K. “The Other Question” in: *Locations of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁸ Gaurav, Desai and Nair, Supriya, eds. *Postcolonialisms. An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005, p. 3.

difference and its valorization can be examined with special attention to the creation of categories of racial stereotypes in this genre.

The most relevant stereotypes for the study of the racial landscape of Louisiana Local Color, with emphasis on the work of Kate Chopin and Grace King, are the following: the tragic mulatta stereotype and the mammy stereotype. Despite the universal reluctance of literary critics to address the issue of race in Chopin's fiction, in which Per Seyersted "found evidence that Kate Chopin stereotypes and demeans blacks"¹⁹, the importance of race in regionalist fiction is beginning to be reclaimed. Joyce Dyer identifies Toni Morrison's publication of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* in 1992 as the principal impulse for the refusal of sentimentalist racial stereotypes and for the reinterpretation of racial anxieties in regionalist fiction:

It seems to me, having read Morrison as well as other Chopin critics who have read her too, that race only appears to be insignificant to Kate Chopin, a privileged woman. In fact, it is on her mind always and has a lasting effect on her art and her life. It is an *inevitable source of anxiety*.²⁰

Such a new theoretical context invites reexamination of the racial anxieties that are manifest in Louisiana Local Color fiction, particularly in the form of "underscored omissions"²¹ and repressive (racial) stereotypes.

¹⁹ Dyer, Joyce. "Reading *The Awakening* with Toni Morrison." *The Southern Literary Journal* 35.1 (Fall 2002), p. 140.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140, emphasis added.

²¹ Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 6.

This interpretative framework, *i.e.*, the attention to the racial anxieties in the form of underscored omissions and stereotypes, strongly resonates with Edward Said's examination of Orientalism. Said realizes that within the field of Orientalism the Orientalist codifications are imposed on the true Orient. He claims that: "This whole didactic process is neither difficult to understand nor difficult to explain. One ought again to remember that all cultures impose corrections upon raw reality, changing it from free-floating objects into units of knowledge [...]." ²² Said also realizes, that the study of the Other has not only metaphysical and ethical implications, but also epistemological implications. His utilization of the phrase "second-order knowledge" describes the construction of the oriental as:

Unshakable abstract maxims about the 'civilization' he [the Orientalist] has studied; rarely were Orientalists interested in anything except proving validity of these musty 'truths' by applying them, without great success, to uncomprehending, hence degenerate, Natives. ²³

Despite the fact that the re-examination of racial roles, anxieties, and stereotypes in Louisiana Local Color has so far been underestimated, the importance of regionalist fiction in the creation of a "national" literature has long been recognized. Stephanie Foot, among others, argues in *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* how regionalist fiction foregrounds marginalized groups in a presumptively unified nation:

²² Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 1978, p. 67.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Because it is a form that works to preserve local customs, local accents, and local communities, regional writing is a form *about* the representation of difference. As such, it offers critics a way to analyze one of the nineteenth century's most effective literary strategies for managing the conflicts between local and national identities.²⁴

Although regionalist fiction has played a critical role in the formation of a homogeneous nation, helping to establish continuous "democratic promise"²⁵ of the United States in the late 19th century, the underlying racial anxieties must be examined in order to assess its role outside the feminist interpretive framework established by critics, such as Elaine Showalter, Helen Taylor and Anna Shannon Elfenbein, who have elaborated these feminist reinterpretations.²⁶

²⁴ Foote, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁶ Cf. Showalter Elaine. "Chopin and American Women Writers" in: *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1991. Taylor Helen. *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Start, and Kate Chopin*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989. Elfenbein, Anna Shannon. "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: An Assault on Racial and Sexual Mythology." *Southern Studies* (Winter 1987): 304 - 312. Elfenbein, Anna Shannon. *Women on the Color Line. The Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989.

II. Theories of Difference: Revaluation of Southern Local Color Fiction

2.1 The South as the Other within the Context of American Psyche

The critical task of identifying the genre of Louisiana Local Color literature as a genre that represents and culturally codifies forms of difference soon encounters serious difficulty: the attempt to contextualize, without gross generalizations and simplification, the Otherness of the American South; and, subsequently, the Otherness of the *literature* of the American South.

The immense popularity of the Southern Local Color fiction and the postbellum surge of short stories written by such writers as George Washington Cable, Kate Chopin, and Grace King in the decades between 1880 and 1900 testified to the interest of the reading public in this genre.²⁷ Traditionally, this surge of popular interest in the Southern Local Color is interpreted as a result of the post-bellum nostalgia for the “Ole South”. Thus, the rise of local color fiction is typically connected to the enormous changes in the American national climate after the Civil War, and its main attraction for the readers is explained by the fact that it was generally apolitical and it offered localized characters, unusual region-specific speech patterns, and picturesque regional

²⁷ The following dates offer a brief chronology of the publication of the primary works of Louisiana Local Color fiction: George Washington Cable’s *Old Creole Days* was published in 1879 to be followed by his most popular novel *The Grandissimes* in 1880 (and revised in 1883), *Madame Delphine* in 1881, and *Dr. Sevier* in 1884. Motivated by Cable’s literary success, Grace King’s first successful story “Monsieur Motte” was published in 1886 and it was followed by her collection of short stories *Balcony Stories* in 1893; and Kate Chopin’s major work *The Awakening* was published in 1899.

landscape. Although the statements about the apolitical nature of Local Color can be contested, it is the way Local Color fiction was presented and marketed to the readers.

In Louisiana, however, the growth of Local Color fiction was additionally motivated by more practical reasons, *i.e.*, by the strong demand of the national reading public. In opposition to the above stated argument about the nostalgic longing for the “Ole South”, this extensive interest in stories of sentimental regionalism did not stem solely from the Southerners who were longing for the *Ancient régime*. In fact, there was a strong demand for such stories from the North where “a firsthand account of a New Orleans, or any other Louisiana scene was a certain guarantee of success and high sales for a national magazine.”²⁸ As Amy Kaplan further distinguishes, the production of regional writers appeals especially to the urban middle-class readership because of the following reason:

This [urban middle-class] readership was solidified as an imagined community by consuming images of rural “others” as both a nostalgic point of origin and a measure of cosmopolitan development. By rendering social difference in terms of region, anchored and bound by separate spaces, more explosive social conflicts of class, race, and gender made contiguous by urban life could be effaced.²⁹

Therefore, it is not surprising that this national interest further motivated authors, such as Grace King, to imitate the success of George Washington Cable. (Although King’s attitude toward Cable’s work was rather hostile and she called his work “venomous

²⁸ Forkner, Ben, ed. *Louisiana Stories*. Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1990, p. 16.

²⁹ Kaplan, Amy. „Nation, Region, and Empire.“ *The Columbia History of the American Novel*. Ed. Elliot Emory. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 251.

fiction”, which was a statement fully corresponding to the prevalent attitude of the majority of Southerners towards Cable’s later work.) Since Northern readers craved the stories and news from the South, it simply became profitable to provide them with such news, and many authors consequently decided to do so.

With the Southern audience in mind, it is clear, why the authors of Local Color fiction were eager to employ the nostalgic tone, pay attention to regional dialects and the complicated caste system. Indeed, the reality of the Reconstruction period was too harsh to be employed in imaginative writing. Therefore, the fictional accounts of post-bellum Louisiana, as elsewhere, to an extent became apolitical and sentimental.

This chapter argues that what ultimately rendered the Local Color fiction popular and successful, with parallels drawn to the critical revival in contemporary literary studies, was the unquenchable desire of the Northern reading public to read these stories. What is the predominant motivation behind this desire? As Barbara Ewell states in her article devoted to the topic of re-viewing of the tradition of Louisiana women writers, the distinctive singularity of the South resulted in its usefulness as an imaginative space:

Being both part of America and safely separated in its margins, the South offered the nation an exaggerated image of many unacceptable attitudes that Americans disguised from themselves in more familiar environs...Louisiana mirrors the complex role that the South has played in the national consciousness. It, too, defines a space that is both psychic and geographic, a site, where the Other – of gender, race, religion,

sexuality, ethnicity is often more clearly demarcated than in the rest of America.³⁰

In order to determine the reasons why “the South” as a unified region, which was not sufficiently distinguishing between individual states, became a representation of the Other, it is necessary to emphasize the role of the South as the place where things impossible in the rest of the country were an everyday reality. Most prominently, it was the existence of the “peculiar institution” of slavery in the Southern states. In Louisiana, however, a unique form of Otherness was established by the additional factor of the strong Caribbean influence and the existence of multiplicity of cultures and languages in the 19th century. As Barbara Ewell points out: “The earliest writing was in French (and Spanish), and when English finally came to be the principal tongue in the mid-nineteenth century, the exotic flavors of Gallic and Caribbean culture lingered palpably.”³¹

The ultimate function of the South as the “Other place”, however, was not limited to the generalizations and myths that were projected on the South by the Northerners, as numerous as they may be. (This is undoubtedly the reason for the origination of the saying that the South has grown more myths than cotton). In fact, there is another crucial aspect of this definition of the South – the implied conclusion,

³⁰ Ewell, Barbara, C. “Introduction.” *Louisiana Women Writers. New Essays and a Comprehensive Bibliography*. Eds. Dorothy H. Brown and Barbara C. Ewell. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992, p. 9.

³¹ Ewell, Barbara C. “Louisiana, Literature of.” *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. Eds. Lucinda MacKethan and Joseph Flora. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002, p. 455.

that the Northerners constituted themselves as its opposite. Thus, the definition of the South as the Other place also carries strong moral connotations of “an ‘emotional idea’ of the remainder of a triumphantly superior America to both literally and figuratively beyond and without the ever-problematic South.”³² Put simply, the constant definition of the South as a place with a complicated caste-system and ever present racism, *etc.* served to reassure the North of its own moral superiority. As a result, even the Southern honor and noble chivalric code is ridiculed as foolish and sentimental in comparison with the Northern values, which are derived from trade rather than from agriculture as well as from progress rather than from tradition.

In the postbellum period, the process of turning the memory of the “Lost Cause” into the future of the New South required a redefinition of the South. Since many of the underlying concepts of the “Old South” were shattered by the Civil War and the ensuing Reconstruction period, the turn toward regionalism seemed to be a safe choice:

Regionalism offered one late nineteenth-century solution: by spacializing its internal differences, the nation created the illusion of resolving them. As the victorious North (more truly, the Northeast) reinforced its image as the center of American culture, the heritage and concerns of New England defined the true national legacy and the source of a reaffirmed national identity. The defeated South became the Other, as marginal to an imperial, masculinist U.S. identity as women were in a patriarchal culture, a point underscored by the South’s increasing feminized image and its parallel economic decline.³³

³² Cobb, James C. *Away Down South. A History of Southern Identity.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 2.

³³ Ewell, Barbara, C. and Menke Glenn, Pamela, eds. *Op. Cit.*, p. lxxv.

Thus, the newly assumed identity of the South reflects not only its geographical difference, but also the historical status of the Other of the Southern states within the nation. At this point of such contextualization of the South, the relation between history and identity becomes relevant.

Another aspect of the newly assumed identity of the South as a unified region and a social construct is the indispensable role of the North as a “negative reference point”. Such a definition was employed, among others, by James Cobb, a prominent historian of the American South in the following excerpt:

Instead of examining southern difference with ‘other regions’ [...] historians and other critical observers typically defined southern peculiarities solely in relation to ‘the North’....The inclination both to make invidious comparisons between the South and the North and to see the latter as the normative standard for the entire nation dated back well before the civil rights era to the earliest days of American independence.³⁴

Such a negative reference point, similar to a negative philosophical definition, allows for the possibility to define something without actually stating what that thing *is*, simply by stating what that thing is *not*. This mechanism of a negative reference point is not limited to the definition of the South. Indeed, there are other examples of such a creation of oppositions, for instance the American colonies in opposition to the United Kingdom or the “Occident” as opposed to the “Orient” utilized by Edward Said.

³⁴ Cobb, James C., *op. cit.* p. 2.

However, we must acknowledge the inherent function of the North in the attempts of the South to redefine itself and to be redefined after the Civil War.³⁵

Although there are numerous relevant issues for the definition of the South as the Other of the United States, such as the exclusion of black people from this definition, the phenomenon of the fictionalizing of history (both by the South and by the North), the nature of perception versus reality, and distinction between identity and cliché, the function of the North as the supreme national identity remains central.

Inarguably, the South, as a region, although it is a problematic social concept, is central to the fiction of Chopin and King, who are both considered regionalist or Local Color writers. The importance of region and its role in the definition of racial and gender-based roles therefore needs to be an essential part of the reinterpretation of the works of both of these authors. As a result of the application of the regional lens, we shall be able to pose interesting questions regarding the distinction between stereotypes and the perception of reality. Furthermore, the role of region as a modifier of stereotypes shall invite questions how the application of identical feminist perspectives on Chopin and King results in different conclusions on the basis of regional variations and differences between King, a New Orleans native, and Chopin, born in St. Louis, Missouri and later making her entrance into the Creole community with her marriage to Oscar Chopin.

³⁵ Cf. Grant, Susan Mary. *North over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era*. Kansas: Lawrence, 2000.

2.2 *Status of Regional Writing*

The theme of the importance of place and region in literature is one of the central themes for contemporary literary studies in general.³⁶ The history and theory of regionalism in the United States has become the subject of many volumes, the most conclusive one being *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*³⁷. This volume focuses on issues of regionalism, both historical and contemporary, and their relevance for the study of the categories of race and gender, but also for the exploration of notions of the frontier and the city within the literary framework. Offering a sweeping collection of critical essays examining regionalism, this volume is not limited to literature of the “traditional regions”, such as the South, the Midwest, and the Northeast. Instead, it includes texts defining such diverse and untraditional literary regions as Los Angeles or Hawai’i.

Despite the seemingly straightforward geographical categorization in various anthologies, the status of regionalist literature and its categorization remains problematic. There are rather widespread critical debates about the reputation of regionalist literature - especially so about the regionalist literature of the South of the United States and its representative, usually female, authors. Moreover, the disputes about the status of the regionalist literatures of United States inform the flux of the

³⁶ Cf. Steiner, Martin and Modale, Clarence. *Region and Regionalism in the United States. A Source Book for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988.

³⁷ Crow, Charles L., ed. *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

definition of regionalist literature *per se* and its resonance with the label of Local Color literature.

Historically speaking, the representatives of regionalism were such (male) authors as Mark Twain, whose work closely related to the Mississippi, Robert Frost and his reflections of New England, or Bret Harte and his stories of the American West while authors associated with the label of Local Color were primarily the following (female) authors: Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Kate Chopin. The historical aspect of the distinction between regionalism and local color, as it is examined by James Cox in “Regionalism: A Diminished Thing”³⁸ is, however, being replaced by novel approaches. In contemporary literary study the tendency to reinterpret the category of Local Color was motivated primarily by the feminist turn in the critical theory of regionalism. Consequently, the debates of the regional and cross-regional contexts resulted in the surge of critical interest in the study of regionalism and the role of region in fiction in general.

The definition of “regionalist” literature and Local Color literature is the subject of the work of many contemporary literary critics (and not exclusively feminist theorist), such as Marion Montgomery, Marjorie Pryse, Judith Fetterley, Barbara Ewell, and Donna Campbell. However, there is still no conclusive consensus on the definition of these literary categories and their conclusive denotations and connotations.

³⁸ Cf. Cox, James M. „Regionalism: A Diminished Thing“. *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. Ed. Elliot Emory. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988: 761 -784.

Marion Montgomery, a profound critic of the present-day American culture has devoted several volumes to Southern topics, for instance: *Eudora Welty and Walter Percy: The Concept of Home in their Lives and Literature*³⁹, *John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate: At Odds about the Ends of History and the Mystery of Nature*⁴⁰, and *Poosum, and Other Receipts for the Recovery of "Southern" Being*⁴¹. In a recently published collection of Montgomery's essays (varying in their dates of publication between the years of 1964 to 2000), which was edited by Michael M. Jordan, Montgomery is introduced as a second-generation Southern Agrarian. Despite their different times of publication, Montgomery's essays are loosely connected by the theme of the function of region in literature and by the subsequent invocation of the importance of acknowledgement of the connection between literature and the place where it originated. As he claims: "Art is regional. Presences abide in place, as they have appeared or do or will appear. As one puts words on the paper, from the still point that place allows, those words harbor presences more than the writer's self..."⁴² Furthermore, as he develops his reflections on the status of regional writing, Montgomery claims that:

The viable particular in art must always have regional anchor,
and one gains a vision of the transcendent and the timeless –
through the *local*....In short, while modern provincialism (not

³⁹ Cf. Montgomery, Marion. *Eudora Welty and Walter Percy: The Concept of Home in their Lives and Literature*. Jefferson, North Carolina: Mc Farland Publishers, 2004.

⁴⁰ Cf. Montgomery, Marion. *John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate: At Odds about the Ends of History and the Mystery of Nature* Jefferson, North Carolina: Mc Farland Publishers, 2003.

⁴¹ Cf. Montgomery, Marion. *Poosum, and Other Receipts for the Recovery of "Southern" Being*. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1987.

⁴² Montgomery, Marion. Jordan Michael M., ed. *On Matters Southern. Essays About Literature and Culture, 1964 – 2000*. Jefferson, North Carolina: Mc Farland Publishers, 2005, p. 23.

limited in space but limited in time since divorced from the past – in Allen Tate’s formulation) is the death of the art, a healthy regionalism is the lifeblood and hallmark of great literature.⁴³

In the essay entitled “The Country Here” Montgomery further distinguishes between regionalism as a genre that offers perspective on transcendent themes via their regional anchor, Local Color fiction as a genre portraying the local and particular while lacking the “transcendent” optics, and modern provincialism as a “state of mind in which regional men lose their origin in the past and its continuity into the present, and begin every day as if there had been no yesterday.”⁴⁴

While insisting on his statements about the crucial importance of region for art in general, Montgomery further acknowledges the fact that there is a difference between merely painting a local or provincial scene and engaging the universal. Thus, in his essay entitled “Is Regional Writing Dead?” Montgomery finally concludes, in correspondence with his previous statements on the “regional anchor” of the transcendent, that: “the day of *regional* writing is never over, whether the term be limited from time to time by calling it ‘Southern’ or ‘Irish’ or Russian’.”⁴⁵ Arguably, being more interested in the region itself than the contemporary critical dispute about the definition of the Southern Local Color or “regionalist” literature, Montgomery offers a seemingly plausible distinguishing factor between these two genres; this factor

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38 – 39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

is defined as the presence or absence of the “universal” or “transcendent” themes in fiction.

The question of applicability of the label “regionalist fiction” has further been explored by Barbara Ewell in her essay “Changing Places: Women and the Old South; or What Happens When Local Color Becomes Regionalism”⁴⁶. Within the context of her unique examination of the feminine self-definition through the marginalized Other of the South and its metamorphosis into the New South, Ewell continues to trace the transformation of Louisiana Local Color stories into regionalist literature. Unlike Montgomery’s reflection on the general role of region in literature, by contrasting the literary achievements of the Louisiana local colorists, such as Kate Chopin, Grace King, and Ruth McEnery Stuart with the response of the Southern Agrarians to their works, Barbara Ewell explores the sensitivities toward the Southern perspective of the marginalized female “Other”. Exposing the underlying arguments about the “universal” identity of the South and opposing these arguments by an invocation of interpretations of Local Color from other (feminine) perspectives, which are inherent to the South as a region, Ewell reaches the following conclusion:

While retaining the principal achievements of local color – its creation of a distinctive southern place as the perspective from which to criticize the nation’s rush to modernity – the modernists effectively obscured not only the places of women writing in constructing that critique, but also the capacity of

⁴⁶ Ewell, Barbara C. "Changing Places: Women and the Old South; or, What Happens When Local Color Becomes Regionalism." *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 42.2 (1997): 157-179.

that place to challenge larger and more dangerous structures, like patriarchy and racism.⁴⁷

Thus, Ewell offers an examination of the status of Louisiana local color literature which contrasts the aesthetic views of the Southern modernists, who refused the “unsuitably nostalgic and feminine”⁴⁸ Local Color and praised the “exclusive aesthetics of the ‘universal’ ”.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the following definition of Local Color is offered by Ewell:

By celebrating, usually with condescending humor, eccentricities of character and the exoticism of unfamiliar settings, the local color short story became an effective vehicle for setting aside certain threatening realities--like the country's increasing heterogeneity or the loss of its independent rural lifestyles.

This definition of Local Color, however, is not incompatible with characteristics that are usually elevated in regionalist fiction, such as the “universal” themes of race, class, and gender that are essential for the definition of regionalist fiction, for instance, in the critical work of Marjorie Pryse.

Like Marion Montgomery, Marjorie Pryse argues that the “universal” themes are essential for regionalist fiction - themes that are still relevant for readers today because: “we have discovered ongoing connections between the fiction regionalist writers produced more than a century ago and the cultural questions and critiques of our

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

own era.”⁵⁰ While addressing the issue of “different reading” of regionalist texts and emphasizing their implicit pedagogy, Pryse further maintains that “regionalism often shifts the center of our perception as readers of American literature to questions of disenfranchisement, of voice, and above all, of approach to regional and other differences.”⁵¹ This shift of interest described by Pryse, which results in the engagement with questions of difference as well as the vision of the transcendent, offered through the local perspective provides an interesting interpretative framework for Local Color fiction. Such a framework ultimately exceeds the narrowly defined boundaries of Local Color fiction, for instance, by the Southern modernist movement, since it offers explorations of regional variants of gender-roles, of racial status, and of participations in the national tradition. Such a dialogue must undoubtedly transcend the picturesque, nostalgic, and chronicling qualities of Local Color fiction.

Although Pryse’s reconsideration of Local Color fiction has resulted in critical praise of works formerly associated with the genre of Local Color and in their reinterpretation within the context of regionalist studies, there remains one problematic aspect of this reinterpretation of Local Color. The problem is centered primarily upon the preference of reinterpretation of New England local colorists, such as Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. In fact, the exclusive critical attention toward the region of New England and its fiction disregards the multiplicity of existing “local colors”.

⁵⁰ Pryse, Marjorie. „Reading Regionalism. The ‚Difference‘ It Makes.“ *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field*. Ed. David Jordan. New York: Garland Publishing, 1994, p. 47.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Donna Campbell, in her examination of Local Color fiction of the nineteenth century and its rebirth as the twentieth century regionalism offers a definition of Local Color fiction within the context of its relationship to Naturalism. While offering extremely insightful comments about the formation of the genre of Local Color and the tensions between this genre and Naturalism, Campbell limits her statements exclusively to the Local Color of the Northeast and partially disregards the existence of Southern Local Color as she focuses on the examination of the “domestic aesthetics” emphasizing the theme of self-denial:

The control granted by housekeeping and its repetitions, like the ethical choices local color heroine’s make, indicate that control itself generates a kind of freedom beyond the seeming limitations of the domestic sphere – or the local color form [...] To choose freely and responsibly in a world in which they otherwise have no control affirms these women’s sense of self and conscience.⁵²

As the reinterpretation of the works of Kate Chopin as regionalist fiction rather than Local Color stories remains ambiguous⁵³ and the reinterpretation of the works of Grace King is almost absent, the present objective of this text is to question the (lack of) reinterpretation of the works of these two authors within the framework of regionalist studies. Are we or are we not witnessing the shift of the work of Grace King (and Kate Chopin) from the realm of Local Color fiction to that of regionalist fiction?

⁵² Campbell, Donna M. *Resisting Regionalism. Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885 – 1915*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997, p. 38.

⁵³ Cf. Holtman, Janet. “Failing Fictions: The Conflicting and Shifting Social Emphases of Kate Chopin’s ‘Local Color’ Stories.” *Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South* 42.2 (Winter 2004): 73 – 88.

Although the debates concerning the definition of Local Color and regionalist fiction remain inconclusive in the works of Marion Montgomery, Barbara Ewell, Marjorie Pryse, and Donna Campbell, for the purpose of this dissertation a distinction between these two labels needs articulation. Although the statements of Montgomery and Pryse regarding the importance of “universal” themes in regionalist fiction, as opposed to Local Color fiction, which lacks such themes, may seem plausible at first, there is an underlying problem. Indeed, to propose “universalism” as the essential characteristics of *regionalist* literature seems unacceptable. Such a definition would ultimately cease to distinguish regionalism from “universal” national or transnational literature. Rather than praising the “universal” themes in regionalist fiction, we should focus on the conflux of social, of aesthetic, and of formal issues present in the work of art aspiring to be considered regionalist. The specificity of regionalist fiction should be seen in its aspiration to reflect upon, question, and possibly subvert the unique norms typically associated with the given region, and thus offer more than one discursive level rather than picturesque stories whose ultimate objective is to entertain the Northern audience.

With correspondence to the above offered distinction between Local Color and regionalist fiction, this text shall further apply the term Local Color in relation to the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin when intending to refer to (or to emphasize) its contemporaneous context of stories of entertainment for the outsider-audience and the term “regionalist fiction” in order to expose the multiple discursive levels of their

works, as they are the focus of the contemporary critical study of the subversions of the norms of gender, race, and class.

Several critics have begun to include the works of Kate Chopin in the volume of regionalist fictions by uncovering the complexities of gender and class in her most accomplished novel, *The Awakening*, while being hesitant to address her short stories in the same manner. Under the rubric of proto-feminism, *The Awakening* became extricated from the label of Local Color, mainly because of the works of critics such as Elaine Showalter, Elizabeth Moss, and Helen Taylor. Elizabeth Moss, for instance, argues in her study devoted to the examination of the works of Southern female writers of so called domestic novels, that the social milieu of the South was an especially fertile ground for ties of submission and hierarchy. As a result, the male Southerners invented “an intricate pattern of gender roles designed to prevent unrest among the female population.”⁵⁴ The naturally hierarchical society of the *Old South*, which was built upon reciprocal relationships of slavery and an aristocratic code, was thus promoting inequities of race and gender instead of individuality. Although the curiosity about Southern Local Color fiction may have been largely influenced by the interest in the “peculiar institution” of slavery, it is a fact that Local Color, previously viewed as a genre purposefully preserving and chronicling traditions and values of isolated communities, has become the platform for examination of trans-regional issues and the decentralization of American literature. As Amy Kaplan argues, “regionalist fiction

⁵⁴ Moss, Elizabeth. *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of the Southern Culture*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992, p. 16.

expands the boundaries of the imagined community and democratizes access to literary representation.”⁵⁵

Interestingly, the ongoing critical reconsideration of the works of Kate Chopin is challenged by the distinction between Chopin’s master novel, *The Awakening*, which has undergone extensive reinterpretation with respect to its “proto-feminist” aspects, and her extensive collection of short stories, which are still “dismissed” as Local Color. Janet Holtman explores Chopin’s short stories as “failing fiction” unable to generate the same critical interest as her novel, and she addresses this categorization in the following manner:

Thus emerges an apparent contradiction in current thought about Chopin’s regionalist fiction: that the stories might be complex, emphatic, and political and yet still be dismissed primarily because of their problematic treatment of gender issues. And what is it that makes the depiction of gender struggle so problematic in these stories? I would argue that it is the complication posed by an overt, simultaneous, and complex entanglement with class and race issues.⁵⁶

Similarly, there has been a lack of critical attention directed toward the reinterpretation of the short stories of Grace King. Indeed, King’s fiction does not raise too many questions about the relevance of the term Local Color. This is perhaps a result of the formal aspects of her stories, which involve repetitions and “borrowings” of plots and heavy stereotyping and the overtly racist thematic aspects. David Kirby is one of the

⁵⁵ Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

⁵⁶ Holtman, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

scholars who consider King's contribution to the American short story from the perspective of regionalist fiction criticism:

Today, King's writings are valuable for two principal reasons: they provide a unique angle of vision into the psychology of the American female at a time when she was ridding herself of one role and struggling to adopt a new one, and they allow the present day reader to look long and hard at a portion of the Southern experience that is not to be found in the writings of better-known authors.⁵⁷

This statement, together with the above offered statements of Montgomery, Pryse, and Campbell directly introduces the questions of value of the regional literature *per se*. As Charles Crow formulated it:

What is the 'cultural work' that is performed by regional literatures? What does such writing *do* within our evolving national experience? The folk ways of a region are often described in texts which are read, or consumed, by members of another, dominant class. Is this commodification of regional culture inherently demeaning or condescending, reducing it to the quaint and picturesque...?⁵⁸

Ultimately, it is becoming evident that the growing popularity of the so called regional literatures and the extensive critical debates concerning these literatures demonstrate the alternative perspectives that regional literatures offer as a subversion of values that dominate the society by engaging the "Other" of a different region. As Stephanie Foote argues:

⁵⁷ Kirby David. *Grace King*. Boston: Twayne, 1980, p. 9.

⁵⁸ Crow, *op cit.*, p. 2.

Structurally and substantively, regional writing is especially able to help critics understand the meaning of local lives, local ideas, and local traditions. Regional writing, imaginatively devoted to the concern of discrete localities, is also therefore committed to asking what place the local knowledges have in the construction of a national tradition [...]. It is precisely its dedication to illuminating the often contradictory meanings of the local that made regional writing so important in its own era, and that continues to make it so important to ours.⁵⁹

The interpretation of such perspectives offers novel insights into the interrelations between identity, nationality, race and gender.

The interrelatedness of region and race, one of the predominant topics of contemporary reinterpretations of regionalist fiction and Local Color, illustrates why the status of regional writing has become so prestigious in contemporary critical theory. In fact, the exploration of the ways in which region shapes our approach to race and vice versa enables us to understand how and why the “American regional identity is, to an extent that we have only begun to uncover, caught up in our understanding of racial identity and racial difference.”⁶⁰ For instance, the Southern attempts of constructing a nationalizing whiteness which are present in regionalist fiction in abundance allow us to see clearly that the category of whiteness is a normative category in the American national identity. As Lori Robinson argues:

⁵⁹ Foote, Stephanie. “The Cultural Work of American Regionalism” in: Crow, Charles L., ed. *op. cit.*, p. 25-26.

⁶⁰ Robinson, Lori. “Region and Race” in: Crow, Charles L., ed. *Op. cit.*, p. 57.

The problem is that regional reconciliation has typically been effected through cultural amnesia, through the repression of the South's recent past....With the assumption that race can be unmarked, that it will no longer be disruptive or noticeable, comes the unexamined assumption that the dominant culture lacks a racial identity. The desire to embrace regional difference, then, has served in the construction of a national identity in which whiteness remains normative.⁶¹

Thus, the urge to define the South and its literature as homogeneous ultimately fails as this region offers a frame of reference for discussions about racial identity or nationalism. As Katherine Henninger further explores this role of the South, she concludes that:

Recent work in this field [the study of Southern literature] provides a crucial model for the reconceptualization of the traditional notions of nation, region, and the role of place in a 'globalized' America whose borders seem suddenly (really always have been) permeable, transnational, and in flux. Breaking away from a narrow association of regionalism with sectionalism, in place with stasis and the 'autochthonous ideal', and (more or less) eager to apply the insights of postcolonial theory to its always contested, multicultural, inherently decentered subject, southern studies in the new millennium has seen a flowering of critical reconfigurations.⁶²

Thus, the black and white vision of the South and its fiction, both literally and metaphorically speaking, is experiencing a metamorphosis of perspective that results in an ability to venture beyond the categories of Local Color, "Southern white literature",

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶² Henninger, Katherine Renée. "How New? What Place?: Southern Studies and the Rest of the World." *Contemporary Literature* 45.1 (2004): p. 177.

“Southern women’s literature”, or “Southern folklore” in order to offer a vision of the South as a complex notion, which has too many times been simplified for the sake of convenience. Furthermore, the emphasis on the authenticity of Local Color fiction in its depiction of the landscape, characters, and dialects is thus being successfully replaced by interpretations focusing on the role of region within a multivalent theoretical framework. As the impact of Local Color ceases to be exclusively local, although it still has its anchor in the region, we can proceed to suggest that the increasingly important status of regionalist writing is applicable to the Local Color genre in general. The marginalization or centralization of the works of Kate Chopin and Grace King (as examples of the category of Local Color or regionalist fiction, respectively) within the literary context, thus relies on the correspondence of their themes with the prevalent contemporary ideology, which opens the possibility to explore their fiction from different perspectives.

Without a doubt, the genre of Local Color that fought so many obstacles, despite (or because of) its popularity, to achieve critical acclaim successfully captivated contemporary literary critics who offer novel interpretations of works of the Southern regionalists as well as other defined regionalist literatures in America. A rehabilitation of Local Color literature, which was tainted by contemporaneous tensions *vis-à-vis* Naturalism, is thus fully under way. However, the question that remains is: what are the limits to the contemporary reinterpretation of Local Color and its re-categorization as regionalist fiction? The following examination of the parameters of regional aesthetics in the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin shall explore this question.

2.3 Regional Aesthetics: The Relation between Aesthetics and Social Space and the Role of Region in the Construction of Gender and Race-Based Identities and Stereotypes.

An important aspect relevant to the examination of the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin, whether specifically defined as Local Color or loosely defined as regionalist fiction, is the consideration of the parameters of regional Aesthetics and their manifestation in these works, as well as the newly initiated interpretative frameworks of these objects of literary analysis. The careful scholarly examination of regional literatures performed, among others, by Marjorie Pryse, Judith Fetterley, and Donna Campbell and the subsequent impulse to add these literatures to the literary canon as a challenge to the literary status-quo inevitably raises questions regarding their aesthetic value. The ongoing debates about the literary value of the works of such authors as Jewett, Freeman, Chopin, and King raise crucial questions regarding aesthetic objects and aesthetic value. The objective of this chapter is to offer a perspective on regional Aesthetics present in the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin, which offers a new alternative to the contemporary feminist interpretations, and to foreshadow parallels between these Aesthetics of Otherness and the Aesthetics of other regionalist, minority, post-colonial, and “crossblood” literatures.⁶³

⁶³ Crossblood literary aesthetic is a term utilized to emphasize and encourage comparative investigations of African American and Native American literature in order to explore aesthetic similarities, intersections between both cultures, and their shared experiences of cultural dislocation, dispossession, exploitation, and resistance to western imperialism by Angela Cotton in: “On the ‘Res’ and in the ‘Hood’: Making Cultures, Leaving Legacies.” *Cultural Sites of Critical Insight. Philosophy, Aesthetics, and African American and Native American Women’s Writings*. Eds. Angela L. Cotton and Christa Acampora Davis. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007, pp. 3 – 27.

The examination of the regional Aesthetics of Otherness in the literature of Louisiana regionalist authors invites many parallels that can be traced among regional Aesthetics, Native American Aesthetics, African American Aesthetics, post-colonial, and other ethnic Aesthetics. The concerns regarding the integration of “minority Aesthetics” into the hyper-canonized Anglo-European white Aesthetics within the American literary context are, in each case, primarily faced with epistemological issues. Within the context of our examination of the fiction of Chopin and King that ultimately attempts to reclaim race as an element of regional writing these issues include, above all, the existence of local epistemologies, *i.e.*, the production of racial knowledge that relies on stereotypes.

Although the category of Otherness, when applied to the South as a region, is fairly broad; and, moreover, it has recently been challenged by Houston A. Baker Jr.,⁶⁴ it shall serve as a starting point for the present analysis of regionalist Aesthetics. Consequently, this chapter offers an exploration of the following questions: To what extent can the function of Aesthetics be defined by its social space (which stereotypes occupy)? How does the dynamic notion of (the Other) region produce and alter the Aesthetics? Or a more specific question: What is the role of region in the use of stereotypes in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King? In order to answer these questions, it is first of all necessary to outline the contemporary role of Aesthetics in

⁶⁴ Cf. Baker, Houston A. Jr. and Nelson, Dana D. “Preface: Violence, the Body and ‘The South’.” *American Literature* 73.2 (June 2001): 231 – 244. This preface to a special issue of the journal of *American Literature* introduces the notion of “new Southern studies” as a term applied to the works of Patricia Yeager, Ann Goodwyn Jones, Richard Grey, and others, and refuses the construction of the South as the “abjected regional Other”.

cultural studies and of social and literary theory and to argue for the necessity of a contextualization of Aesthetics.

Indeed, the discipline of Aesthetics and its definition needs to be addressed and examined in order to offer an understanding of the fluctuation of popularity and an appreciation of regionalist literature, which thrived in many forms and regions at the turn of the nineteenth century, only to be followed by disdain from, among others, the representatives of Southern modernism and “New Criticism”⁶⁵ and, finally, to be rediscovered by contemporary feminist theory and regionalist studies.

In a recently published compilation of essays on Aesthetics - and on the many challenges this discipline has to face in contemporary culturally diverse scholarship - entitled *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, Emory Elliot identifies the crucial tension between the traditional (and narrowly defined) understanding of Aesthetics as a set of universal standards of beauty and of the diverse existing ideological definitions of Aesthetics. Elliot also identifies the fear of the danger of exploitation of Aesthetics for ideological purposes, which is present in contemporary scholarship, and discusses the isolated tendencies to revive the formal aspects of literary works. However, since such formal aspects are inevitably informed by the general aesthetic tendencies of the given literary tradition, the question of the possibility of attaining ‘objective’ (universal) aesthetic values becomes problematic. As Emory Elliot argues:

The challenges before us involve nothing short of constructing new principles for evaluating productions of art, with the fullest

⁶⁵ For further details on this topic confer Ewell, “Changing Places”, *op. cit.*

possible grasp of the aesthetic principles of the cultures which contributed to these works, and creating new terminologies and explanations for how and why elements of creative production affect us as they do.⁶⁶

Recognizing the need for a contextualization or reevaluation of Aesthetics in order to develop alternative standards of value, Elliot is further aware that we need to formulate “new terms and definitions and perhaps also a new system of analysis for describing the characteristics of art and literature and the feelings and intellectual pleasures they evoke in the particular diversity of the people we are today.”⁶⁷

Therefore, the question should not only be *how* does the notion of region produce or alter the Aesthetics – in our case in the works of Kate Chopin and Grace King - but also, *why* this issue should be the center of critical interest. As Elliot discovers the lack of universality of aesthetic standards and their applicability, we may concur that aesthetic judgment is formed by communities of taste which are affected by their region. The aesthetic revival, as it is described by Elliot and Clark, may lead to the following conclusion phrased by Christopher Castiglia and Russ Castronovo in their preface to the special feature of *American Literature* dedicated to Aesthetics and the end(s) of cultural studies:

The place of aesthetics in cultural studies is, for the moment at least, a problem, but a productive one, giving critics room to

⁶⁶ Elliot, Emory. “Introduction: Cultural Diversity and the Problem of Aesthetics.” *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*. Eds. Emory Elliot, Louis Freitas Caton, Jeffrey Rhyne. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 17.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

maneuver, to speculate, and, once again, in pursuing out ends,
with eyes wide open, to attempt more promising beginnings.⁶⁸

Therefore, it is clear that the contemporary scholarly emphasis underscores the problematic aspects of the desired universal applicability of aesthetic concepts. “Aesthetics” is thus no longer considered a synonym for “formalism” or “high art” and, as the current aesthetic revival described by Fredrick Jameson⁶⁹ suggests, the agency of Aesthetics is much more extensive – and also rather progressive. For instance, Michael Clark in his book *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today* claims that Aesthetics provide “a source of autonomy and resistance to the status quo”.⁷⁰ This statement may lead us to the examination of the ability of Aesthetics to articulate differences, particularly regional differences. Distinguishing between Aesthetics as a transcendent theory of “high art” and Aesthetics as contextualized developments of theories and sensations, we are thus able to analyze Aesthetics as a “methodology for discerning communities of taste.”⁷¹

The aesthetic discourse present in the study of regionalist literature is thus faced with a challenge similar to the realm of Southern studies itself. In an analogy to

⁶⁸ Castiglia, Christopher and Castronovo, Russ. “A ‘Hive of Subtlety’: Aesthetics and the End(s) of Cultural Studies.” *American Literature* 76. 3 (September 2004), p. 434.

⁶⁹ Cf. Jameson, Fredric. “Marx’s Purloined Letter”. *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s “Spectres of Marx”*. Ed. Sprinkler Michael. London: Verso, 1999, pp. 52 – 53.

⁷⁰ Quoted in: Castiglia, Christopher and Castronovo, Russ. *Op cit.*, p. 426.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 433.

Houston A. Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson's call for "new Southern studies",⁷² there has been a similar call for "new Aesthetics" which would enable the interrogation of the relationship between local Aesthetics and global Aesthetics.

Such new approaches to Aesthetics, as they were proposed by Elliot, Clark, Castiglia, Castronovo, and others, refuse the claim that aesthetic value is an intrinsic (formal) and universally acknowledged characteristic of the work of art. On the contrary, these approaches embrace new epistemologies as foundations for aesthetic theory. However, to an extent, these novel approaches raise a problematic issue of objectivity and validity of such aesthetic values as well as the fear of an excessive relativization of these values.

This issue of objectivity of aesthetic values is concisely addressed by Satya Mohanty in his insightful article entitled "Can Our Values Be Objective? On Ethics,

⁷² A scholar who is frequently praised for the novel approach to Southern studies called *New Southern studies*, Patricia Yaeger in her book, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930 – 1990*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, focuses on the category of the body and explores the plethora of images of grotesque, mangled, and mistreated bodies which occur in the fiction of the American South. Yaeger further suggests, that the images of such bodies indicate a „crisis of whiteness in a place in which it has become impossible to be white in the old, accustomed ways“ (3) and she further clarifies the objective of her book as the following: „We will investigate a group of women writers from very different Southern localities who keep circulating and recirculating grotesque stories about the South – stories preoccupied with figures of dirt, monstrosity, the throwaway, gargantuan women, old children, and the problem of arrested systems of knowledge“ (8). Refusing the traditional dominant categories of Southern literature defined by Walker Percy - history, family, storytelling, and tragedy, Yaeger thus offers alternative categories for interpretation of Southern fiction. Yaeger's new categories include, but are not limited to, the category of convulsive white bodies, covert or hidden black mothers, arrested systems of knowledge or „the unthought known“, crossover objects, occluded knowledge and place (which is never simply „place“ in Southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape). Yaeger ultimately transforms the traditional dominant categories of Southern literature by emphasizing the body and place.

Aesthetics, and Progressive Politics”. In this article, Mohanty refuses the notion of objectivity as neutrality and suggests that objectivity is an “epistemic ideal in the realm of values.”⁷³ Furthermore, after refusing the skeptical postmodern theory of value which denies the possibility of any objective theoretical knowledge, Mohanty refuses the relativist theories produced by social and historical context that threaten to exploit aesthetic and other values for ideological purposes. (Here, Mohanty refers to the work of Paul de Man and Pierre Bourdieu who suggest the demystification of Aesthetics and the revelation of its hidden political agenda.) Briefly summarizing the debate between Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky on the issue of the political nature of values, Mohanty ultimately refuses both Foucault’s epistemological holism and he argues, like Chomsky, that “values are not only socially determined, because often they also refer to deeper features of human nature, our species-wide needs and capacities, which set limits on how historically ‘contingent’ legitimate evaluations can be.”⁷⁴ To support his claim, Mohanty further draws parallels between Foucault’s position and the position of Barbara H. Smith, the lattermost of whom claims the following:

[With respect to values] everything is always in motion with respect to everything else. If there *are* constancies of literary value, they will be found in *those very motions*: that is, in the relations among the variables. For, like all value, literary value is not the property of an object *or* of a subject, but rather, *the product of the dynamics of a system*⁷⁵.

⁷³ Mohanty, Satya P. “Can Our Values Be Objective? On Ethics, Aesthetics, and Progressive Politics.” *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*. Eds. Emory Elliot, Louis Freitas Caton, Jeffrey Rhyne. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 32.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷⁵ Smith, Barbara H. “Value/Evaluation”, quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 40, emphases in the original.

In order to argue for the possibility of objective Aesthetics and other values, Mohanty proposes to “show how basing aesthetics partially in human nature can be liberating for aesthetic inquiry.”⁷⁶ Arguing that our deepest aesthetic notions refer to human nature, Mohanty offers an epistemic defense of value which does not point to ideal Forms but rather to “key properties of human nature”⁷⁷ suggesting that completely context-free aesthetic notions would be defective. Therefore, in relation to multicultural studies, Mohanty calls for comparative Aesthetics which could help challenge the aesthetic status quo from a cross-cultural perspective based on human nature.

Analogously, in order to avoid excessive aesthetic relativism or extreme forms of politicized Aesthetics, this chapter proposes to approach the discipline of Aesthetics as a discipline whose epistemological foundation of judgment is found in the social space of the given region. Therefore, this examination is informed by the trend of “new Aesthetics” and its call for distinctions between local and global Aesthetics, yet it is also aware of the dangers of aesthetic relativism. Thus, our focus on local Aesthetics and on their relation to the global Aesthetics, and to the subsequent application of this global/local tension shall provide an intriguing framework with exciting potential for the reinterpretation of Louisiana regionalist literature to expose and transcend the problematic coexistence of its nineteenth century racist overtones with its twentieth century interpretative frameworks, which are predominantly congruent with feminist theory.

⁷⁶ Mohanty, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54

The interrogation of the local Aesthetics of regionalism and of their interconnection with the global aesthetic perspective shall uncover not only their Otherness, but also their dialectical relationship. As Susan Feagin claims, the objective of the newly appearing global aesthetic theories focuses on the inspirational process of “thoughts and practices that in fact stretch the Western imagination, potentially enriching and extending theories of art and the aesthetic”⁷⁸ rather than on the interrogation of the universal applicability of aesthetic concepts.⁷⁹ Refining the perspectives on the local and on the global within the context of Louisiana and the United States, this exposition of regional Aesthetics shall distinguish the works of Kate Chopin and Grace King without artificially imposing global aesthetic theories on these works.

Let us proceed to the first question, *i.e.*, to what extent can the function of Aesthetics be defined by its social space? As suggested above by Emory Elliot and others, universality is no longer central to the concept of Aesthetics, as the myth of absolute aesthetic value has been undermined. Furthermore, as pointed out by Barbara Smith, literary values are always in motion. Subsequently, as the formalist approach to Aesthetics is being refused by contemporary theorists, the role of social consensus acquires a more and more central position in this discipline.

⁷⁸ Feagin, Susan L. “Introduction.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism. Special Issue: Global Theories of the Arts and Aesthetics* 65.1 (Winter 2007), p. 1.

⁷⁹ In order to avoid confusion in terminology, it needs to be emphasized that in the special issue of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, in which Feagin’s introduction appeared, the term “global theories of art and aesthetics” refers to “theories and practices in relation to arts around the globe” (1) and *not* to universally applicable global theories.

One of the theorists who engaged this subject in their works in a profound manner is Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, whose ideas “emerged from diverse intellectual sources such as Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Saussure, Wittgenstein, Benveniste, Canguilhem, and from schools of thought ranging from phenomenology and structuralism to analytic philosophy”,⁸⁰ and whose work had a profound impact on the fields of sociology, philosophy, and critical theory. His book *Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* primarily focuses on the questions of art and its autonomous value. Among many other issues, this volume raises the question of how to understand (aesthetic) understanding. In an analogous manner to the discipline of “new Aesthetics”, the focal analysis of essence and illusion of the absolute aesthetical value in Bourdieu’s work challenges the subject of transhistoricity and universality of literary norms by identifying the following circular causality:

The experience of the work of art as immediately endowed with meaning and value is an effect of the harmony between the two aspects of the same historical institution, the cultivated *habitus* and the artistic field, which mutually ground each other. Given that the work of art does not exist as such, meaning as an object symbolically endowed with meaning and value, unless it is apprehended by spectators possessing the *aesthetic disposition and competence* which it tacitly requires, one could say that it is the eye of the aesthete which constitutes the work of art – but only if one immediately remembers that it can only do so to the extent that it is itself the *product of a long collective history*, that is, of the progressive invention of the

⁸⁰ Harker, Richard. Mahar, Cheleen and Wilkes, Chris, eds. *An Introduction to the Work of Pierre Bourdieu. The Practice of Theory*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990, p. 1.

‘connoisseur’, and of a long individual history, that is, of prolonged exposure to the work of art.⁸¹

Thus, for Bourdieu the questions of meaning and of value of a work of art are explicitly connected to the social history of the field rather than to some formalist *a priori* concepts of artistic essence. In fact, it seems that the discipline of Aesthetics is witnessing a shift of emphasis from *aesthetic judgment* to *aesthetic experience*. Furthermore, by undermining the essentialist visions of Aesthetics, Bourdieu refuses claims that the historical anamnesis and the active *époque* are necessary for a proper definition of aesthetic function.

In his discussion of historical categories of artistic perception, Bourdieu further underscores the two-fold sociological perspective of the value of a work of art:

[The] categories engaged in the perception and appreciation of the work of art are doubly linked to historical context: associated with a social universe which is situated and dated, they are also the object of usages which are themselves socially marked by the social position of their users.⁸²

Bourdieu’s claim that “the oppositions structuring aesthetic perception are not given a priori, but are historically produced and reproduced”⁸³ is the ultimate refusal of the primacy of form over function of a work of art.

⁸¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Trans. Susan Emanuel. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 289, emphases added.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

Attacking the category of “pure reading”, Bourdieu further refuses “hermeneutic narcissism”, a position which he defines in the following terms: “[hermeneutic narcissism is] that form of encounter with works and authors in which the hermeneutic scholar affirms his intelligence and grandeur by his emphatic insight into great authors.”⁸⁴ To conclude his reflection on the possibility of “pure Aesthetics”, Bourdieu refuses the position of ahistoricism since it “tends to bracket out anything that ties the text to a history and a society”⁸⁵ In opposition to ahistoricism or hermeneutic narcissism, Bourdieu proposes the strategy of “double historicization” including both the originating tradition and the application of tradition, since included in his conception of a sociological theory of art perception is the following:

An act of deciphering *unrecognized as such*, immediate and adequate ‘comprehension’, is possible and effective only in the special case in which the cultural code which makes the act of deciphering possible is immediately and completely mastered by the observer and merges with the cultural code which has rendered the work perceived possible.⁸⁶

Therefore, as is clear from Bourdieu’s explanation of the contextualization of Aesthetics, the formulation of aesthetic values is clearly subordinated to the social space. The extent to which the aesthetic judgments are subordinated to the social sphere, however, is two-fold, and it includes both the originating tradition and the contemporary tradition.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁸⁶ Johnson, Randal, ed. *Pierre Bourdieu. The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 216, emphasis in the original.

The underlying problem of the contextualization of Aesthetics in the case of the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin, therefore, consists in the reconciliation of opposite, or even a mutually exclusive, interpretative tradition of the nineteenth century and its “ideological work of postbellum reconciliation”⁸⁷ and the feminist interpretative tradition of the twentieth century; important also in the case of race- and gender-based stereotypes of the “tragic mulatta”, the “mammy”, the “Southern belle”, the “confederate woman” and other stereotypes present in their fiction. Since stereotypes occupy social space, their aesthetic role cannot be linked to any formalist or *a priori* concepts. Moreover, their role needs to be contextualized in their originating tradition as well as in the tradition of contemporary critics.

Fully in accordance with Bourdieu’s theory of double historization, which seeks to include both the *originating tradition* and the *application of tradition* in the course of aesthetic experience and evaluation, we are witnessing the following process: the dominant evaluating strategies of the 19th century Local Color fiction of the American South, as they are represented by Kate Chopin and Grace King, are being replaced by alternative evaluating strategies undermining the original interpretations of the texts, and new interpretations of these texts are being proposed in connection with dominant themes existing within contemporary society. The works of Kate Chopin and Grace King are thus subject to a variety of interpretations relying on shifting social emphases. As a result, the conventional treatment of this genre (which is no longer limited to *The*

⁸⁷ McCullough, Kate. *Regions of Identity: The Construction of America in Women’s Fiction, 1885 – 1914*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 189.

Awakening) is sacrificed in order to create novel approaches that are more accurately connected with the contemporary system of hierarchies.

From a historical perspective, the examination of the discussed genre was subject to many significant changes. Initially, since the genre of Local Color was primarily connected to the traumatic changes that occurred in the American national climate after the Civil War, and which solidified the South's position of the "Other", its main attraction for readers was how it was marketed as generally apolitical. Indeed, the straightforward political propaganda of the preceding era was pushed aside by "sentimental" regionalism. Later, with the rise of New Criticism, the emphasis of many interpretations of Local Color shifted from the plantation myth ideology towards the praise of absolute aesthetic value. As Barbara Ewell claims: "Though the antebellum South was essentially created in local color fiction, that genre was promptly discredited as unsuitably nostalgic and feminine by the Southern modernists"⁸⁸. And in recent decades, in accordance with feminist literary theory, propounded by such critics as Elaine Showalter and Joanna Russ, the myth of absolute aesthetic value has been undermined. In other words, the aesthetic value ceases to be the one and only criterion of a work of art and other extra-aesthetic rubrics, such as the political and social bases for Aesthetics, became relevant.

⁸⁸ Ewell, Barbara C. "Changing Places: Women and the Old South; or, What Happens When Local Color Becomes Regionalism", *op. cit.* p. 158

As a result of such innovative valorization, feminist interpretations have become the dominant mode of literary criticism aimed at the women writers of the *fin de siècle* American South. Traditional interpretations utilizing the pejorative category of “domestic fiction” or “popular women’s fiction” are thus either becoming obsolete or they are “undergoing reexamination since it became clear they were used to bury much of value on specious assumptions.”⁸⁹

Interpretations of Local Color fiction carried out by Elaine Showalter, Anne Goodwyn Jones, Elizabeth Moss, Marjorie Pryse, Judith Fetterley, Donna Campbell and other distinguished feminist critics are currently forming the “critical mainstream” centered around *The Awakening*. Such critical homogeneity may be in dissonance with the initial refusal of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, which at first received a highly unfavorable critical reception, such as: „[The Awakening] is not a healthy book“⁹⁰; however, it is in full accordance with the contemporary literary tradition.

We acknowledge that the feminist interpretations of Chopin’s fiction may be fully in accordance with the *application tradition*, to use Bourdieu’s terminology; however, as Kate McCullough points out in her book *Regions of Identity*, such interpretations are not unproblematic:

[W]hile feminist literary critics succeeded in bringing Chopin into the canon, the grounds on which they did so, ironically, more faithfully reflect issues central to second-wave (largely

⁸⁹ Lauter, Paul. *Op. cit.*, p.244

⁹⁰ From „Notes from Bookland“ in: *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*. 13 May, 1899. p. 5, *qtd.* in: Culley, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

white, bourgeois) feminism than to Chopin's work as a whole. [...] While her short fiction does display an interest in female erotic and maternal desire, it does so in explicitly regionally, racially, and ethnically marked ways.⁹¹

Unlike McCullough, we may extend the questioning of the underlying feminist issues not only in Chopin's short stories, but also in her master novel. We may argue that there is a troubling element in the feminist interpretations of *The Awakening*, which is present specifically in the ambiguous ending of the novel. As Suzanne Wolkenfeld argues, the final image of Edna plunging into the depths of the ocean is principal for conclusive interpretations of *The Awakening*:

The recent critical controversy as to the meaning and value of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is epitomized in the range of responses to Edna's suicide. This finale constitutes the critical crux of the novel, not only in that it is central to the interpretation of Edna's character and the theme of the story, but also because it is joined with the issue of Chopin's attitude to her protagonist and the artistic integrity of her work.⁹²

Indeed, the following ending of Chopin's *The Awakening* invites several plausible interpretations:

She [Edna Pontellier] walked out. The water was chill, but she walked with long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body with its soft, close embrace. She went on and on. [...] She did not look back now, but went on

⁹¹ McCullough, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁹² Wolkenfeld Suzanne. „Edna's Suicide: the Problem of the One and the Many“ in: Culley, ed. *Op. cit.*, pp. 241-2.

and on, [...] Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her. “Good-bye – because I love you.”⁹³

Contemporary critics tend to interpret Edna’s suicide primarily in two opposing ways. Numerous feminist and existentialist critics favor the interpretation of Edna’s suicide as a gesture of power. For instance, Chopin’s autobiographer Per Seyersted sees Edna’s suicide as: “the crowning glory of her development from the bewilderment which accompanied her early emancipation to the clarity with which she understands her own nature and the possibilities of her life as she decides to end it.”⁹⁴

On the other hand, critics emphasizing the naturalistic overtones in *The Awakening* characterize Edna as a passive victim: a victim who fails to create a new territory within the existing society. Instead of successfully fighting the *status quo* and destroying the limits that have been imposed upon her by the society, Edna is seen as self-surrendered. However, due to the lack of Chopin’s explicitness, there remains a shadow of ambiguity over the actual suicidal nature of this act. Indeed, Edna Pontellier was an inexperienced swimmer and her desire to push the limits imposed upon her by her role of a mother and wife may have been expressed in this act without an actual intention to commit suicide. In fact, it may have been yet another of Edna’s whims rather than a victorious *coup d’etat*. This ambiguity in the ending of *The Awakening* cannot be seen as a coincidence. As Kate McCullough argues:

⁹³ Chopin, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁹⁴ Seyersted, Per. *Qtd.* in: Wolkenfeld, Suzanne. „Edna’s Suicide“ in: M. Culley, ed. *Op. cit.* p. 242.

Chopin experiment[ed] with representations of American womanhood, rejecting a kind of North-eastern Puritan tradition of non-representation of female sexuality and following Realism's move toward mimesis so as to dismantle models of True Womanhood as well as those of the Southern Lady.⁹⁵

In fact, the intentional ambiguity of the final scene of *The Awakening* is informative in more than one respect. Above all, it raises questions regarding this intentional ambiguity of Edna's final agency.

Similarly, the fiction of Grace King has been the focal point of analogous feminist re-interpretations, with similarly ambiguous results. The short story that has received the most critical attention is King's "Little Convent Girl" which employs the tragic mulatta trope in order to make statements about the racial and gender-devised roles in Louisiana of the turn of the nineteenth century. The tragedy of being "contaminated" by the black race drives the passive convent girl to suicide. This act is interpreted by Anna Shannon Elfenbein as an allegory of the "submerged identities of Southern women authors, the unnamed heroine's total acceptance of a racist, sexist view of life results in tragedy."⁹⁶ Like the finale of *The Awakening*, the presumed suicide of the little convent girl is related in very ambiguous terms:

They walked down the stairway, the woman in front, the little convent girl – her hand released to shake hands with the captain – following across the bared deck, out to the gangway, over to the middle of it. No one was looking, no one saw more than a

⁹⁵ McCullough, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁹⁶ Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line. The Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin, op.cit.*, p. 108.

flutter of white petticoats, a show of white stockings, as the little convent girl went under the water.⁹⁷

Once again, the act of suicide remains ambiguous, leaving the reader to wonder whether it was an accident; and only the contexts of King's writings can provide the answer. As Linda Coleman proceeds in a contextualization of "Little Convent Girl", she points out that it is evident in this story that King blamed miscegenation, not racism.⁹⁸

Another ambiguous ending is presented by Kate Chopin in her short story "Désirée's Baby" by suggesting a stereotypically conventional reaction of Désirée, the tragic mulatta figure, who appears to commit suicide by drowning while at the same time drowning her baby.

She [Désirée] took the little one from the nurse's arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches...She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gowns to shreds. She disappeared amongst the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again.⁹⁹

The victimized character of Desirée who is portrayed as submissive to both racial and gender-specific oppression is, however, problematized by Désirée's agency, albeit ambiguous, in the final scene of the story. As Elen Peel points out: "Although

⁹⁷ Bush, Robert, ed. *Grace King of New Orleans. A Selection of Her Writings*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973, p. 156.

⁹⁸ Cf. Coleman, Linda S. „At Odds: Race and Gender in Grace King's Short Fiction“ in: Brown, Dorothy H. and Ewell, Barbara C., eds., *op. cit.* p. 51.

⁹⁹ Gilbert Sandra M., ed. *Kate Chopin. Complete Novels and Stories, op. cit.*, p. 247.

submissive, the young woman [Désirée] does have some power. Her boldest action is disappearance, but she does act. [...] Even if she does kill herself and her child in the bayou, it is significant that the deaths are absent from the text.”¹⁰⁰

Therefore, the overemphasized feminist perspectives resulting from the *double historization* may be sometimes applied without careful consideration of the regional dimension of the works of King and Chopin. Aspiring to inscribe meaning to these texts by connecting them to the contemporary *aesthetic disposition* of feminist theory, the feminist interpretations of such texts, although they offer insightful analyses, may need to be amended in the two following perspectives. Firstly, it is the subtle disregard for the regional concepts of identity formation, which is closely linked to the role of the South as a region within the national context that exposes strong binary oppositions between the North and the South as well as the categories of White and Black. The accentuation of such local epistemologies undoubtedly leads to the necessity of applying new interpretative frameworks. Secondly, the feminist terminology applied to the works of Chopin and King often cannot explore the frequent accounts of racial oppression in these works in other terms than in parallels to oppression of women in their gender and social roles. As a result, many critics attempt to de-emphasize the shortcomings in the “proto-feminist” texts of these two authors.

¹⁰⁰ Peel, Ellen. “Semiotic Subversion in ‘Désirée’s Baby’ “ in: Brown, Dorothy H. and Ewell, Barbara C., eds., *op. cit.*, p. 69.

In her article "Grace King: Feminist, Southern Style" Clara Juncker, one of the prominent critics of the work of Grace King, argues that "as an advocate of womankind, writing from and of marginality, Grace King was perhaps inadvertently, a feminist".¹⁰¹ However, Juncker exposes the ambiguity of King's position regarding female emancipation and she further claims that King's engagement with the issues of female oppression and emancipation remains ambiguous and even confusing mainly because of the discord between King's personal life, which lacked any radical feminist activities, and her fiction, which seems to revolve strictly around the issues of femininity, feminine language, feminine enclosures and communities. Ultimately, Juncker concludes her examination of King's ambivalent relationship to feminism in the following terms: "As a turn-of-the-century woman experimenting with gender, King nevertheless provides more questions than answers to the rearrangement of sexual and social roles".¹⁰² Although King's texts are strongly marked by gender, as Juncker points out by referring to selected titles of King's stories, they are also racially specific. If we agree with Juncker that the "feminine enclosures of King's fiction are above all suffocating"¹⁰³ how do we account for the racial enclosures which are even more pronounced?

¹⁰¹ Juncker, Clara. "Grace King: Feminist, Southern Style." *The Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South* 26.3 (1988), p. 15.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

The exploration of the Louisiana region from the perspective of the Southern belles, confederate women, black mammies, and tragic mulattas in King's fiction and the explorations of women's class-defined lives in the fiction of Kate Chopin is certainly relevant for feminist interpretations. As Kate McCullough argues, the category of the feminine and its relationship to the category of the regional offers plausible interpretative models. According to McCullough "representations of femininity, that is, specifically inflected by various combinations of region, race ethnicity, and sexuality, serve as a vehicle for these authors' constructions of national identity."¹⁰⁴

However, the existing interpretations of the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin cannot fully illuminate the issues of racial complexities functioning in the formation of both gender and racial stereotypes. The category of ambiguity, which recurs in the interpretations of the texts of both King and of Chopin, suggests that the interpretative framework is not applicable to the issues that are central to the works of these two authors. The ambiguousness of the figure of the tragic mulatta, the ambiguous ending of King's short story "Little Convent Girl", Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" and *The Awakening* testifies to a profound absence, which needs to be further explored.

In order to summarize the answer to the question of to what extent can the function of Aesthetics be defined by its social space with relation to the reinterpretation of the works of Kate Chopin and Grace King, we can claim that by undermining the essentialist visions of Aesthetics, the reception of the works of King and Chopin testifies to Bourdieu's refusal of historical anamnesis; this corresponds with Barbara

¹⁰⁴ McCullough, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

Smith's claims that aesthetic and literary values are "in motion" and relates to the aforementioned objective of the discipline of new Aesthetics. Furthermore, focusing not only on the elements that are present in the texts of Chopin and King, but also on the elements that are absent or ambiguous, we may claim that the framework of feminist interpretations of their fiction needs to be broadened in order to illuminate the function of the signifier of race/skin within the Louisiana literary discourse of the nineteenth century.

It is evident from the previous paragraphs that the ambiguous agency of King's and Chopin's heroines, as well as their ambiguity of skin color/race, may be transcended strictly by reference to the local epistemologies of the region and its identities. Therefore, the examination of the regional dimension of Aesthetics is the most plausible way of approaching the ambiguities and absences in the feminist re-interpretations of the fiction of King and Chopin. As the next chapter shall fully illuminate, the best approach to the examination of such ambiguities present in the fiction of King and Chopin, as well as in their contemporary interpretations, is an interdisciplinary approach, which takes into consideration the region as an epistemological, social, and political foundation of aesthetic judgment.

In an attempt to discuss the second proposed question relevant to the topic of regional Aesthetics, *i.e.*, how does the notion of (the Other) region produce and alter the Aesthetics, we encounter a relative dearth of scholarship devoted to these topics. This indicates that there are other categories, such as the categories of race and gender,

which have steadily received more critical attention. However, Michael Kowalewski, who is one of the few literary critics who praise the inter-disciplinary interest in the idea of place with respect to the fiction of Chopin and King, equates the importance of the category of region to the categories of race and gender. He further explains that the reason why the category of region may have been ignored for so long by critics may be the following fact: “many of them simply lack a vocabulary with which to ask engaging philosophical, psychological, or aesthetic questions about what it means to dwell in a place, whether actually or imaginatively.”¹⁰⁵ Such a new attention to place in literary studies may, indeed, offer exciting concepts of identity formation and literary production, respectively.

In order to examine the second proposed question of this chapter we shall proceed by accentuating the Otherness present in the works of these two authors as well as their engagement of the Other in racial or gender-based terms. The main motivation of the turn toward alternative values in the works of regionalist writers was defined by Donna Campbell in the following manner:

Because the dying New England villages and the ravaged plantations of the South presented all too grim a spectacle to those who wished to remember better times, local color writers depicted a doubly distanced golden age that remains within the landscape of loss as significant absence, *perpetuating its own myth* by daily contrast with the straitened circumstances of the present.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Kowalewski, *op.cit.*, p. 174.

¹⁰⁶ Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 20, emphasis added.

As the subsequent paragraphs shall illuminate, the treatment of social and political marginalization in textual terms results in the following situation: the formerly marginalized voices take center stage in Louisiana Local Color literature. As Realism and Naturalism were becoming central to the national literary market, and also offering readers universal themes¹⁰⁷, regional Aesthetics opposed this trend by utilizing themes, tropes, and characters bearing strong regional connotations. Therefore, rather than examining the fiction of King and Chopin within the context of the “feminist turn to Regionalism”, which illuminates the “Aesthetics of domesticity” and “sentimental Aesthetics”, the focus of this examination is an assessment of the fiction of these two authors by comparing the aesthetic judgment with explicit laws of the region. This approach shall be further employed in order to discuss the tragic mulatta stereotype in the next chapter.

First and foremost, the Otherness of regional Aesthetics, which complies with the regional Aesthetics of marginalization, is present in the choice of characters in regionalist fiction. The contemporary focus on the marginalized “Other” in Southern Local Color is primarily centered upon female characters that are, for the most part, racially and ethnically marked, and the reinterpretation of their social roles. In her examination of Chopin’s short fiction, Kate McCullough recognizes the emphasis on Otherness in the choice of Chopin’s characters in the following terms:

¹⁰⁷ For a detailed discussion of the relationship between Realism, Naturalism, and Local Color, confer chapters: „Necessary Limits: Women’s Local Color Fiction“ and „Frederic, Norris, and the Fear of Effeminacy“ in: Campbell, *op. cit.*

In choosing for the most part to depict the “exotic” heroines of Local Color fiction – characters who were Cajuns, African Americans, or poor Creoles – rather than simply focusing on white upper class Anglo Americans (or even, at a stretch, upper-class, white Creoles), Chopin was choosing characters who were already, in the terms of dominant culture and literary codes, not eligible for the white, middle-class category of the True Womanhood.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, we can claim that by offering portrayals of such diverse characters as Désirée, whose racial status is questionable due to her uncertain origin, La Belle Zoraïde, who is a mulatta figure; Zaïda, who is an Acadian woman, and others, Chopin offers a complex portrayal of various versions of regionally, ethnically, and racially marked womanhood, and not simply a universal feminine theme.

In her novels, Chopin may not explicitly incorporate the vast variety of regionally specific Othernesses, as in her short fiction; yet by her choice of themes and characters, she continues to operate within the marginalized genre of Local Color, which “has its analogy in a more generalized feminization of Southern fiction and culture.”¹⁰⁹ From the opening scene of Chopin’s first novel, *At Fault*, we can clearly infer the role-reversal that is taking place in her depiction of life at the Place du Bois plantation:

When Jerome Lafirme died, his neighbors awaited the results of his sudden taking off with indolent watchfulness. It was a matter of unusual interest to them that a plantation of four

¹⁰⁸ McCullough, *op. cit.* p. 201.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

thousand acres had been left unencumbered to the disposal of a handsome, inconsolable, childless Creole widow of thirty. A *bêtise* of some sort might safely be looked for. But time passing, the anticipated folly failed to reveal itself; and the only wonder was that Thérèse Lafirme so successfully followed the methods of her departed husband.¹¹⁰

The role reversal on the Place du Bois plantation is clear and complete. The central role is not assumed by Jerome Lafirme, the plantation owner, but by his widow Thérèse, who is able successfully to manage the plantation during the difficult time of the metamorphosis of the traditional agrarian South into the new South, which is becoming increasingly industrialized. Despite her strong love for her plantation, Thérèse is able rationally to decide to sell the timber rights to her property to David Hosmer, and thus enter the business sphere traditionally viewed as male-dominated. Although *At Fault* lacks the stylistic sophistication and narrative complexity of Chopin's later novel, it successfully foreshadows its major theme of interrogation of the question of female emancipation.¹¹¹

Edna Pontellier, another strong female character, is portrayed in *The Awakening*, Chopin's second novel and "famous statement on middle-class female identity."¹¹² This time, Chopin explores the domestic sphere, a more appropriate setting for her heroine.

¹¹⁰ Disheroon Green, Suzanne and Caudle J. David, eds. *At Fault. Kate Chopin. A Scholarly Edition with Background Readings*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001, p. 3.

¹¹¹ For an alternative examination of Chopin's *At Fault*, vis-à-vis pastoral tradition, confer: Anderson, Maureen. "Unraveling the Southern Pastoral Tradition: A New Look at Kate Chopin's *At Fault*." *The Southern Literary Journal* 34.1 (Fall 2001): 1 – 13. Anderson offers an examination of *At Fault* in order to identify "Chopin's careful manipulation of nineteenth-century southern pastoral conventions in the novel to address flaws in southern society" (1).

¹¹² Holtman, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

However, by portraying Edna's rebellion against her role as a mother and wife and her aspiration to become an independent artist, a hoped-for vocation which is contrasted by the character of Adèle Ratignolle - the perfect example of a dutiful mother, skilled housekeeper, and doting wife - Chopin explores the previously marginalized theme of female selfhood, sensuality, and sexuality. Edna's Otherness is thus defined primarily in terms of her longing for sexual expression and expression of female desire in general. Furthermore, although Edna is not an ethnically marked character, we may argue that she assumes certain traits characteristically ascribed to the Other and therefore, metaphorically speaking, she becomes a tragic mulatta figure herself.¹¹³

Another form of Otherness (intentionally and unintentionally) explored in the regionalist fiction of the American South is the racial Other. In this context, the work of Grace King is the most representative example of such an exploration. Her fiction frequently utilizes racial stereotypes, such as the "Southern belle", the "mammy" and the "tragic mulatta" stereotype. By exposing these racial stereotypes, we may concurrently answer the third formulated question: "What is the role of region in the use of stereotypes in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King?" In her story, "Crippled Hope", Grace King employs a rhetorical device frequently used in pro-slave discourse. Seen through the dominant nineteenth-century interpretative framework, in this story King is aspiring to romanticize and idealize the relationship between the master and the slave. Since the master-slave relationship is portrayed as that of love and affection, and the family ties between the slaves are described as neglected, the abolition of slavery is

¹¹³ This argument is further developed in: Junková, Dagmar. „An Ambiguous Triumph: Evolving Stereotypes of Local Color Fiction in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." Diploma thesis. Charles University. Prague, 2004.

consequently seen as a source of sorrow for the slaves. By the same token, in this particular story King suggests that the only affectionate relationship, which is of importance as well as a benefit to the slave, is that between himself or herself and the master (plus his family). Indeed, Little Mammy's feelings about herself as a marketable item are the following: "Hardly a day passed that she [Little Mammy] did not see [...] some master she could have loved, some mistress whom she could have adored."¹¹⁴

Therefore, King's narrative strategies bear strong regional characteristics by adhering to the ideological work of postbellum reconciliation in order to "play down racial dissent by offering happy portraits of Southern racial harmony at a time when virulent racism was evident everywhere from the rise of lynching to the NWSA's white suffragists' abandonment of African-American women."¹¹⁵ Clearly, then in the fiction of Chopin and King the regional Other is being conflated not only with the female Other but also with the racial/ethnic Other.

Arguably, George Washington Cable, another representative of Louisiana Local Color literature, also engages forms of Otherness present in the New Orleans region:

Cable's local color in *The Grandissimes* is special, at the very least by virtue of the region he was delineating. That is, New Orleans and its environs were inescapably exotic to some degree and Cable developed his locale with full attention to its color, that is to atmosphere. However, it has not often been

¹¹⁴ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

¹¹⁵ McCullough, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

recognized how thoroughly and artfully functional that atmosphere is in the work.¹¹⁶

His main focus is the portrayal of the Creole community and the complicated hierarchy of the caste system of antebellum Louisiana. Cable is able to capture the exotic aspects of New Orleans by including the depiction of such events as “bal masqué” as well as more profound realities of this region. His fair depiction of racial discrimination praised by contemporary critics won him the label of the “Southern rebel” during his lifetime. Furthermore, his portrayal of the Louisiana tripartite racial system and the impossibility of its complete fusion with the newly established binary system clearly show the Otherness of racial categorization unique to the Louisiana region. According to Violet Harrington Bryan, Cable’s portrayal of women of color included above all: “pretty but tragic quadroons and octoroons, the landladies of neat, well-run boarding houses, nurses, prostitutes, or Voodoo women. The African women were seen as the praline, flower, and cala vendors, who sold their words of wisdom with their wares.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, due to their emphasis on the racial and ethnic complexities of the post-bellum Louisiana, it is clear that the views of the South offered in the fiction of Chopin, King, and Cable are conducted in regional terms, rather than in strict geographical terms. Therefore, we can agree with John Stauton that “by presenting regional

¹¹⁶ Cleman, John. “The Art of Local Color in George W. Cable’s *The Grandissimes*.” *American Literature* 47. 3. (Nov. 1975), p. 396.

¹¹⁷ Harrington Bryan, Violet. “Race and Gender in the Early Works of Alice Dunbar Nelson.” in: Brown, Dorothy, H. and Ewell, Barbara, C., eds. *Op cit*, p. 137.

experience from within, as to engage the reader's sympathy and identification, regionalism becomes a literature both of difference and for difference."¹¹⁸

Apart from the emphasis on the Otherness of characters in Louisiana regionalist fiction, there are other important themes establishing its marginal status. Above all, it is the "great matrix of loss" including themes of absence, loss, limitation and the past.¹¹⁹ The fiction of Grace King deals almost exclusively with themes of loss, be it loss of status, possessions, dreams, the loss of desire to live or the loss of all of these attributes. As Clara Juncker phrases it, "to an almost overwhelming degree, King's fictional focus is on the destitute, suffering women of the post-Civil War era."¹²⁰ This focus of King's work ultimately results in her stylistic downfall within the realm of plot delineation. "La Grande Demoiselle" and "Mimi's Marriage" are two stories that are strikingly similar, although they do not share all characteristics. Both of these stories describe a loss of the family property as a result of the Civil War. The story of "La Grande Demoiselle" puts more emphasis on the affluence of the Sante Foy family describing Idalie Sainte Foy Mortemart des Isles, the "Grande Demoiselle", and her wardrobe in the following manner:

It was said that in her dresses the very handsomest silks were used for linings, and that real lace was used where others put imitation, - around the bottoms of the skirts, for instance, - and

¹¹⁸ Stauton, John A. "Kate Chopin's 'One Story': Casting a Shadowy Glance on the Ethics of Regionalism." *Studies in American Fiction* 28. 2 (Autumn 2000), p. 208.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹²⁰ Juncker Clara. "Grace King: Woman-as-Artist." *Southern Literary Journal* 20. 1 (1987), p. 38.

sometimes the buttons were of real gold and silver, sometimes set with precious stones. Not that she ordered these particulars, but the dressmakers, when given *carte blanche* by those who do not condescend to details, so soon exhaust the outside limits of garments that perforce they take to plastering them inside with gold, so to speak.¹²¹

The pride, pomp and indulgence of the Sainte Foy family is described by King almost with affection in the first half of her story which is followed by the second half relating the misfortunes of this family as they followed one after another since the beginning of the Civil War. First of all, the patriarch of the family was killed in the war, consequently the family plantation was confiscated by the unionist colored troops and later, as the family house was consummated by fire, Idalie's mother died, presumably of rage. Within the scope of several short pages, King is portraying the ultimate fall from grace of one of the prominent families of the community. "Mimi's Marriage" is another story from King's collection *Balcony Stories* that deals with the themes of loss related to the historical events in the American South by employing a remarkably similar plot. (Only this story offers a little less dramatic portrayal of the same predicament and this time the family in question is not of such wealth, although it is still considerably proud.)

Interestingly, there are clear traceable parallels between the heroines of Chopin's and King's fiction, and the genre of Local Color itself. Kate McCullough describes the genre of Local Color in the following terms:

As a literary category, this "woman's" subgenre has been represented as a diminished version of canonical Realism:

¹²¹ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

though both attempt to represent lived reality with an attention to detail and common life, Local Color has been dismissed as quaint, backward-looking, and diminutive form (often short stories) written by women writing on a small scale, a form dismissed as nostalgic and concerned with loss and the rural.¹²²

The opposition between the genre of Local Color and Realism is duplicated by the constant struggle of the heroines to be demarcated in racial terms while, arguably, the dark race is a diminutive lesser form of the white race. Ultimately, the heroines of King's and Chopin's fiction, be it "La Grade Demoiselle, the "Little Convent Girl", Marcéline, Edna Pontellier, Thérèse Lafirme, La Belle Zoraïde, Désirée or any other female character, although they certainly offer a multitude of definitions of Southern femininity, they are representing the regional Other not by their geographical location, but by their constant reference to the racial dimension. Therefore, we may agree with Clara Juncker that "with abundant generalizations about woman's condition, she [King] claimed for herself a female text, written, read, and lived by a community of women"¹²³, yet we must also acknowledge that all the aspects of Southern womanhood in the fiction of Chopin and King are inextricably related to and defined via race and racial difference and opposition. The category of race, or the absence thereof, is crucial for the discussion of Southern womanhood in the works of Louisiana regionalist/Local Color writers, such as Chopin and King. The category of Otherness of Louisiana regionalist fiction manifests itself primarily in the category of race, which not only

¹²² McCullough, *op. cit.* p. 188.

¹²³ Juncker, Clara. "The Mother's Balcony: Grace King's Discourse of Femininity." *New Orleans Review* 15.1 (1988), p. 42

coexists with the categories of gender-roles, class and ethnicity, but which to a large extent governs these categories. The inclusions and exclusions in the racial dimension are a crucial part in regional identity formation, as it is portrayed by both Chopin and King.

To an extent, the regional Aesthetics of Otherness (of gender, race, language and setting) of Louisiana regionalist fiction, as represented by the fiction of King and Chopin, may be informed by the underlying tension between the region and the nation, as it is explored by Stephanie Foote, Amy Kaplan, Lori Robinson and Katherine Henninger¹²⁴ or the tensions between the genres of Local Color, Realism, and Naturalism¹²⁵; however there is an additional aspect relevant to the examination of regional Aesthetics that problematizes Chopin's and King's use of such textual strategies as stereotypes or allegory.

Presently, we shall argue that it is the essentiality of the category of race and of the coexisting fetishization of blackness and reification of whiteness in the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin that is produced as a specific regional aesthetic dimension and is perpetuated by stereotypes of race and gender. As Michelle Birnbaum correctly points out in her article "Alien Hands: Kate Chopin and the Colonization of Race" that illuminates certain parallels between the fiction of Kate Chopin and between colonial discourse: "Edna locates in racial and ethnic Others a territory necessary for a liberating

¹²⁴ Confer above chapter "Status of Regional Writing".

¹²⁵ For detailed discussion of this topic confer: Campbell, *op. cit.* and McCullough, *op. cit.*

alterity: in their difference, she finds herself.”¹²⁶ The implications of the normativity of whiteness are evident in King’s and Chopin’s employment of racial stereotypes in their fiction and they culminate in the employment of the tragic mulatta stereotype in their short stories as well as in Chopin’s masterpiece novel, *The Awakening*. The fetishization of blackness thus becomes the underlying epistemological, social, and political foundation of aesthetic judgment. This process is implied in the work of Patricia Yaeger under the rubric of a “crisis of whiteness in a place in which it has become impossible to be white in the old, accustomed ways.”¹²⁷ The reification of whiteness stabilizes the categories of identity in Louisiana regional fiction for both white and black characters. The question remains, to what extent do King and Chopin employ such textual strategies and to what extent do they rework them.

Perhaps the best exposition of this underlying epistemological category informed by local knowledge, apart from the tragic mulatta stereotype, which is explored in the following chapter, can be found in Grace King’s first story, “Monsieur Motte”, published in 1886. Monsieur Motte, the central character of the story, is a figure invented by Marcélite Gaulois, a quadroon servant, in order to allow Marcélite to provide for Marie Modeste “Motte”, an orphaned girl whom she nursed, brought up and whom she loves endlessly. As a symbol of white patriarchal power, Monsieur Motte is an absent benefactor in Marie’s life. The actual benefactress is her former “mammy” Marcélite who is afraid that by making publicly known that she and she alone is

¹²⁶ Birnbaum, Michele. „Alien Hands : Kate Chopin and the Colonization of Race.“ *American Literature* 66.2 (June 1994): pp. 303.

¹²⁷ Yaeger, Patricia. *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930 – 1990*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 3.

responsible for the improvement of Marie's financial situation, she will bring shame upon the girl because of her quadroon status. A review that appeared shortly after the publication of "Monsieur Motte " praises above all the elements of Local Color present in this story:

The location is New Orleans and its vicinity, and it is a study of créole and negro life from the pen of one who evidently has a very intimate acquaintance with both, and who writes not only out of her knowledge but out of her cordial sympathies. The theme would be a pathetic one under any circumstances, but what may be called its dramatic qualities are increased by the conditions imposed by the social order which rules in Louisiana as in the other lately slave States, and which makes the question of caste an always present and an always irritating one.¹²⁸

In a more recent discussion of this story, Anna Elfenbein interprets the story of Monsieur Motte as a "tour de force in its moving presentation of the self-sacrifice of a quadroon woman for a young girl she loves as a daughter [which] reveals the inability of one generation to prepare the next for the penalties attached to the female role."¹²⁹ However, apart from the insistence on the invaluable insights into the female social roles in King's fiction, which is a position held among others by Linda Coleman and Clara Juncker, King's short stories offer another dimension, which is not only co-existent but crucial – the dimension of authentic racial identity and corresponding ambiguous moral issues.

¹²⁸ „Monsieur Motte“ in: *The Literary News*. IX. June 1888, p. 173.

¹²⁹ Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line. The Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin, op. cit.*, p. 93.

The surrogate motherhood of Marcéline is the sole most important relationship in the life of Marie Modeste “Motte” who is being indoctrinated about the proper morals in the Institute St. Denis. The maternal instinct of the “mammy figure” Marcéline protects Marie from the knowledge of the absence of Monsieur Motte and the presence of Marcéline as her sole benefactress. The relationship of Marie and Marcéline is poignantly described in the following excerpt from King’s story: “Marcéline was not a mother – not her mother. She had stopped at the boundary where the mother ceases to be a physical and becomes a psychical necessity. The child still clung to Marcéline, but the young woman was motherless.”¹³⁰ Marcéline’s maternal instinct is portrayed within the boundaries of the category of the “mammy stereotype” employed in the post-bellum discourse where the black women are seen as devoid of maternal instinct and their only maternal feelings are projected on the white children of their masters.¹³¹

The figure of Monsieur Motte is an image of white power created by Marcéline who has been indoctrinated to place race above everything. Her devotion to little Marie and to the emotional bond which she was able to create with her, as well as the financial aspect of her devotion, dissolves when her race is an issue. Although Marcéline provides Marie with both emotional and financial support and she thus performs the traditional role of both parents, she is not entitled to be rewarded for her actions, other than facing the necessity of revealing the truth to Marie after her graduation, her metaphorical initiation to her adult life:

¹³⁰ Bush, *op cit*, p. 63.

¹³¹ The mammy stereotype is further examined below in chapter “Reinterpretation of the Mammy Stereotype”.

Life was changing from a brilliant path in white muslin dresses to a hideous dilemma; and for once she did not know what to do. A travail seemed going on in her brain; her natural strength and audacity had completely oozed away from her. She began a vehement monologue in creole, reiterating assertions and explanations, stopping short always at one point [...] She looked towards the ceiling with violent reproaches to the bon Dieu, doux Jesus, and Sainte-Vierge. Why had they left her alone to manage this? They knew she was a “nigger, nigger” (trying to humiliate and insult herself).¹³²

Although Marcérite is ascribed the most powerful agency in this story, in order to support Marie in financial terms compatible with the wealth and social status of Monsieur Motte, she is ultimately powerless. She is not able to verify Marie’s origin other than by providing an old prayer book of Marie’s mother.

Linda Coleman argues that the outcome of the story is the loss of identity for Marie: “Although the family Bible that Marcérite has given her provides Marie with a name and a social place, it fails to offer a physical place, her land to confirm her position.”¹³³ Such a centralization of the white character and of white issues at the expense of the character of Marcérite may correspond with King’s intent, yet it also perpetuates the reification of whiteness:

Marcérite loses her place as provider, her function as mother, and even her prewar role as confidante. In fact, even though Marie would follow Marcérite out of a sense of responsibility, there is no opportunity in New Orleans society for such a

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

relationship....All of Marcéline's earlier pride and self-respect disappears, implying an understanding on King's part of the loss of personal integrity caused by racial structures."¹³⁴

Correspondingly, Marie's *début* is her continuing indoctrination about the importance of race by Madame Lareveillère and Monsieur Goupilleau who, upon finding out that Marie has been at the complete mercy of the quadroon nurse, both offer her their own support in the following terms: "Mademoiselle, do not fear; Mademoiselle shall not leave us, I shall protect her; I shall be a father to her –" "And I", said Madame, drawing Marie still closer to her, - "I shall be her mother".¹³⁵ Thus both Madame Lareveillère and Monsieur Goupilleau offer to "protect" Marie by taking her away from the only person who ever loved her and cared for her, implying that the economical and emotional ties between Marie and Marcéline vanish due to Marcéline's quadroon status. The role of Marcéline is erased in order to replicate the preferred model of racially pure family and to provide space for the fulfillment of Madame Lareveillère's newly found maternal instinct while completely disregarding Marcéline's own maternal feelings toward Marie:

Madame, too, has suffered loss, but hers carries with it adult responsibilities – her vanity and pride have kept her from reestablishing a family. In choosing now to care for Marie and to act on her feelings for Goupilleau, she finds fulfillment and a future. This newly constituted nuclear family, however, so mirrors the antebellum family in structure that it offers

¹³⁴ Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Marcélite only token reward for her loyalty and her resourcefulness.¹³⁶

Therefore, as a result of a preference for “white motherhood” represented by Madame Lareveillère, Marcélite’s surrogate motherhood is erased on the basis of her race and the heroine of the story induces feelings of pity: “Ah, mon Dieu, ayez pitié de moi, pauvre négresse!”¹³⁷ The question remains, whether we should pity Marcélite because of her unfair treatment by Madame Lareveillère, or because of the lack of authentic racial identity outside the framework of the “quadroon mammy” stereotype in King’s text.

Thus, we may conclude that the category of regional Aesthetics produced in the South is specifically susceptible to the employment of stereotypes perpetuating the reification of whiteness and its normativity by referring to constructs such as the “mammy stereotype”, as examined in the story of “Monsieur Motte” or the “tragic mulatta” stereotype, the examination of which is the objective of the next chapter, both which function not solely as a narratively useful and economical description but also as an underlying strategy of absolutization of white values.

Having examined the relevance of region in the formation of aesthetic values and judgments, and having exposed the racially explicit role of stereotypes in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King, let us emphasize that the focus on such regional

¹³⁶ Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹³⁷ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

dimension is not simply the identification of the racist overtones present in the fiction of Chopin and King but also a plausible plateau for examination of the works of these two authors potentially enriching their existing feminist interpretations. The next chapter proposes to look beyond such existing interpretations and to offer a possible synthesis of the nineteenth century typical regionalist narrative strategies and the twentieth century interpretative frameworks by drawing parallels to post-colonial theory represented by Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, and Edward Said. The motivation for suggesting an analogy between the examination of regional Aesthetics and stereotypes in the works of Chopin and King, and the post-colonial discourse, is informed primarily by the post-colonial paradigm, utilizing the dichotomy of the colonizer versus the colonized in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*, as well as by the notion of stereotype as a form of normalizing judgment and the notion of in-between-ness and mimicry in Homi K. Bhabha's *Locations of Culture* in order to expose and question the appropriation of the tragic mulatta stereotype for the purpose of identifying the "Other" within white-supremacist discourse.

III. Reinterpretation of the Tragic Mulatta Stereotype in the Fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King: Gender as Seen through Region and Race

This chapter interrogates the category of race in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King in order to reclaim the importance of race for regional aesthetics and to offer an alternative view on the existing interpretations that emphasize the feminist themes of their fiction and, ultimately, to expand such interpretations. Unlike feminist theory that interprets the portrayals of racial oppression and racial/racist stereotypes in the fiction of Chopin and King primarily as a parallel to the female oppression or simply acknowledges its presence without fully interrogating it, the analysis of this chapter focuses on the interrogation of local epistemology of race, *i.e.*, the production of knowledge about race, as it is anchored in the Louisiana region, through the lens of postcolonial theory. Furthermore, this examination aims to emphasize that the representational possibilities of the tragic mulatta stereotype are not limited to the abolitionist family/nation analogy, and showcase that they are appropriated by Chopin and King as a region-specific trope fetishizing the black body.

Situating the examination of the tragic mulatta stereotype within the framework of the psychoanalytic approach of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, which examines primarily the psychological effects of racism, such as the internalized self-contempt, Homi K. Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse as it is presented in *Location of Culture*, a selection of essays exploring the unstable nature of colonial identity, and

the feminist approach to *mestizaje* of Gloria Anzaldúa captured in her seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, with further references, among others, to Edward Said's exploration of the relationship between power and knowledge in *Orientalism* and Patricia Yaeger's examination of the problem of neglect and throwaway bodies in *Dirt and Desire*, will allow us to examine the racial stereotypes present in the fiction of the two discussed authors by means of interrogating the process of the construction, as well as the function of such stereotypes, as they are informed by the Louisiana region, and by its social and racial hierarchies, rather than relying on the virgin/whore dichotomy that is typically used for the interpretation of racial and gender stereotypes in nineteenth-century Louisiana regionalist fiction.

The relevance of the application of the postcolonial theoretical framework to the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin is justified primarily by the racial hierarchies that were codified in the South well before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 by the Louisiana's *Code Noir*¹³⁸ and that continued to exist in the post-bellum and post-reconstruction South. The complex interplay of racial issues in the post-bellum society is reflected in the fiction of both King and Chopin. However, their treatment of these issues is not unproblematic. In fact, as Anna Elfenbein points out in her discussion of the fiction of Kate Chopin, the nineteenth-century Louisiana hierarchies of race, caste,

¹³⁸ To regulate relations between slaves and colonists, the Louisiana *Code Noir*, or slave code, or later *Black Code*, which was largely based on that compiled in 1685 for the French Caribbean colonies, was introduced in 1724 and remained in force until the United States took possession of Louisiana in 1803. The Code's 54 articles regulated the status of slaves and free blacks, as well as relations between masters and slaves. For the full text of the *Code Noir* confer: French, Benjamin Franklin. *Historical Collections of Louisiana: Embracing Translations of Many Rare and Valuable Documents Relating to the Natural, Civil, and Political History of that State*. New York: D. Appleton, 1851.

and class have a potential to confuse the contemporary reader because Chopin's "treatment of race and ethnicity is sometimes negligent and sometimes purposeful, [and as a result] many readers have been baffled by those stories that present the complex and ambiguous racial categories of nineteenth-century Louisiana."¹³⁹ Therefore, in order to examine the contemporary revaluation of the fiction of Chopin and King, a new interpretative framework needs to be introduced for the interrogation of their works that are representative of nineteenth-century Louisiana regionalist discourse and its treatment of race. Such interpretative framework shall be established by refocusing on the presence as well as on the absence of the questions of race primarily in King's stories "The Little Convent Girl", "Monsieur Motte", "Madrilène; or the Festival of the Dead" and in Chopin's stories "Désirée's Baby", "La Belle Zoraïde" and in her most accomplished novel, *The Awakening*.

Furthermore, the relevance of the application of the theoretical framework of postcolonialism to the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin may be supported by the following argument presented by Ania Loomba in her theoretical study entitled *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* with regard to the relatively extensive applicability of the term "postcolonialism" to various subjects:

"Colonialism" is not just something that happens from outside a country or a people, not just something that operates with the collusion of forces inside, but a version of it can be duplicated from within. So that "postcolonialism", far from being a term that can be indiscriminately applied, appears to be riddled with contradictions and qualifications.

¹³⁹ Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line. The Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin, op. cit.*, p. 120.

It has been suggested that it is more helpful to think of postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism. Such a position would allow us to include people geographically displaced by colonialism such as African-Americans or people of Asian or Caribbean origin in Britain as ‘postcolonial’ subjects although they live within metropolitan cultures.¹⁴⁰

In fact, admitting that due to its widespread application, the term “postcolonialism” itself is riddled with contradictions and qualifications, underscores the importance of an application of such an anti-hegemonic paradigm in various disciplines. Indeed, in an attempt to examine various hierarchies of power, “gradual and increasingly important research [has been] done in areas of feminism, multicultural minority and gay and lesbian studies.”¹⁴¹ Thus, rather than defining the term in precise historical or theoretical terms, as the genesis of this term suggests, its main characteristic should be the desire to “contest the centrality and authority of distinctive systems of domination, together contributing to the deciphering of systems of representation designed to validate institutional subordination and silence the voice of competitors.”¹⁴² Therefore, this implication of postcolonial theory is central to its application to the following nineteenth-century Louisiana regionalist discourse, as represented by the works of

¹⁴⁰ Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism /Postcolonialism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 16.

¹⁴¹ Quayson, Ato. “Postcolonialism” in: Craig, E., ed. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge. 6 March 2008 <<http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/N093SECT2>>.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

Grace King and Kate Chopin. Needless to say, we must acknowledge that not all subordinating discourses are the same in different regions; moreover, the South is by no means a homogeneous region and, as argued by Suzanne Disheroon-Green and Lisa Abney:

The South is not monolithic, and perhaps the best example of the heterogeneity inherent in the Southern region can be found in the state of Louisiana. Despite its numerous similarities with the South at large, Louisiana is a region possessing a unique cultural identity.¹⁴³

Therefore, we are exposing the degree of the applicability of the theories of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said and their resonance with the conceptualization of race present in the works of the two Louisiana authors, Grace King and Kate Chopin, without claiming their uncontested and universal applicability to the rest of the South outside the Louisiana region.

This chapter primarily analyzes the trope of the “tragic mulatta”, appropriated both by King and Chopin in their fiction, as an essential point of conjunction of the issues of gender, race, and region. We shall examine the utilization of this trope in Chopin’s and King’s fiction in order to uncover the absence of authentic racial knowledge. Furthermore, we shall argue that this absence is motivated by the underlying anxiety presented by the existence of ambivalent feelings of fear and desire toward the racial Other. Moreover, the degree of the interplay of fear and desire shall

¹⁴³ Disheroon-Green, Suzanne and Abney, Lisa. “Introduction: Building Literary Louisiana, 1865 – 1945.” *Songs of the Reconstructing South: Building Literary Louisiana 1865 – 1945*. Eds. Suzanne Disheroon-Green and Lisa Abney. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002, p. 1.

be exposed in the work of these two writers partially by alluding to the work of Sallie Rhett Roman, Chopin's and King's contemporary Louisiana woman writer whose work has been rediscovered for the literary canon by extensive scholarly research undertaken by Nancy Dixon.¹⁴⁴ Consequently, the illumination of the internalization of colonial commodification of the racial Other shall be explored as a true tragic element in the tragic mulatta stereotype by alluding to Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse and Anzaldúa's concept of the "new mestiza consciousness". Patricia Yaeger's approach to Southern fiction is appropriated for the examination of the tragic mulatta stereotype in the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin primarily because of its emphasis on the "reconfigurations of southern body politics"¹⁴⁵, which corresponds to the violence committed on the mulatta bodies. This is summarized by Judith Berzon in the following manner: "Death through grief, murder, childbirth, abortion, and suicide; life with remorse, despair, bitterness, alienation, and insanity; this is the catalogue of tortures that are endured by various tragic mulatto characters."¹⁴⁶

The suggested reshaping of the theoretical framework and redefinition of the employment of the tragic mulatta stereotype in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King lead us to the interrogation of racist overtones in the works of the two discussed authors that are often omitted or glossed over in critical interpretations of their works

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Dixon, Nancy. *Fortune and Misery: Sallie Rhett Roman of New Orleans, a Biographical Portrait and Selected Fiction, 1891 – 1920*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999.

¹⁴⁵ Yaeger, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ Berzon, Judith R. *Neither White Nor Black. The Mulatto Character in American Fiction*. New York: New York University Press, 1978, p. 102.

and, even more often, interpreted with respect to the construction of gender roles. As Linda Coleman suggested in her study of Grace King:

No doubt at least one reason for her marginalization has been King's white-apologist position on race. To acknowledge the importance of Grace King's fiction, however, is not to condone racism. What is valuable is an understanding of the limitations that interlocking racism and sexism imposed on King and her representation of Louisiana women.¹⁴⁷

Subsequently, in this study, the application of postcolonial theory to the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin allows us to interrogate nineteenth-century white supremacist notions existing in Louisiana local color fiction and their respective (lack of) examination in twentieth-century reevaluation and problematization of gender-roles in regionalist literature. By the same token, this study will offer comments about the canonization of the work of Kate Chopin and the parallel aspiring, yet not as successful, attempts to reinterpret the work of Grace King and include it in the literary canon of American literature.

The interpretations of the role of racial stereotypes in the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin have predominantly focused on the female stereotypes that were interpreted strictly in terms of the virgin/whore dichotomy of the white and black womanhood, respectively. Examined and situated within the Louisiana power hierarchies by Anna Goodwyn Jones, this dichotomy is explained in the following terms:

¹⁴⁷ Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

Those basic Western myths [brought by the southern colonists along with their patriarchal social and familial assumptions] polarized women into the “virgin, pure and untouchable, and the prostitute, dangerously sexual.” The clustering of images – goodness and light with virginity, evil and darkness with sexuality – seemed to be reified and therefore confirmed when white planters owned black slave women. Race and sex thus fused to create in the “white lady” the southern version of the nineteenth century’s cult of true womanhood.¹⁴⁸

The examination of the virgin/whore dichotomy is certainly relevant for the illumination of gender roles and stereotypes of the antebellum South. Its relevance is extended to the tragic mulatta stereotype, among others, by Christine Palumbo-DeSimone in her essay “Race, Womanhood, and the Tragic Mulatta. An Issue of Ambiguity”¹⁴⁹ in order to expose Kate Chopin’s subversion of the tragic mulatta in “Désirée’s Baby”, and to argue that “Armand is the truly tragic mulatto in “Désirée’s Baby”, for he has not only lost his family, but has inculcated the racist values which must now lead him to self-loathing.”¹⁵⁰ However, applying the category of ambiguousness to Désirée Palumbo-DeSimone does not reflect on the internalization of the “racist values” by Désirée herself, who is “literally lost”; and she further ascribes the source of Désirée’s tragedy “not [to] her assumed ‘taint’ [but to] the system of racial

¹⁴⁸ Jones, Anne Goodwyn. *Tomorrow is Another Day. The Woman Writer in the South, 1859 – 1936*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1981, p. 12.

¹⁴⁹ Palumbo-DeSimone, Christine. “Race, Womanhood, and the Tragic Mulatta. An Issue of Ambiguity.” *Multiculturalism: Roots and Realities*. Ed. James C. Trotman. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002, pp. 125 – 136.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

and sexual oppression [where] the white patriarchal system is the ‘taint’.”¹⁵¹ Therefore, although the mulatta is a “racially ambiguous” figure, it is interrogated by Palumbo-DeSimone primarily in terms of “men’s’ anxiety about women’s sexuality”¹⁵² rather than in terms of racial fear from the *racially* Other and the interrogation of absolute racial categories.

In accordance with the above discussed definition and applicability of postcolonial theory to the racial stereotypes in “Little Convent Girl”, “Monsieur Motte”, “Madrilène; or the Festival of the Dead”, “Désirée’s Baby”, “La Belle Zoraïde” and *The Awakening*, Gloria Anzaldúa’s explorations of “borderlands” that are situated outside the binary value system of sex (male/female), gender (black/white), and language (English/non-English) become relevant; this is so especially when she appropriates the dichotomy of purity and sexual desire - the virgen/puta dichotomy - for her examination of the imposition of these binary oppositions by the conqueror ideology. For instance, in order to illuminate the importance of the category of ambiguity that is irreconcilable with the *status quo* defined in binary terms, Anzaldúa argues that the Virgen de Guadalupe is a powerful symbol of the tolerance of ambiguity:

Today, la Virgen de Guadalupe is the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered. She is the symbol of the mestizo true to his or her Indian values. La cultura Chicana identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

Our Faith is rooted in indigenous attributes, images, symbols,
magic, and myth.¹⁵³

Anzaldúa refuses the imposition of this “myth” on the Chicano religious and cultural values in *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, and she strives to uncover the complexity of deities of “folk Catholicism” practiced by many Chicanos by identifying a Virgen de Guadalupe with her Indian predecessor *Coatlalopeuh*, and considering her the central deity connecting the Chicanos to their Indian ancestry: “Coatlalopeuh is descended from, or is an aspect of, earlier Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddess. The earliest is Coatlicue, or ‘Serpent Skirt’.”¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, Anzaldúa describes the subsequent disempowerment of the female deities: “The male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities.”¹⁵⁵ As Erika Aigner-Varoz argues, Anzaldúa ultimately aspires to do the following:

[to] stri[p] away the surface metaphors that camouflage the “wounds”, the underlying conceptual metaphors, in order to redeem and reclaim voice, instinct, intellect, and sexuality. These are qualities that she implies should be denied to no one, and thus she uncovers a space not only for those who have traditionally been cast out, but for all humanity.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/ La Frontera. The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987, p. 30.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁵⁶ Aigner-Varoz, Erika. “Metaphors of a Mestiza Consciousness: Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* – Critical Essay.” *MELUS* 25.2 (Summer 2002), p. 60.

The mulatta figure in the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin may be interpreted as a similar symbol of the tolerance of ambiguity and a call for equality. In fact, Eve Raimon in her recent study *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited* argues that the trope of the tragic mulatto or mulatta is appropriated for interpretations entailing questions of nationality and identity of modern America and foreshadowing the concepts of hybridity and *mestizaje*:

The figure of the "tragic mulatto" provides a central literary site for black and white antislavery writers to work through questions raised by the highly charged subject position of mixed-race persons in antebellum society. Literally embodying both Northern and Southern ideologies, the "amalgamated" mulatto (to use the contemporaneous term) can be viewed as quintessentially American, a precursor to contemporary motifs of "hybrid" and "mestizo" identities.¹⁵⁷

Therefore, the ambiguity of the tragic mulatta figure should not be limited solely to an examination with respect to the virgin/whore stereotype but it should, more importantly, be interpreted as a stereotype arising from the sexualized fetish of the colonial discourse, as delineated by Homi Bhabha in the following manner:

I argue for the reading of the stereotype in terms of fetishism. The myth of historical origination – racial purity, cultural priority – produced in relation to the stereotype functions to 'normalize' the multiple beliefs and split subjects that constitute colonial discourse as a consequence of its process of disavowal. [...] The fetish of stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and

¹⁵⁷ Raimon, Eve Allegra. *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited. Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004, p.4.

contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it. This conflict of pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence, has a fundamental significance for colonial discourse.¹⁵⁸

The fetishization of the black body, *i.e.*, the fear of the racial Other and a coexistent desire projected towards the body of the tragic mulatta, thus embodies the complex and paradoxical nature of a stereotype as a confluence of knowledge and power, but also fantasy and pleasure, which ultimately reveals not only the dominant power of those who create and circulate those stereotypes, but also their anxieties and fears. The interrogation of the tragic mulatta stereotype in the fiction of Chopin and King in accordance with Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse allows us to access the multivalent function of the local epistemology of race, as it is specific to the Louisiana region at the turn of the nineteenth century, without reducing the tragic mulatta figure to a trope of abolitionist fiction or a pseudo-romantic heroine. As a result of the application of such an ideological framework, the attempts to assert absolute statements about the racial Other ultimately fail to offer an accurate perspective on the racial hierarchies and codifications of race. As interpreted by Toni Morrison in her series of lectures *Playing in the Dark* fetishization is:

[E]specially useful in evoking erotic fears or desires and establishing fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal. Blood for example, is a pervasive fetish: black blood, white blood, the purity of blood; the purity of white female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and

¹⁵⁸ Bhabha, *op. cit.* p. 74 – 75.

sex. Fetishization is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery.¹⁵⁹

This element of fear is most frequently manifested in terms of violence on the black body. As Sonia Oltavaro-Hormillosa claims in her study of Fanon's "masculinist tradition" within the context of contemporary gay discourse:

One of the major recurring themes in *Black Skins White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth* is the racial anxiety that simultaneously masks both desire and fear of the black body and manifests itself in violence towards the body, as illustrated by the history of lynching.¹⁶⁰

The examination of the elements of fear and desire directed towards the black body as underlying characteristics of the tragic mulatta stereotype is thus parallel to Patricia Yaeger's attention to the body within the context of the "New Southern Studies"; primarily via an examination of the trope of a body merging with water or earth that under the rubric of "reverse autochthony" explores the sites where „both grownups and children are hurled into water or earth without proper rituals, without bearing witness to grief, without proper mourning.¹⁶¹

Grace King's short story "Little Convent Girl" offers adequate themes for examination of the above outlined objective, *i.e.*, the interpretation of racial stereotypes

¹⁵⁹ Morrison, *op cit.*, p. 68.

¹⁶⁰ Oltavaro-Hormillosa, Sonia "Gigi". "Racial and Erotic Anxieties: Ambivalent Fetishization, from Fanon to Mercer." *Postcolonial and Queer Theories: Intersections and Essays*. Ed. John C. Hawley. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001, p. 91.

¹⁶¹ Yaeger, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

as an articulation of a contradictory emotion of fear and a coexistent desire aimed towards the racialized Other. In this story, the tragic mulatta stereotype is captured fully in correspondence with the conventional treatment of this figure where the mulatta is portrayed as a “dark, sweet flower with traces of poison on her lips. Unaware (in many versions of the formula) and innocent of the toxin she bears, she is fated to suffer social ostracism or slavery for the sins of her white father.”¹⁶² Traditionally viewed within the Southern postbellum ideological framework as a tale warning against miscegenation, this short story has become a focus of contemporary critical attention due to its pronounced (however subtle) subversion of contemporaneous gender-roles. As Douglas McReynolds argues:

King’s characters are largely stereotyped, and her plots are often borrowed; yet there occurs frequently in her short stories [...] a synthesis of fairly crude and certainly familiar stock elements into the startlingly clear insights that attends the revelation of human truth. More specifically, King writes about real flesh-and-blood women; and by translating the experience of sex and especially repressed sexuality into motifs of war and manners she, perhaps better than any of her contemporaries, makes accessible the unique experience of being woman in a man-dominated society.¹⁶³

Similarly, Clara Juncker sees King’s role as a woman-as-artist who “in the negative space of a creative no-man’s land [...] imagined a female text, inhabited by past and future women (writers). [...] King filled the silence with words, sweet in the mouths of

¹⁶² Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line. The Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin, op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁶³ McReynolds, Douglas J. “Passion Repressed: The Short Fiction of Grace King.” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 37.4 (1983), p. 208.

her literary daughters.”¹⁶⁴ In fact, the convent girl invites interpretations focusing on the issue of oppressed female identity. Most importantly, the heroine remains nameless throughout the story, and needs to rely on the category of “convent girl” for her (self)identification:

She was known on the boat only as “the little convent girl”. Her name, of course, was registered in the clerk’s office, but on a steamboat no one thinks of consulting the clerk’s ledger. It is always the little widow, the fat man, the tall colonel, the parson, etc...She was the beau-ideal of the little convent girl. ¹⁶⁵

However, as Ellen Peel explicitly pointed out in her article referring to the work of Kate Chopin, “Semiotic Subversion in *Désirée’s Baby*”, namelessness connotes “not only femaleness but also blackness in antebellum society.”¹⁶⁶ Therefore, the tragic fate of the convent girl who is mourning the death of her father foreshadows the tragedy of the fact that her mother is a member of the racialized Other. In Fanon’s terminology, that the main female character remains nameless throughout the story resonates with the important role that is played by the “racial epidermal schema” for the purpose of (self)identification. As we shall later see, primarily in Chopin’s stories “*Désirée’s Baby*” and “*La Belle Zoraïde*”, race becomes the most important signifier, overriding the importance of name, gender, and class.

¹⁶⁴ Juncker Clara. “Grace King: Woman-as-Artist”. *Op cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁶⁵ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

¹⁶⁶ Peel, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

The identity crisis of the little convent girl is anticipated, among other things, by King's choice of narrative technique. The consistent use of the third person narrative allows King to deny the little convent girl absolutely any chance to voice her own narrative and relies fully on the scopic drive, resulting in a gaze that is an epidermal identification. The identity crisis of the little convent girl is thus parallel to the state of "crushing objecthood" described by Fanon as instituted by "the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories."¹⁶⁷ At the mercy of the narrator, the little convent girl is described by King in the following manner:

She was dressed in deep mourning. Her black straw hat was trimmed with stiff new crape, her new bombazine dress had crape collar and cuffs. She wore her hair in two long plaits fastened around her head tight and fast. Her hair had a strong inclination to curl, but that had been taken out of it as austerely as the noise out of her footfalls. Her hair was as black as her dress; her eyes, when one saw them, seemed blacker than either, on account of the bluishness of the white surrounding her pupil. Her eyelashes were almost as thick as the black veil which the sisters had fastened around her hat with an extra pin the very last thing before leaving.¹⁶⁸

Indeed, the emphasis on the outward appearance of the convent girl is in sharp contrast to the absence of any account of her internal sentiment or experience and the minimal references to her feelings. In fact, the convent girl's perspective is utterly missing from the story. Some would argue that such an emphasis on the perception of the convent

¹⁶⁷ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove, 1967. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann, p. 111.

¹⁶⁸ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

girl by others symbolizes her submissive (typically feminine) nature and is a result of her submission to the rule of her father and the subsequent rules of the convent. However, we may suggest that the convent girl in this story is a victim of the codified system of a racial binary apparatus. Although her name is never mentioned, perhaps in order to protect her father from shame, attention is drawn to a precise description of her complexion: “Her complexion was sallow, a pale sallow, the complexion of a brunette bleached in darkened rooms.”¹⁶⁹ The absence of her own voice and the subsequent emphasis on the scopic element clearly suggests that she is, in fact, objectified into a character that is not able to assert her identity, femininity, or ethnicity. Thus, the absence of any agency or discourse from the nameless mulatta underscores not only her status as a victim of institutionalized oppression and repressed sexuality but also as a racially marked victim of her region, where the applicability of the *Code Noir* used to regulate inter-racial relations in many ways, including the following:

Free men who shall have one or more children during concubinage with their slaves, together with their masters who accepted it, shall each be fined two thousand pounds of sugar. If they are the masters of the slave who produced said children, we desire, in addition to the fine, that the slave and the children be removed and that she and they be sent to work at the hospital, never to gain their freedom.¹⁷⁰

The role of the tragic mulatta stereotype in King’s story “The Little Convent Girl” is to function as an objectified construct asserting and maintaining the

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68

¹⁷⁰ „Article IX“ of the Black Code translated from the 1685 original version of the *Code Noir* from George Mason University. 20 Feb. 2008 <<http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/335/>>.

irreconcilable and unmixable categories of “white” and “black”. Therefore, we can conclude that the stereotypical portrayal of the tragic mulatta figure in this story functions as a narrative tool emphasizing the ideological perspectives inscribed in this stereotype in order to support the nationalizing category of whiteness and its superior status in accordance with Bhabha’s following statement of the role of the Other within colonial discourse:

[D]espite the ‘play’ in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise of power, colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism [- radical realism].¹⁷¹

However, this objectification of the character of the little convent girl for the purpose of the white ideological perspectives on the assertion of difference between the “white” and “black” race is undermined by its driving force, the underlying contradictory feelings of fear and desire.

The fear of the racial Other, as an underlying motivation for the perpetuation of the tragic mulatta stereotype that embodies the impossibility of crossing the binary opposition between “white” and “black” , manifests itself in “The Little Convent Girl” on many levels. First of all, the plot of the story emphasizes the dimension of the fear of the Othered race by allowing the little girl’s father to willingly separate his daughter

¹⁷¹ Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 70 – 71.

from her mother. Furthermore, the father decides to confine her to the convent unaware of her mother's race rather than to tell her the truth about her origin. Therefore, as a result of the father's racial fears and attempts to "protect" his daughter, the girl is not only racially marked, but she is also motherless. Arguably, she is fatherless too, since her father provided assistance solely on a financial level, paying the convent fees.

The following situation described at the end of "The Little Convent Girl" is exactly the type of situation that the little girl's father unsuccessfully attempted to avert:

She did not turn her eyes to the right or left, or once (what all passengers do) look backward at the boat which, however slowly, had carried her surely over dangers that she wot [sic] not of. All looked at her as she passed. All wanted to say good-by [sic] to the little convent girl, to see the mother who had been deprived of her so long. Some expressed surprise in a whistle; some in other ways. All exclaimed audibly, or to themselves, "Colored!".¹⁷²

Clearly, we can draw parallels between this situation, as it is related by King in "The Little Convent Girl", and the following situation described by Frantz Fanon in the chapter "Fact of Blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

"Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile. "Look, a Negro!" It was true. It amused me. "Look, a Negro!" The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement. "Mamma", see the Negro! I'm frightened! Frightened!

¹⁷² Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.¹⁷³

In fact, transcending the particulars of these two narrations, we may argue that each of these two accounts of the encounter with the racial Other offers an opposing perspective of such a situation. King's text captures the third person perspective related by the "colonizer" and Fanon's narrative captures the first person perspective of the "colonized". Both of these perspectives rely heavily on the "objectification of the scopic drive" and the "racial epidermal schema".¹⁷⁴

Parallel to Sallie Rhett Roman's treatment of colored characters in her novels *Tonie* and *Folette of Timbalier Island*, as described by Nancy Dixon in the following terms: "like other black characters in Roman's fiction, Ann and Johnson are talked about, ordered around, but seldom or never speak"¹⁷⁵, we may claim that there is a significant absence of any authentic exploration of racial issues in the fiction of Grace King that would transcend the utilization of the themes of racial interaction and the Creole discourse and "negro patois" for the purpose of "exotic" and thus marketable features of the genre of Local Color fiction.

¹⁷³ Fanon, *op. cit.*, pp. 111 - 112.

¹⁷⁴ For both terms *cf.* Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 80 – 81.

¹⁷⁵ Dixon, Nancy. „Sallie Rhett Roman of the *Times Democrat*: Race, Women, and Southern Aristocracy in the Novellas, *Tonie* (1900) and *Folette of Timbalier Island* (1900)" in: Disheroon-Green and Abney, eds. *Op. cit.*, p. 29.

Arguably, the nameless bi-racial heroine in the story of “The Little Convent Girl” does not possess the amazingly beautiful traits traditionally ascribed to the archetypal mulatta figure whose “beauty attracted the unwanted attentions of unscrupulous men who wanted to possess her physically, but who paid no heed to the consequences of such attentions to the woman”¹⁷⁶. In this instance, the element of desire in King’s story is clearly suppressed by the element of fear from the racialized Other, which threatens to cross the white/black binary. The distant symbol of desire can be detected perhaps in the little convent girl’s mother who at a certain point in time was sexually attractive for the father in such a manner that he succumbed to his passion, despite his indoctrination, which ultimately lead him toward a lifelong hypocrisy and fear that the truth about his daughter could be discovered one day. However, the little convent girl’s mother who probably possessed traits of exotic beauty strong enough to seduce the little girl’s future father remains portrayed simply as “Colored!”¹⁷⁷

As Suzanne Disheroon points out in her examination of the mulatta figures in the fiction of Lyle Saxon and Zora Neale Hurston, the literary depictions of the tragic mulatto are often misleading:

Whereas the *literati* tend to portray mixed-race women as victims of circumstance who had no control over their destinies, their relatives, in fact, had a significant hand in their barter. [...] Elaborate balls were hosted by shrewd mothers who, realizing that their daughters faced futures marked by

¹⁷⁶ Disheroon-Green, Suzanne. “Bleaching the Color Line: Caste Structures in Lyle Saxon’s *Children of Strangers* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” in: Disheroon-Green, Suzanne and Abney Lisa, eds. *Op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹⁷⁷ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

financial uncertainty, would place them on display before wealthy white men.¹⁷⁸

The arrival of the little convent girl to New Orleans is thus offering a new perspective on her possibilities in the social structure of the more benevolent tripartite racial system that includes the *plaçage* arrangement, which is described by Violet Harrington Bryan in the following words:

The status of free antebellum quadroon women was, predictably, ambiguous. Many did not wish to marry free men of color, and certainly not men who were any darker than they. The result was the *plaçage* arrangement, which became conventional in antebellum New Orleans society, whereby a white man had a liaison with a woman of color, set her up in an apartment or house, and provided for the children of their union, while also legally marrying a white woman and having a “legitimate” family.¹⁷⁹

The slightly exotic, yet sufficiently white features of the little convent girl could possibly be “marketed” to her advantage to ensure her a comfortable social position, as well as a degree of respect. As Anna Elfenbein points out in her discussion of stereotyped women on the color line:

[I]nstitutionalized mulatto concubinage had developed in only one place in the United States, in New Orleans, under the influence of Spanish and French colonists and of Spanish and French refugees from the West Indies. As a result of generations of breeding light-skinned merchandise for a wealthy clientele and of interracial “arrangements” between

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁷⁹ Harrington Bryan, Violet. “Race and Gender in the Early Works of Alice Dunbar Nelson.” in: Brown, Dorothy, H. and Ewell, Barbara, C., eds. *Op cit.*, p. 126.

free women of color and white “benefactors”, the word *Negro* was “hardly a fair term, for there were whole rainbow hues of colors” among the prostitutes in New Orleans.”¹⁸⁰

The element of eroticization of the little convent girl’s body is, however, completely absent from King’s narration of “The Little Convent Girl”. Furthermore, at this point we may speculate whether the little convent girl’s suicide was perhaps her response to her mother’s decision to bring her to see the captain and possibly arrange some type of plaçage situation for her daughter. Followed directly by the final paragraphs of the story relating the drowning of the little convent girl, King portrays the encounter of the two women of color with the captain in the following manner:

“Captain!” A hand plucked at his elbow, as if not confident that the mere calling would secure attention. [...] The mother of the little convent girl stood there, and she held the little convent girl by the hand. “I have brought her to see you,” the woman said. “You were so kind – and she is so quiet, so still all the time, I thought it would do her a pleasure.” [...] There was, perhaps, some inflection in the woman’s voice that might have made known, or at least awakened, the suspicion of some latent hope or intention, had the captain’s ear been more fine enough to detect it.¹⁸¹

Perhaps what we should detect in this ending is the timid attempt of the little convent girl’s mother to offer the captain her daughter’s “companionship”. In such an

¹⁸⁰ Elfenbein, Shannon, Anna. *Women on the Color Line: Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin, op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁸¹ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

interpretation, the final action of the little convent girl reflects even more strongly King's refusal of miscegenation, and its consequent disruption of Southern hierarchical structures.

However, unlike Sallie Rhett Roman, King's contemporary local color writer who refuses to "be forced to address the issue of miscegenation [...] in her writing"¹⁸², Grace King chooses to acknowledge the issue of miscegenation in her fiction. We may argue that King chooses to incorporate the tragic mulatta trope in her fiction in order to assert the stereotype because of a fear of the racial Other in the postbellum South, fully in correspondence with the role ascribed to stereotype by Homi Bhabha, defined in the following terms:

I suggest, in a very preliminary way, that the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as *anxious as it is assertive*, and demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself.¹⁸³

In other words, the encounter with the racial Other, which typically results in refusal, feelings of antagonism, creation of ideological myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions, is portrayed in the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin, in full correspondence with the nineteenth-century ideology that employed negative stereotypes in order to portray inferiority of the Othered race and thus continually solidify its superior position. Black

¹⁸² Dixon, „Sallie Rhett Roman of the *Times Democrat*: Race, Women, and Southern Aristocracy in the Novellas, *Tonie* (1900) and *Folette of Timbalier Island* (1900)", *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹⁸³ Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 70, emphasis added.

loyalty and white superiority have become widely accepted concepts within nineteenth-century Louisiana regionalist discourse.

In order to offer a new perspective on King's treatment of racial issues, Susie Scifres Kuilan in her article "The 'All-Seeing Eye' in Grace King's *Balcony Stories*" argues that King "uses blindness images to address the tough issues of race and class [and] uses blindness as a way of discussing wrongs perpetuated against people on the basis of race, gender, and class."¹⁸⁴ Kuilan argues that due to her social status and to her desire to advance her literary career King concealed her insights into the issues of race, and instead offered the sentiments corresponding with the public beliefs of her time. This argument, however passionately it attempts to reclaim Grace King as an author whose work "not only reveals her conflicting beliefs about class, race, and gender but it also illustrates King's understanding that times were changing, requiring people to accept new truths about these roles"¹⁸⁵ is not convincing. In fact, the interpretation of the role of the little convent girl's veil, as it is offered in "The 'All-Seeing Eye' in Grace King's *Balcony Stories*" seems misdirected because it identifies the role of the veil as literally obstructing the little girl's view and, furthermore, it draws parallels to the figurative blindness of the little girl who is unaware of her biraciality:

In the story, the girl is blind to what real life is like and to her own heritage because she has been raised in a convent, and in much the same way as blind people have been described in the

¹⁸⁴ Scifres Kuilan, Susie. „The ‚All-Seing Eye‘ in Grace King's *Balcony Stories*“ in: Disheroon-Green, Suzanne and Abney, Lisa, eds. *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

society in the past, she is described as being unable to “do anything for herself” (143). She is on her way to meet her mother – a woman who she has not seen in years and does not remember. She wears a veil, but she becomes more animated and involved with the other travelers during the trip, she puts “up her veil, actually, to see better” (151); however, she does not truly see better, and neither does the reader because only when her mother finally arrives to pick her up from the boat do we discover that she is multiracial.¹⁸⁶

However, we can argue that the role of the veil, which is recurrent in King’s fiction (and fiction about Grace King), is primarily the role of concealment that is motivated, yet again, by the fear of acknowledgement of the breach of the color line. The little convent girl is in fact *hidden* behind the veil; moreover, she is hidden in the convent in Cincinnati, Ohio - a state where slavery was abolished in its constitution, yet it aggressively barred the black immigration from its neighboring slave owning state of Kentucky.¹⁸⁷ In an analogous way to her mother’s identity that is hidden by her absence, the truth about her mother is *hidden* in New Orleans. Therefore, we may suggest that the convent, interpreted by some critics as a symbol of female oppression, is simply another device of concealing the racial identity of the little convent girl:

She was in mourning for her father, the sisters told the captain, and she was going to New Orleans to her mother. She had not seen her mother since she was an infant, on account of some disagreement between the parents, in consequence of which the father had brought her to Cincinnati, and placed her in the

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105 – 106.

¹⁸⁷ For further details regarding the integration of former slaves in Ohio confer: Litwack, Leon F. *North of Slavery; the Negro in the Free States, 1790 – 1860*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961.

convent. There she had been for twelve years, only going to her father for vacations and holidays.¹⁸⁸

The act of “protecting” his daughter by rendering her virtually motherless and by confining her to a convent outside of the slave owning South is indicative of the father’s underlying motive, *i.e.*, the concealment of his daughter from the outside world, as well as from his own life. Allowing her to visit him only during vacations and holidays, the father of the little convent girl allocates her a minimal space in his life. Therefore, the argument that King “may have intended to perpetuate her racist attitudes, womanly Southern values, and aristocratic Creole elitism through her fiction, but through the use of language associated with blindness and sight, she achieves the opposite effect”¹⁸⁹ is not pervasive. Such an attempt to inscribe the dimension of critique and subversion of the codified racial hierarchies in the postbellum South in the fiction of Grace King seems to oppose not only the accessible textual, but also biographical information about Grace King, whose “attitude towards the Negro was both kindly and paternalistic, patronizing and apprehensive – a thoroughly conventional attitude according to her class and time”.¹⁹⁰

The most important aspect of the underlying fear of the racial Other is undoubtedly the portrayal of violence on the black body. In “The Little Convent Girl” the violence directed toward the black body is twofold. The strict regimen and

¹⁸⁸ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

¹⁸⁹ Scifres Kuilan, *op. cit.* p. 107.

¹⁹⁰ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

restriction of certain bodily aspects and functions is evident. In fact, the rigidity of conduct of the little convent girl becomes her most emphasized characteristic. For instance, this rigidity of conduct is portrayed in relation to her adherence to the tenets of the convent: “On Friday, she fasted rigidly, and she never began to eat, or finished, without a little Latin movement of the lips and a sign of the cross.”¹⁹¹ Furthermore, in spatial terms, the place occupied by the little convent girl is minimized in the following manner:

Unless the captain or the clerk remembered to fetch her out in front, she would sit all day in the cabin, in the same place, crocheting lace, and her spool of thread and box of patterns in her lap, on the handkerchief spread to save her new dress. Never leaning back – oh, no! always straight and stiff, as if the conventual back board were there within call.¹⁹²

Apart from the rigid religious conduct and minimal occupation of space, the little convent girl is further subject to an extremely strict personal routine, especially so in relation to her hair and to her attire. As King points out: “her hair had a strong inclination to curl, but that had been taken out of it as austere as the noise out of her footfalls.”¹⁹³ The smooth hairstyle appropriated in correspondence with the white ideal of beauty is another element of suppression and constraint of the little convent girl’s bodily expression and movement:

The last day, her hair was brushed and plaited and smoothed over and over again until the very last glimmer of curl

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

disappeared. Her dress was whisked, as if for microscopic inspection; her face was washed; and her finger-nails were scrubbed with the hard convent nail-brush, until the disciplined little tips ached with a pristine soreness.¹⁹⁴

As Sonia Oltavaro-Hormillosa remarks on the issue of racial and exotic anxieties, the metaphor of hairstyle as an identity has been appropriated by some critics in order to argue for idealized notions of pure African beauty in opposition to the artificial hair straightening or lightening.¹⁹⁵ In terms of her attire, the little convent girl is subject to similarly extreme constricting routine: “Going up the steep stairs, there was such confusion, to keep the black skirts well over the stiff white petticoats [...] and the thin feet laced so tightly in the glossy new leather boots would cling to each successive step [...] and have such a pause of helpless agony.”¹⁹⁶

The culmination of the phenomenon of violence on the black body, as an expression of the underlying fear of the racial Other is undoubtedly present in the act of drowning. This example of self-inflicted violence moreover suggests the internalized commodification of the tragic mulatta figure herself. Although the conventional resolution of the tragic mulatta dilemma – suicide – is not related in completely unambiguous terms, the ending of “The Little Convent Girl” nonetheless suggests the little convent girl may have decided to drown herself, perhaps in an attempt to be drawn down to the “subterranean mother stream” described to her by the pilot:

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁹⁵ *Cf.* Oltavaro-Hormillosa, *op. cit.*, p. 90 – 91.

¹⁹⁶ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

No one was looking, no one saw more than a flutter of white petticoats, a show of white stockings, as the little convent girl went under the water. The roustabout dived, as the roustabouts always do, after the drowning, even at the risk of their good-for-nothing lives. The mate himself jumped overboard; but she had gone down in a whirlpool. Perhaps, as the pilot had told her whirlpools always did, it may have carried her through to the underground river, to that vast, hidden, dark Mississippi that flows beneath the one we see; for her body was never found.¹⁹⁷

In Patricia Yaeger's terminology, by committing this act the tragic mulatta becomes a throwaway body and a disposable body. In *Dirt and Desire* Patricia Yaeger aspires to replace the traditional interpretative categories that are applied to the study of Southern literature with new categories:

We must pay attention to the difficult figure of the throwaway body – to women and men whose bodily harm does not matter enough to be registered or repressed – who are not *symbolically* central, who are looked over, looked through, who become a matter of public and private indifference – neither important enough to be disavowed nor part of white southern culture's dominant emotional economy.¹⁹⁸

The random sense of neglect regarding the black body is manifest in King's "The Little Convent Girl" in the fact that the little girl's body is never found, nobody is mourning her absence, and no consequences of her disappearance are voiced. As summed up by Patricia Yaeger, the quintessence of the throwaway body is the "quick translation of white-on-black murder into economic terms, the quicker translation of black-on-black

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p., 156.

¹⁹⁸ Yaeger, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

murder into nothing.”¹⁹⁹ The little convent girl’s disappearance conveniently solves the problem that she has constituted. Most importantly, there is no community that mourns her death. Furthermore, the absence of portrayal of her mother’s mourning for the convent girl implies that within the framework of her own internalized commodification of the black body, her mother may have, to a certain extent, sympathized with the little convent girl’s decision.

To offer a more profound perspective in this examination of King’s use of the tragic mulatta stereotype in “The Little Convent Girl”, we propose an attempt to solidify the superiority of the white “colonizers” of Louisiana over the racially mixed and racially Othered persons; also we acknowledge of racial fixity as something motivated by racial fear, which can be further contrasted with Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s perspectives on ethnicity, class, and place. Dunbar-Nelson’s short story “Sister Josepha” interrogates similar questions of identity, namelessness, racial ambiguity, and gender roles, as does King’s “The Little Convent Girl”:

No name but Camille, that was true; no nationality, for she could never tell from whom or whence she came; no friends, and a beauty that not even an ungainly bonnet and shaven head could hide. 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 an anticipation of the world’s questionings, she was asking herself, “Who am I? What am I?”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁰⁰ Moore Dunbar-Nelson, Alice Ruth. „Sister Josepha“ in: Ewell, Barbara C. and Glenn Menke, Pamela, eds. *Op. cit.*, p. 312.

The origin of the three-year-old founding who was brought to the Convent du Sacre Coeur knowing only her first name “Camille” remains obscure, as in the case of the little convent girl. As Kristina Brook argues in her article “Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s Local Colors of Ethnicity, Class, and Place”:

In Dunbar-Nelson’s “Sister Josepha”, the convent girl has an unknown past, and her lack of family name or of certain racial identity forces her withdrawal from the outside world. In confronting the ways of this world, which threaten (in different ways) the single woman and the woman of color, Sister Josepha is particularly vulnerable, given her ambiguous identity. She must consequently quash her individuality under cover of the veil if she wishes to avoid the institutionalized sexual victimization of plaçage.²⁰¹

Distinguishing between the “outsider” and “insider” perspective, Brooks further argues that Dunbar-Nelson offers a fictional treatment of race that often obscures the racial overtones, and renders her treatment of racial issues ambiguous or aracial, since the “outsider” readers do not possess localized knowledge. The local audience, on the other hand is:

privy to the well-known stereotypes [and] will experience a racialized reading of the same stories that a non-local audience will find racially unmarked. Thus, encoding racial identity within Creole ethnicity is a means [of inserting] a regional boundary in the reading experiences of her audience”.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Brooks, Kristina. “Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s Local Colors of Ethnicity, Class, and Place.” *MELUS* 23.2 (Summer, 1998), p. 10.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

In fact, alluding to Camille's "twinkling black eyes"²⁰³, her "glorious tropical beauty of the type that matures early"²⁰⁴, and her "silky black hair"²⁰⁵ Dunbar-Nelson suggests that Camille is, in fact, a Creole of color. The identification of Camille as a Creole of color, and the subsequent identification of Dunbar-Nelson's treatment of race is thus in direct relationship to the role of local knowledge in regionalist literature. However, Dunbar-Nelson's portrayal of the racial identity crisis in her story "Sister Josepha" results neither in a totalization of forms of racial identity, nor in a victimization of the black body. Concluding her story "Sister Josepha" by portraying Sister Josepha's dilemma between the confining life in the convent and the free existence outside of the convent that would ultimately force her to encounter questions of her racial identification, Dunbar-Nelson allows Sister Josepha to choose the convent:

The organ pealed forth as mass ended, the throng slowly filed out, and the sisters paced through the courtway back into the brown convent walls. One paused at the entrance, and gazed with swift longing eyes in the direction of narrow, squalid Charters Street, then, with a gulping sob, followed the rest, and vanished behind the heavy door.²⁰⁶

As offered by Alice Dunbar-Nelson, the decision of Sister Josepha in the conclusion of the story to remain in the convent may not make her happy; however, it offers a perspective on her existence that is similar to other girls in the convent who cannot otherwise be provided for as a result of the lack of financial means, or of the absence of

²⁰³ Moore Dunbar-Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

any family relations. Unlike the heroine of King's "The Little Convent Girl", Sister Josepha is not forced into self-inflicted violence, perhaps precisely because she is portrayed as a member of the community in the convent. Her predicament is similar to other nameless foundlings, orphans, and poverty stricken girls who are brought together in the convent du Sacre Coeur. As Kristina Brooks argues:

Dunbar-Nelson resists totalizing forms of identity through a different kind of local knowledge, one which cannot easily be translated by the non-regional reader, much less opposed to normative practices, because it presupposes familiarity with local events. By encoding locally known traditions and locally renowned figures within her fiction, Dunbar-Nelson attempts to avert identification of her Creole characters as types such as the tragic mulatta and to present them, instead, as distinct individuals.²⁰⁷

Confining Sister Josepha behind the heavy door of the convent, Alice Dunbar-Nelson resolves the dilemma of racial identification in terms that are distinctly less radical than the resolution of the little convent girl's dilemma offered by King in the following manner: "No one was looking, no one saw more than a flutter of white petticoats, a show of white stockings, as the little convent girl went under the water."²⁰⁸ Therefore, unlike King's firm adherence to the racial binary, Alice Dunbar-Nelson transcends this strict binary and overcomes the overt racial fear expressed by King in "The Little Convent Girl". Ultimately, as Kristina Brooks concludes her remarks on Alice Dunbar-Nelson's ambiguous or aracial treatment of race:

²⁰⁷ Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁰⁸ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

Through this identity crisis, Dunbar-Nelson portrays the complex strands of gender, race, and class which firmly bind Sister Josepha to a life “behind the heavy door” of the convent (172). Coding the young Sister’s racial identity such that only local readers will be certain to read her color into her character, Dunbar-Nelson avoids typecasting her heroine in the only tragic literary role open to the racially mixed woman, the tragic mulatta.²⁰⁹

Dunbar-Nelson thus offers an alternative to King’s appropriation of the tragic mulatta stereotype in “The Little Convent Girl”, with its internalized commodification of the black body that ultimately results in a throwaway body without a family or community to mourn for, by envisioning a type of community, however limited, in which the racially mixed girl may exist.

Unlike “The Little Convent Girl”, Kate Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby” exhibits more evident examples of the productive ambivalence of fear and desire manifest in relation to the portrayals of the black body. Therefore, the appropriation of Bhabha’s formula of a fetishism of colonial discourse adequately addresses the focal problem of racial stereotypes in the fiction of Kate Chopin, and thus further expands the traditionally applied framework that primarily utilizes the virgin/whore dichotomy. Bhabha’s concept of fetishism is appropriated for his theory of colonial discourse from psychoanalysis, which is explained for the purpose of illuminating Bhabha’s motivation by Meyda Yegenoglu in the following terms:

²⁰⁹ Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

Fetishism refers to a *contradictory belief* structure which enables the infant to deal with the shocking discovery of sexual difference. The male infant discovers that woman's/mother's body is different, for she does not have a penis, and substitutes this lack with what thus later becomes a "fetishobject". The fetish can be any object that can serve in place of the penis with which the shocked male infant would complete the woman/mother. The function of the fetish is to *disavow* the perception of difference. [...] In other words, the notion of fetishism refers to the structure of a belief which maintains a fantasmatic unity and sameness in the face of contradiction and difference. [...] This implies that the structure of fetishism as a contradictory belief is always characterized by an ambiguity or ambivalence, by a productive tension that results from the simultaneous recognition and refusal of difference.²¹⁰

Bhabha specifically appropriates the theory of fetishism for his theory of colonial discourse where, unlike in terms of sexual difference, which remains secret, "skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as 'common knowledge' [...] and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies."²¹¹

Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" captures such "racial dramas" that result from Louisiana's unique history of race relations by offering its residents a "rich mélange of French, African, Anglo, and Spanish cultures. [And] while other Southern states during slavery enacted segregation and anti-miscegenation laws, in Louisiana blacks and

²¹⁰ Yegenoglu, Meyda. "Mapping the Field of Colonial Discourse." *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. Eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 28.

²¹¹ Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

whites mixed freely in the Catholic Church, in the street, and at quadroon balls [...].”²¹²

Moreover, another perspective can be found in Ted Tunnell’s book *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862 – 1877*, which describes the unique race relations in Louisiana before the Civil War in the following terms: “free blacks owned real and personal property (including slaves), contracted legal marriages, testified against whites in courts of law, learned trades and professions, and participated in music and the arts.”²¹³ The acute visibility of the Other race within the Louisiana context compelled Chopin and King, among other authors, to construct fictional accounts of characters of the Other race, since the absence of any degree of interrogation of racial issues would seem implausible within the context of late nineteenth-century Louisiana.

The application of Bhabha’s theory of fetish in colonial discourse to Chopin’s “*Désirée’s Baby*” uncovers the underlying contradictory beliefs about the racially Other characters, and the subsequent construction of racial stereotypes that embody such contradictory beliefs. In fact, the racial stereotypes present in this short story construct the black (mulatta) body in terms of both desire and fear. Moreover, unlike in Grace King’s “*The Little Convent Girl*” the presence of the contradictory feelings of fear and desire toward the racial Other in Chopin’s “*Désirée’s Baby*” is more dominant.

²¹² Gunning, Sandra. *Race, Rape and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890 – 1912*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 114.

²¹³ Tunnell, Ted. *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862 – 1877*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984, quoted in: Gunning, *ibid.*, p. 114.

Similarly, as in the case of the examination of Grace King's "The Little Convent Girl" offered above, for the purpose of the examination of "Désirée's Baby", we shall abandon the focus on the virgin/whore dichotomy associated with the white women and black women respectively that is, among others, addressed by Ellen Peel in her article "Semiotic Subversion in 'Désirée's Baby' " in the following terms: "A form of poetic justice ensures that the same one-drop rule that enables him to keep La Blanche as a slave [and a mistress] causes him to lose Désirée as a wife."²¹⁴ The focus of this examination is the underlying function of the emotions of fear and desire toward the racially Other as the constituent of the tragic mulatta stereotype in "Désirée's Baby" with parallels to Edna Pontellier, the main character of Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, who is seen metaphorically as a tragic mulatta figure.²¹⁵

There are manifold associations of the racially mixed characters in "Désirée's Baby", however ambiguously presented by Chopin, with desire. Primarily, it is the character of Désirée who is delineated as a foundling of uncertain origin, and thus is suspected by her father, husband, the readers, and probably by Chopin herself, to be of racially mixed origin that is associated with the phenomenon of desire on multiple levels. Most evidently, as Ellen Peel points out, it is the name of Désirée itself that

²¹⁴ Peel, *op. cit.*, p. 227 – 228.

²¹⁵ For additional exploration of reification of whiteness and fetishization of blackness confer Duane Carr's examination of Chopin's short stories "At the 'Cadian Ball'" and "The Storm" in: *A Question of Class: The Redneck Stereotype in Southern Fiction*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1996. In this study Carr interrogates the dynamics of class, caste, gender and race and further complicates Chopin's portrayal of regional aesthetics by pointing out another theme in her fiction – "the relationship between wealthy Creoles and Acadians in which the caste system is always maintained with the Acadians kept firmly below the Creoles in the social structure" (54).

signifies that she is an object of desire: “She was a foundling adopted by Madame and Monsieur Valmondé. Like a queen and king in a fairy tale, they were delighted by her mysterious arrival and named her Désirée, ‘the wished-for one’, ‘the desired one’.”²¹⁶ Thus, Désirée is primarily portrayed by Chopin as an object of strong maternal and paternal love. Indeed, Madame and Monsieur Valmondé are eager to embrace the mysterious arrival of Désirée and welcome her with utmost care and affection:

In time, Madame Valmondé abandoned every speculation but the one that Désirée had been sent to her by a beneficent providence to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without child of the flesh. For the girl grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere, - the idol of Valmondé.²¹⁷

Furthermore, Désirée is the object of Armand Aubigny’s infatuation and sexual desire. In fact, she is portrayed by Chopin, without any explicit sexual imagery, as a woman who is able to suddenly entice Armand’s passion despite her obscure origin and lack of prestigious family name:

Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her [Désirée] there, had fallen in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. The wonder was that he had not loved her before; for he had known her since his father brought him home from Paris, a boy of eight, after his mother died there. The passion that awoken in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or anything that drives headlong over all obstacles. Monsieur Valmondé grew practical and wanted

²¹⁶ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

things well considered: that is, the girl's obscure origin. Armand looked into her eyes and did not care.²¹⁸

Another racially mixed character in “*Désirée's Baby*” who is associated with desire is La Blanche, one of the quadroon maids at the Aubigny plantation. However, this association of La Blanche with sexual desire is less pronounced and requires more attention to the details of the story. Nonetheless, however subtly, Chopin suggests that La Blanche is an object of sexual desire for Armand Aubigny. Firstly, the unsuspecting *Désirée* reveals Armand's presence in (or near) La Blanche's cabin: “And the way he [the child] cries, [...] is deafening. Armand heard him the other days as far away as La Blanche's cabin.”²¹⁹ Later, the resemblance between one of La Blanche's little quadroon boys, and her own child unveils the reality to *Désirée*, although she remains unaware of the full implication of this resemblance, *i.e.*, her husband's probable sexual exploitation of La Blanche:

One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys [...] stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. *Désirée's* eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. “Ah!” it was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face.²²⁰

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

Ellen Peel addresses the doubling in the story of Désirée and La Blanche by pointing out that “the two women – and even their sons – may have parallel ties to Armand because of the possible sexual connections between slave and master.”²²¹ Thus, La Blanche is a living example of miscegenation, the one-drop-rule and the ensuing phenomenon of “invisible blackness”, for she is equally fair as Désirée and much fairer than Armand, who is considered white until the secret of his origin is discovered at the end of the story:

Some weeks later there was a curious scene enacted at L’Abri. In the centre of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire [...] and it was he [Armand] who dealt out to a half dozen negroes the material which kept this fire ablaze. [...] The last thing to go was [...] part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband’s love – “But above all, ” she wrote, “night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery.”²²²

Armand Aubigny, who thus acquires the position of a tragic mulatto himself at the end of the story, is also portrayed as an object of desire to Désirée and his sexual attractiveness may be, perhaps in a limited manner, extended to La Blanche. Not only is Armand the proud owner of “one of the oldest and proudest [names] in Louisiana”²²³ but Désirée continues to desire the love and respect of her potentially unfaithful

²²¹ Peel, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

²²² Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

husband after the realization of the baby's racial heritage becomes a common knowledge in the parish. She is desperate because of Armand's cold refusal of herself and their child that results from Armand's paradoxical internalization of "white anxiety" regarding the racial Other. When Madame Valmondé urges Désirée to return to the Valmondé home with her child, Désirée still wishes to remain by her husband's side: "She turned away like one stunned by a blow, and walked slowly towards the door, hoping he would call her back. 'Good-by [sic], Armand', she moaned. He did not answer her. That was his last blow of fate."²²⁴

The problem of the predominance of the literary portrayals of the victimized tragic mulatta figures, as opposed to the tragic mulatto figures, is examined in detail, among others, by Nancy Bentley in "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction". In this article Bentley interrogates the dominant patterns of "corporeal representations", to use her own terminology, of white and black bodies present in antebellum fiction. Quite interestingly, she argues that the disregard for the portrayals of the light-skinned male mulatto is paradoxically indicative of its importance within the national racial discourse:

The figure of the Mulatto hero has received less critical attention than the "tragic" Mulatta, in part because he appears less frequently and with greater attendant anxiety. But this imbalance is itself a symptom of the fact that the fictional Mulatto is the figure who most distinctly locates the internal

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

contradictions of domestic ideology and its subtext of the body.²²⁵

Bentley further claims that the “prevailing conventions of the ‘feminized’ domestic novel [...] made it logical to cast white men as the oppressors and obstacles to emancipation rather than victims.”²²⁶ In other words, if we accept Bentley’s exposure of the problem behind the preference of the tragic mulatta stereotype to the “white slave” or tragic mulatto stereotype, we may conclude this examination by simply stating that Armand is too white and too similar to the symbol of power – the white male, to be a martyr. In this sense, Chopin’s appropriation of the “tragic mulatto” figure is incomplete, since it clearly indicates that Armand shall continue to exercise his power and not become a martyr. “*Désirée’s Baby*” once again reinforces the following paradigm identified by Bentley: “White male bodies are spared and female bodies are sacrificed.”²²⁷

Moreover, the (sexual) desirability of the black body in “*Désirée’s Baby*” is further appropriated and significantly reinvented by Chopin in her most masterful novel, *The Awakening*. Clearly, there are numerous parallels between the stigmatized character of the little convent girl in King’s story and *Désirée Aubigny* in Chopin’s story, who are both fashioned in full correspondence with the “tragic mulatta” formula, and the fated character of *Edna Pontellier* in *The Awakening*. However, there is one

²²⁵ Bentley, Nancy. “White Slaves: The Mulatto in Antebellum Fiction.” *American Literature* 65.3 (Sep., 1993), p. 503.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 506.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

parallel that is crucial to our interpretation of Chopin's racial stereotypes. This parallel should be sought in Edna's internalization of Otherness. As argued by Michele Birnbaum: "it is actually Edna's generalized identification with – rather than her alienation from – the marginalized which both affirms her class position and allows her to critique the sexual constraints associated with it."²²⁸

Indeed, in *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier is portrayed as a similarly fated character as the tragic mulatta. She is also balancing between two irreconcilable identities: an authentic identity of a woman filled with passion and an (involuntarily) assumed identity of an objectified virtuous wife. Due to the above discussed dichotomy of passion and purity, the members of the Créole society in *The Awakening* attributed sexual desire exclusively to the 'dark' female character in full correspondence to the virgin/whore dichotomy. Accordingly, the sensuality of the Créole women was thematized solely through motherhood. Indisputably, it is Adèle Ratignolle that is essentially characterized as performing her role of a dutiful mother in *The Awakening*. In Chopin's words she is:

[O]ne of the mother-women [who] seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. ... They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.²²⁹

²²⁸ Birnbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

²²⁹ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 529.

Thus, Edna's refusal of the traditionally prescribed gender role within the framework of the passion/purity dichotomy and her newly awakened sexual desire, which is symbolized by the sea, contaminates the 'whiteness' of her social status by 'dark' passion.

As a result, from the racial-binary point of view of the antebellum middle-class society, Edna's actions ultimately stigmatize her with an irreversible sign of "metaphorical blackness" because she "violated the expectations of her genteel readers by showing that sexual passion is no respecter of class or caste boundaries."²³⁰ Consequently, Chopin portrays Edna as assuming the same outcast status as the tragic mulatta. Ultimately, her determination to escape the torment of such a dual existence finally results in her self-sacrifice to the depth of the ocean:

She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke...She went on and on. She did not look back now, but went on and on...²³¹

Appropriating desire that is predominantly associated with the racially mixed characters in nineteenth-century Louisiana Local Color fiction, Edna becomes similarly stigmatized as the tragic mulatta. The desire toward the racially Other that is clearly suppressed in King's "The Little Convent Girl" is thus not only present in Chopin's

²³⁰ Elfenbein, "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: An Assault on Racial and Sexual Mythology." *Southern Studies* (Winter 1987), p. 304.

²³¹ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 654.

“Désirée’s Baby”, but it is also reinvented to include Edna Pontellier’s appropriation of desire in *The Awakening*.

On the other hand, the dimension of racial fear in “Désirée’s Baby”, and by analogy in King’s “The Little Convent Girl”, is clearly traceable to the convention of nineteenth-century American regionalist literature of presenting the white racial anxiety underlying portrayals of white supremacist violence, which is defined by whiteness and sees blackness as undesirable. As Sandra Gunning argues in her examination of late-nineteenth-century American and African American literary discourses on white supremacist violence:

Unlike Thomas Dixon, Chopin was not reared in the shadow of the Ku Klux Klan, but both her childhood in St. Louis before the Civil war and her marriage to a racially loyal white Southerner tied her on the one hand to the memory of slavery, and on the other to the violence of white supremacy itself.²³²

Furthermore, as Helen Taylor points out, given Chopin’s background, she “could hardly have been oblivious to the many class and race tensions in the area, or to the considerable shifts in economic and social power and influence that marked the tumultuous years after the Civil War.”²³³ In fact, Chopin was directly exposed to her husband’s devotion to the Crescent City White League, which was one of the

²³² Gunning, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

²³³ Qtd. in: *ibid.*, p. 115.

organizations that was formed in reaction to the postbellum Louisiana racially polarized context and pledged the maintenance of the supremacy of the white race.²³⁴

The application of Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse is further supported by the textual evidence of Chopin's appropriation of violence on the black body. "Désirée's Baby" reflects the complex "worlds of New Orleans, Clouterville, and the Cane River valley in which Kate Chopin set her local color stories [that] had their own violent racial past, which undoubtedly became part of the fabric of both her Southern identity and her Southern writing."²³⁵ Quite paradoxically, it is primarily Armand who, in correspondence with his assumed social role of a white planter, inflicts violence on the slaves on his plantation: "Young Aubigny's rule was a strict one, too, and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime."²³⁶ Furthermore, Armand's decision to whip or not to whip his slaves is portrayed not as a deliberate decision including reflection on its consequences, but as a mere whim depending on his mood: "He [Armand] hasn't punished one of them – not one of them – since the baby is born. Even Négrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work – he only laughed and said Négrillon was a great scamp."²³⁷ Indeed, the infliction of violence on Armand's slaves is portrayed neither as necessary nor as deliberate; rather, it is an outlet for Armand's

²³⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

²³⁶ Gunning, *op cit.*, p. 243.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

own frustration. After the realization of the situation regarding his son, Armand turns to violence on his slaves:

Then a strange, an awful change in her husband's manner, which she dared not ask him to explain. When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves.²³⁸

The main motif of violence on the tragic mulatto body, however, is undoubtedly Désirée's foreshadowed suicide, and the infanticide of her baby. Like to the little convent girl and Edna Pontellier, Désirée is last seen walking toward the bayou with her baby in her arms:

She [Désirée] had not changed the thin white garment nor the slippers which she wore. Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad beaten road which lead to the far-off plantation of Valmondé. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds. She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again.²³⁹

As Ellen Peel correctly points out, "like the suicide of Edna Pontellier in 'The Awakening', Désirée's disappearance is hardly a triumph."²⁴⁰ As a result of the

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 246 – 247.

²⁴⁰ Peel, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

analysis of Désirée's *coup de grace* in accordance with Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse, we may claim that Désirée's internalized system oppressive to black identity allows her to commit, however ambiguously foreshadowed, an infanticide of her mulatto baby. This suggests that Désirée's tragedy does not stem primarily from the system of patriarchal oppression, but from the fetishization of the racial Other. This aspect of Désirée's actions resonates with Toni Morrison's portrayal of Sethe in her novel *Beloved*, as examined by Mary Jane Suero Elliott:

[Sethe's] internalized system oppressive to black identity informs her motivations for killing her child. [...] Her internalization of the lessons of commodification encourages Sethe to act, in a highly problematic attempt to save her children from commodification, as if they are not only extensions of herself, but also her possessions.²⁴¹

Furthermore, the mulatta figure in the fiction of Chopin as well as of King is portrayed as a solitary figure. As Ellen Peel points out with respect to Désirée, "she fails to acknowledge ties with anyone outside the family who belongs to her sex or to her newly attributed race and class."²⁴² Similarly, the little convent girl is portrayed as a figure that lacks any kind of community or family. Her inability to relate to her own mother in the closing part of her journey suggests that her individualism is seen as definite:

"Captain!" [...] The mother of the little convent girl stood there, and she held the little convent girl by the hand. "I have brought her to see you", the woman said. "You were so kind –

²⁴¹ Suero Elliot, Mary Jane. "Postcolonial Experience in a Domestic Context: Commodified Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *MELUS* 25. 3/4. (Autumn – Winter, 2000), p. 189.

²⁴² Peel, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

and she is so quiet, so still, all the time, I thought it would do her a pleasure.” [...] “She don’t go nowhere, she don’t do nothing but make her crochet and her prayers, so I thought I would bring her for a little visit of ‘How d’ye do’ to you.”²⁴³

In fact, the only activities the little convent girl engaged in during her short stay in New Orleans were prayer and crocheting – activities that are solitary by definition. Moreover, her inability to communicate with her mother finally unveils her solitary status. This solitary status also applies to Edna Pontellier, who is seen by Margo Culley as a solitary soul. Furthermore, according to Culley, *The Awakening* is “an existential novel about solitude”²⁴⁴. The tragic mulatta in King’s “The Little Convent Girl” and Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby” and the metaphorical tragic mulatta in *The Awakening* can thus be viewed not only as a victim of the passion/purity dichotomy, but also as a victim of slavery’s commodification of the “colonial subject” as well as a victim of imposed isolation and a lack of community.

Clearly, the portrayals of the tragic mulatta stereotype in the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin are not limited to the stories discussed above. While the examined texts, *i.e.*, “The Little Convent Girl”, “Désirée’s Baby”, and *The Awakening*, manifest the ambivalent fear and desire directed towards the racial Other, there are other stories written by King and Chopin that also reveal the same conflict about racial issues as these more popular stories.

²⁴³ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

²⁴⁴ Culley, Margo. “Edna Pontellier: ‘A Solitary Soul’ ” in: Culley, ed. *Op. cit.*, p. 247.

Another short story that also effectively portrays the interplay of racial fear and desire is King's "Madrilène; or, the Festival of the Dead" that describes the racially motivated violence on Madrilène, a girl of uncertain racial background who is presumed to be a quadroon or octoroon, who was "afraid of men, but not ghosts nor voodooos."²⁴⁵ As Douglas McReynolds points out in his article "Passion Repressed: The Short Fiction of Grace King", Madrilène is "the victim of a social system in which [...] color was everything. Madrilène looks white, she seems white, her instincts tell her that she is white; but she is apparently octoroon; and to be an octoroon in New Orleans in the late nineteenth century is to be black."²⁴⁶ Furthermore, Madrilène, whose actual name is Marie Madeleine, remains unidentified by a family name. Thus, like the little convent girl and Désirée, Madrilène is portrayed as a solitary figure without any family identification: " 'What is the name of the girl?' [...] 'Everybody knows her name – Madrilène, or Marie Madeleine, if you will.' 'Marie Madeleine what?' 'Marie Madeleine – nothing.' "²⁴⁷ It is, however, primarily due to Madrilène's ambiguous color/race and her "invisible blackness", which we also referred to in the case of the characters of Désirée or La Blanche, that the crisis of her (self)identification is escalated.

In fact, due to the "invisible blackness" of Madrilène, the reader cannot be certain of her actual "color". Douglas McReynolds claims that it is actually impossible

²⁴⁵ King, Grace Elizabeth. *Tales of Time and Place*. New York: Garnet Press, 1969, p. 164.

²⁴⁶ McReynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

²⁴⁷ King, *op. cit.*, p. 174 – 175.

to conclusively decide whether Madrilène, the story's heroine is white or black.²⁴⁸ In fact, in reaction to the physical abuse from Palmyre, Madrilène refers to herself as being white:

When she is forced to choose between staying on the dark street where her mere presence attracts the lewd fondling of men or facing the murderous Palmyre in the light, she chooses the latter. Palmyre, true to her word, strips Madrilène naked in public and begins slashing; Madrilène in terror and despair cries to the world that "Negroes are murdering a white girl," and the world, always ready to protect a white woman from Negroes, is only too glad, albeit in this case too late, to respond. Her body drained of blood, she dies white and sexually inviolate; but she dies nonetheless the victim – the almost willing victim – of passionate violence.²⁴⁹

The racial status of the nameless Madrilène who repeatedly longs to identify herself with the "good dead, the white dead" is thus established as ambiguous. King describes Madrilène in the following terms:

Her figure was so frail and slight it looked like a *shadow* thrown where she stood; her face like a relieve ornament cut into the marble against which it leaned. The *dazzling white surface*, illuminated by the full rays of the sun, made distinct the ordinary insignificant minutiae of her features.²⁵⁰

By juxtaposing Madrilène's shadowy figure with the dazzling white surface, King further reinforces the racial black/white binary. Another instance of Madrilène's

²⁴⁸ Cf. McReynolds, *op. cit.*, 207 - 216.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

²⁵⁰ King, *op. cit.*, p. 134 (emphases added).

identification as white can be found in the conclusion of the story: “Was that death in the long, thin, white face? Ah, she got white when she paled; they could all see that. Were those staring eyes gazing into eternity? At God, or at her Lais? Was that tall, thin, pale white woman Madrilène, her servant, her drudge?”²⁵¹ Therefore, as the story unfolds, the categorization of Madrilène has apparently changed from her classification of “Mulatresse! nigger! nigger! ‘coon! ‘coon! (a localism of irritating significance to the colored)”²⁵² to a status of a white lady: “White ladies do not sleep in the bed of negroes.”²⁵³

In this context, it is quite surprising that the opening paragraph of Anna Elfenbein’s examination of King’s stories “Madrilène” and “Bonne Mamman” to a large extent dismisses the racial dimension of these stories:

Closer examination of [...] King’s stories that deal at length with quadroon women characters, moreover, proves that critical assumptions about a benighted consistency in Grace King’s racial views are ill-founded. King’s concern with the faithful depiction of women characters in these stories overrides her racial ambivalence to a remarkable degree. We hardly need to know the racial identities of the women in these stories, for their oppression seems inextricably bound up in the conventional restrictions imposed upon all women.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²⁵⁴ Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line. The Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

Such a dismissal of the racial dimension of King's stories is interesting especially since this particular story clearly offers an escalation of King's portrayal of violence on racially mixed characters. Indeed, this story includes not only portrayals of violence on the (ambiguously) black body, but also black-on-black violence and female-on-female violence:

“Could the others not in the darkness see the blows descending on her? Could they not hear them through the cursing and swearing that accompanied them? Did they not know that Palmyre carried a knife in her bosom – she carried her bosom naked enough for them to see it.”²⁵⁵

Indeed, it is Palmyre who becomes the dominant threat for Madrilène and not the white men of whom Madrilène is so intensely afraid, as King suggests in the following manner: “Born and raised in the streets, she was afraid of them [white men] at night; afraid of them at the very age when other colored girls frequent them.”²⁵⁶ Furthermore, Palmyre's motivation for her attack also has a racial dimension. Although, according to Palmyre's exclamations, the reason for the attack on Madrilène is that Madrilène attacked Loulou, Palmyre's son, the underlying reason for Palmyre's attack is portrayed by King as Palmyre's jealousy of Madrilène. Indeed, she is upset chiefly because Madrilène longs to integrate herself in the white community (at least in the cemetery of the good dead, the white dead after her death) and because Madrilène can “pass” for white:

²⁵⁵ King, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

“A miserable creature, sir, who is always forsaking her own race to run after the whites. And she has the temper of a demon, sir. She beat my son, beat him almost to death, out there in the street! A little child – ah, but I shall make her pay for it!” [...] “She should stay in her class, sir; me, I stay in my class. If God made us quadroons, we should be quadroons. She tries to pass herself off for white.”²⁵⁷

Therefore the underlying conflict of the story, as it is portrayed by King, is not solely that Madrilène may be of mixed blood, but essentially that she refuses to remain identified solely by her caste status. More disturbingly, it is the darker Palmyre who resents Madrilène’s ability to “pass” for white. In fact, we may argue that the appropriation of the fear of racial mixing and contamination by Palmyre is the most significant aspect of this story betraying King’s racial views. Ultimately, the materialization of Palmyre’s fear of Madrilène’s transgression results in her violent attack. Therefore, we cannot fully agree with the statement that “ ‘Madrilène’ is as much about repressed sexuality as it is about racial identity.”²⁵⁸ Similarly, the racial conflict in the case of the “The Little Convent Girl” and “Désirée’s Baby”, remains foregrounded in the story of Madrilène within the context of a region-specific formation of racial stereotypes, highlighting King’s ambivalent attitudes towards race that were shared by her audiences.

Quite disturbingly, the dimension of black-on-black violence present in this story seems to mitigate the significance of violence on Madrilène’s body. Indeed, once

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁵⁸ McReynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

it is established that Madrilène is “black”, the violent scene is referred to as a mere “quarrel among niggers”:

A groan of rage fell from the crowd at the sight of the beaten girl’s face. Tempers became uglier, more menacing; the shrill voices of Palmyre’s sisters more pressing, more anxious. “She’s only pale!” “She’s not white!” “No sir, she’s not white!” “She’s a nigger!” “She’s no more white than me!” “She told a lie!” “Before God, she’s not white!” “We are all niggers!” “It’s only a quarrel between niggers!” “Niggers will fight!” “No sir, Palmyre wouldn’t touch a white person! Palmyre is no fool.” “Madrilène is our cousin.”²⁵⁹

In a parallel to King’s short story, “The Little Convent Girl”, the story of Madrilène’s ambiguous racial identity emphasizes the fear of the racially Other characters. The presence of ambivalent feelings of fear and desire towards the racially Other portrayed by King in this short story partly illustrates the “fantasy of colonial discourse”, as it is described by Robert Young in *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*: in the following manner: “In this characteristic ambivalent movement of attraction and repulsion we encounter the sexual economy of desire in fantasies of race and of race in fantasies of desire”²⁶⁰. Moreover, the story of Madrilène describes violence committed on the black bodies in a rather graphic manner: “ ‘I will catch you! I will cut you open!’ [...] She felt the knife. It was cutting - - cutting! ‘Help! help!’ ”²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ King, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

²⁶⁰ Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 90.

²⁶¹ King, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

The association of the women of color with the element of desire, on the other hand, is present in the story primarily via the references to Madame Lais, her “Africanized” daughters and granddaughters and her establishment, which is described as *chambers garnies*. By portraying the other quadroon characters as prostitutes, which is a fate that Madrilène does not want to accept, King both acknowledges the stereotyped sexuality of the women of color; yet, at the same time she refuses to interrogate it in the way Chopin approached this issue in “La Belle Zoraïde”, the examination of which shall follow. Therefore, the economy of fear and desire, is addressed, among others, by Meyda Yegenoglu in the following terms “the ambivalence and splitting of colonial discourse, reflected in its fetishistic mode of representation can be illustrated in the conflictual way pleasure and fear, strangeness and familiarity, recognition and refusal of difference are articulated”²⁶². The foregoing is as unbalanced as what one finds in “The Little Convent Girl”.

Correspondingly, Kate Chopin’s short story “La Belle Zoraïde” addresses situations where “the dominant being is at stake in the constructed field of the dominated [and] the privileged being is always defined by the underprivileged position of the dominated.”²⁶³ Unlike Grace King, however, Kate Chopin does not hesitate to interrogate not only the issues of dominance and submission, but also the role of sexuality in the constitution of such power-structures. Indeed, this story about Zoraïde’s misplaced maternal love offers abundant portrayals of the sexualized images of the

²⁶² Yegenoglu, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²⁶³ Suero Elliot, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

black body. La belle Zoraïde (the beautiful Zoraïde) is described in the following manner:

La belle Zoraïde had eyes that were so dusky, so beautiful, that any man who gazed too long into their depths was sure to lose his head, and even his heart sometimes. Her soft, smooth skin was the color of *café-au-lait*. As for her elegant manners, her *svelte* and graceful figure, they were the envy of half the ladies who visited her mistress, Madame Delarivière.²⁶⁴

Surprisingly, in “La Belle Zoraïde” Chopin also offers a radically sexual depiction of a male black body with her portrayal of Le Beau Mézor – the beautiful Mézor:

Zoraïde had seen le beau Mézor dance the Bamboula in Congo Square. That was a sight to hold one rooted to the ground. Mézor was as straight as a cypress tree and was as proud looking as a king. His body, bare to the waist, was like a column of ebony and it glistened like oil.²⁶⁵

In fact, the phallic symbols of a “cypress tree” and a “column of ebony” allow us to interpret Chopin’s depiction of the male black body in “La Belle Zoraïde” as radically eroticized. Furthermore, it is significant that la belle Zoraïde witnesses le beau Mézor dancing the Bamboula, which is an “African dance, accompanied by the ‘bamboula’, a small drum or tambourine made from a large bamboo joint. Popular among blacks in the nineteenth century, the dance begins slowly and builds into a sexualized frenzy.”²⁶⁶ According to Emily Toth, Chopin’s depiction of le beau Mézor dancing the Bamboula

²⁶⁴ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 312 -313.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²⁶⁶ Ewell, Barbara, C. and Menke Glenn, Pamela, eds. *Op. Cit.*, p. 184, note 16.

can be considered as a “release of tension and a powerful sexual display”.²⁶⁷ However, it is important to point out that in “La Belle Zoraïde” Chopin offers sexualized images of the black male body without including any explicit references to bestiality or to savagery. Abandoning the conventional treatment of black male sexuality as savage or brutal, Chopin captures an important dimension of interracial desire, an element clearly active in the formation of the Louisiana power-structures and their response to the racial Other.

Furthermore, the sexual attraction of le Beau Mézor escalates in the moment when Zoraïde desires the black, proud Mézor who, when he was not dancing Bamboula at the Congo Square, was “hoeing sugarcane barefoot and half naked, in his master’s field”²⁶⁸ more than the sophisticated mulatto “M’sieur” Ambroise who has embraced the “white” values. In fact, Zoraïde’s sentiment toward Ambroise is more than that of indifference:

M’sieur Ambroise was then the body servant of Doctor Langle. La belle Zoraïde *detested the little mulatto, with his shining whiskers like a white man’s*, and his small brown eyes, that were cruel and false like a snake’s. She would cast down her own mischievous eyes, and say: “Ah, nénaine, I am so happy, so contented here at your side just as I am. I don’t want to marry now; next year, perhaps, or the next.”²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Toth, Emily. *Kate Chopin. A Life of the Author of The Awakening*. New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1990, p. 126.

²⁶⁸ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 313, emphasis added.

As soon as Zoraïde discloses to her mistress her true reason for refusing to marry Ambroise, *i.e.*, her love for le beau Mézor, Madame Delisle is shocked to her utmost capacity by the choice her protégé has made: “ ‘That negro! that negro! Bon Dieu Seigneur, but this is too much!’”²⁷⁰

Therefore, at the crux of this story Chopin purposefully juxtaposes the choice made by Madame Delisle on behalf of Zoraïde, and the choice that Zoraïde makes for herself. Both of these choices are determined by the skin-color of the potential husband. Madame Delisle insists on choosing a husband for Zoraïde who is as “white” as he can be, given that Zoraïde is racially mixed. Judith Berzon emphasizes the irony present in Chopin’s story of la belle Zoraïde in the following manner:

Typical of many of Kate Chopin’s studies in race relations, the tale is offered without authorial comment. However, her sense of the profound irony inherent in the relations between the races is apparent. This story is particularly ironic because the racial prejudice which destroys the lovely mulatto girl is not her own but her mistress’s and *it is not the white woman’s hatred for the girl, but rather her love that destroys Zoraïde.*²⁷¹

Zoraïde, on the other hand, decides to choose a character as dark as possible: “Since I am not white, let me have from my own race the one whom my heart has chosen.”²⁷²

Anna Elfenbein addresses this instance of Zoraïde’s resistance by pointing out Zoraïde’s failure to internalize the racist values in the following manner:

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

²⁷¹ Berzon, *op. cit.*, p. 102, emphasis added.

²⁷² Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

Raised to be as close an approximation of the ‘lady’ as possible considering her race, Zoraïde is crushed because she refuses to marry the man her mistress has chosen for her. Despite, and perhaps also to spite, Madame Delarivière, Zoraïde has failed to internalize her white godmother’s racist values.²⁷³

Furthermore, commenting on the central theme of this short story, Emily Toth argues in her critical biography of Kate Chopin that in “La Belle Zoraïde” Chopin transcends the white benevolent paternalism by refusing to portray Zoraïde as a happy slave and, moreover, suggests parallels between Zoraïde’s decision and Chopin’s own insistence on free will:

In “La Belle Zoraïde”, Kate Chopin – the daughter of slave owners – looked on the thoughtless white world through the eyes of a woman of color, at a time when her Louisiana contemporaries Grace King and Ruth McEnery Stuart were still writing about happy slaves and tragic octoroons. Kate Chopin’s Zoraïde, like the black woman in Chicago – and like Chopin herself – insists on her own free will and her own destiny.²⁷⁴

However, such an existentialist interpretation of “La Belle Zoraïde” is complicated by Zoraïde’s response to her mistress’s manipulation, to the violent refusal of her own daughter, and to her misplaced motherly love:

It was Madame herself who led the pretty, tiny little “griffe” girl to her mother [...] “Here”, said Madame approaching, “here my poor dear Zoraïde is your own little child. Keep her; she is yours. No one will ever take her from you again.”

²⁷³ Elfenbein, *Women on the Color Line. The Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin, op. cit.*, p. 132 – 133.

²⁷⁴ Toth, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

Zoraïde looked with sullen suspicion upon her mistress and the child before her. Reaching out a hand she thrust the little one mistrustfully away from her. With the other hand she clasped the rag bundle fiercely to her breast; for she suspected a plot to deprive her of it.²⁷⁵

In fact, in all of the above examined stories by King and Chopin, *i.e.*, “The Little Convent Girl”, “Désirée’s Baby”, “Madrilène”, and “La Belle Zoraïde”, we can detect not only violence and a neglect of the black body, but also a unanimous refusal of the possibility of a functional bi-racial family. The isolation of the tragic mulatta figures is thus underscored by the acute lack of motherly love in their life, as in the case of the little convent girl, Madrilène, and Zoraïde (Désirée has known the love of her surrogate mother Madame Valmondé), as well as their inability to establish the maternal relationships with their own children, as in the case of Désirée and Zoraïde. Moreover, in the story of Madrilène, the role of the family home is performed by the brothel ran by Madame Lais.²⁷⁶ Parallel concerns regarding not only the individual Other, such as in the case of the solitary tragic mulatta figure embodied by King’s little convent girl and Madrilène as well as by Chopin’s Désirée and Zoraïde but also the collective

²⁷⁵ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 316 – 317.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Barrueto, Jorge J. “A Latin American Indian Re-Reads the Canon: Postcolonial Mimicry in “El Señor Presidente.” *Hispanic Review* 72.3 (Summer, 2004): 339 – 356. A parallel commentary on the family that is “rendered as a remorseless unit which is not conducive to the fostering of love”(339) is offered by Barrueto within the context of his examination of the Latin American canon from the Indian perspective. Furthermore, Barrueto also recognizes the fear of the Other (in the case of his examination, the Native American Other) on the individual as well as collective level: „That fear of the native, although in the imaginary, loomed large in European consciousness. From the mere imagined personal characteristics of individual native behavior, native primitivism became the overriding feature of the native’s own collective community. This was the ultimate fear about the Other; the fear was not only about the individual Other, but also about what he might produce, like the collective Other (his society)” (346).

Other, are explicit in Chopin's short story "A Little Free Mulatto", which envisions a community for racially mixed people in "L'Isle des Mulâtres". Examining the predicament of a little mulatto girl, Chopin portrays her predicament in the following manner:

She was not permitted to play with the white children up in the big-house, who would often willingly have had her join their games. Neither was she allowed to associate in any way with the little darkies who frolicked all day long as gleefully as kittens before their cabin doors. There seemed nothing for her to do in the world but to have her shiny hair plaited, or to sit at her mother's knee learning to spell or to patch quilt pieces.²⁷⁷

The resolution of the little mulatto girl's predicament envisioned by Chopin is the relocation of the mulatto family to "L'Isle des Mulâtres", a fictional version of a community of free people of color established in Isle Brevelle in Louisiana: "Well, there is no question about it. The happiest little Free-Mulatto in all Louisiana is Aurélia, since her father has moved to 'L'Isle des Mulâtres'."²⁷⁸ It is important to note that while Chopin abandons the solitary tragic mulatta mode and actually allows for the existence of a racially mixed community, this community is isolated and removed to a specific location. Therefore, the overriding implication of this short story is clearly Chopin's white supremacist belief that the blacks are happy among themselves. As Emily Toth summarizes Chopin's outlook on the social integration of the racially mixed characters: "Like most white southern sympathizers, Kate apparently thought blacks and mulattoes preferred to be with their own: In 'A Little Free-Mulatto', a

²⁷⁷ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 744.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 745.

young mixed-blood girl is desperately lonely until her father takes her to ‘L’Isle des Mulâtres’, the colony of free people of color in Natchitoches Parish.”²⁷⁹ Since neither Zoraïde nor Désirée have the possibility to find refuge in a similar enclave, their social integration is portrayed as impossible and their children are more or less violently disposed of.

Sandra Gunning concludes her examination of the politics of white supremacy and the legacy of white violence in Chopin’s fiction by claiming that Chopin “constructs blackness generally (although not exclusively) as benign, separate, and exotic rather than monstrous.”²⁸⁰ Moreover, interrogating the categories of class, race, ethnicity, and male aggression in Chopin’s *At Fault*, “A Little Free Mulatto”, “La Belle Zoraïde” and several of her other stories Gunning suggests that Chopin’s treatment of the issues of oppression and their challenge in her texts is exclusive to her white female heroines:

Significantly, *At Fault* demonstrates that Chopin is willing to challenge the politics of white supremacy only enough to liberate her white heroines, while embracing at the same time its structuring of race relations to consolidate Thérèse’s power. [...] Chopin also uses Thérèse to signify an alternate reality that respects traditional racial codes and racial balances of power without losing sight of the Southern white need for black labor.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Toth, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

²⁸⁰ Gunning, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

Therefore, Chopin's deconstruction of the white supremacy's myth of the black rapist, as it is examined by Gunning, is a clear indication that Chopin, in fact, attempted to resist, to a certain degree, nineteenth-century racist discourses. However, once again, we need to point out the complex confluence of the issues of race and gender, and insist that Chopin's attempts to challenge these issues in her fiction are incomplete.

Although Chopin does not incorporate portrayals of black "monstrosity" in her fiction, her portrayals of racially mixed characters remain problematic. Indeed, in Chopin's fiction, the main threat originating from the racially mixed characters is not their one-dimensional monstrosity, bestiality, or brutality; quite on the contrary, the main threat is constituted by the degree of similarity of such characters. In the case of *Désirée* and *Zoraïde*, and also in the case of King's characters of *Madrilène* and the little convent girl, the mulatta characters are not seen as a threat, *per se*; it is rather their potential ability to "pass" as white that constitutes a major threat, and that needs to be identified as a failure. Indeed, unless the tragic mulattas chose isolation, be it the Valmondé plantation, the convent, a cemetery, or *L'Isle des Mulâtres*, and embrace their racial Otherness, they constitute a threat.

To conclude the examination of the ambivalence of fear and desire directed towards the racial Other, as it is portrayed in King's "*Madrilène*" and Chopin's "*La Belle Zoraïde*", it is important to illuminate further an underlying aspect of these texts that motivates such racial fears. The stories depicting the tragic mulatta stereotype struggle with the fact that the mulatta figures are associated with "invisible blackness".

In truth, the characters are similar to the white ladies and aspire to imitate them, yet they are not similar enough, due to their “drop” of African blood. Therefore, their assimilation into the worlds of their mistresses, who often love them, has clearly defined boundaries, as can be illustrated by the following excerpt from the conversation between Zoraïde and Madame Delarivière:

“Remember, Zoraïde, when you are ready to marry, it must be in a way to do honor to your bringing up. It will be at the Cathedral. Your wedding gown, your corbeille, all will be of the best; I shall see to it myself.” [...] “Am I white, *nénaine*?” pleaded Zoraïde. “You white! *Malheureuse*! You deserve to have the lash laid upon you like any other slave; you have proven yourself no better than the worst.”²⁸²

Zoraïde’s resemblance to her mistress is thus portrayed as similar; however, she is ultimately not the same. This situation resonates with Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, which is formulated in the following manner:

[C]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.²⁸³

²⁸² Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

²⁸³ Bhabha, *Op. cit.*, p. 86, emphases in the original.

Although postcolonial theory in the works of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and others is a highly region-specific theory, we have appropriated this complex semiotic and psychoanalytic framework of colonial discourse for the examination of the constructions of the tragic mulatta stereotype in nineteenth-century Louisiana regionalist literature in order to show that the tragic mulatta stereotype destabilizes the Louisiana colonial paradigm in more ways than by acting as a sexualized opposite to the white Southern belle within the virgin/whore dichotomy. In fact, it is the “invisible blackness” or, in Bhabha’s terminology, mimicry of the tragic mulatta that disrupts the Southern hierarchy, *i.e.*, the distance between the colonizer and the colonized by means of constituting “the white presence and its black semblance.”²⁸⁴ Thereby, the white authority is replaced by an alarming uncertainty that results in the ambivalent relationship of the colonizer to the colonized who are expected to assume certain values and characteristics modeled on the colonizer’s wishes, but who are, on the other hand, discouraged to assume too many of these values and characteristics. As a result, the tragic fate of the little convent girl, Désirée, la belle Zoraïde, and Madrilène is sealed. The above-examined stories of Grace King and Kate Chopin are thus in strict opposition to the abolitionist fiction of such authors as Harriet Beecher Stowe, since their hybridity is not portrayed as a potentially liberating situation foreshadowing the national unification but, contrariwise, as a threat to the local hierarchy.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

By analogy, this region-specific dimension of the exploration of the tragic mulatta stereotype in Louisiana fiction also offers an answer to the question of preference of the female mulatta figures over the male mulatto figures who are ultimately more threatening to the established hierarchy due to their close resemblance to the white man, the ultimate symbol of power. As formulated by Nancy Bentley in her aforementioned article “White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction”: “At the moment when the novel represents slaves as white man with ‘Anglo-Saxon blood’, the discourse of domestic fiction is transformed into an antithetical language of sublime terror as the ‘white slave’ becomes the heroic agent of violence.”²⁸⁵ Clearly, such a character poses a threat to the established hierarchy in a more pressing manner than the female tragic mulatta figure that is subject to double oppression as a result of the intersection of the issues of race and gender.

Presently, let us conclude this chapter and its examination of the construction of the tragic mulatta figure as a Louisiana region-based stereotype. This chapter has exposed portrayals of the tragic mulatta figure within the context of nineteenth-century Louisiana discourse, as represented by the short fiction of Grace King, Kate Chopin, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, in order to uncover its region-specific epistemology of race. In this chapter, the portrayals of the tragic mulatta stereotype in the following stories “The Little Convent Girl”, “Sister Josepha”, “Désirée’s Baby”, “Madrilène; or The Festival of the Dead”, and “La Belle Zoraïde” have been interpreted as indicative of the ambivalent economy of (sexual) fear and desire rather than as a strict application of the virgin/whore dichotomy. This ambivalence was exemplified primarily by examining

²⁸⁵ Bentley, *op. cit.*, p. 503.

one plateau of the sexualized stereotypes of the dusky-eyed, exotic quadroons and octoroons, *i.e.*, the desirability of their bodies for their white masters, which paradoxically underlies the perpetuation of the white Southern hierarchy, as well as by examining the portrayals of (sexual and non-sexual) violence and victimization on the black body, *i.e.*, whipping, rape, drowning, neglect, *etc.*, that resulted from the fear of the visible racial Other as well as from the “invisible blackness”.

Arguably, in the fiction of Grace King we have witnessed a more significant degree of refusal to embrace the racial fluidity and ambivalence than in the fiction of Kate Chopin. Furthermore, King’s suppression of the dimension of desirability of the black body is in sharp contrast with Chopin’s embrace of the desirability and sexuality of not only the female black body but also of the male black body, as exemplified by an examination of her portrayal of the character of Le Beau Mézor in “La Belle Zoraïde”. Moreover, Chopin’s appropriation of the tragic mulatta stereotype for Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* ultimately shatters the virgin/whore interpretative framework. Thus, Chopin not only acknowledges the sexual desirability of the tragic mulatta, but also allows Edna, a white middle class wife from the New Orleans region, to appropriate the sexuality that is traditionally associated with the racially other-than-white characters. However, since both Chopin and King have been exposed to the same local perceptions of race, their short fiction offers an engagement with the issue of race that ultimately transcends the exoticism of the genre of *local color* by expressing, in different degrees, the ambivalent feelings of fear and desirability of the racially Other characters that is informed by the Louisiana region and its epistemology of race.

Therefore, it is evident that racial discourse, as it is present in the fiction of Chopin and King, distinctly differs from the appropriation of questions of racial issues by their literary predecessors, the (white, Northern) abolitionist authors, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852) and Lydia Maria Child (*The Quadroons*, 1842). Both Stowe and Child adopt the tragic mulatta stereotype primarily as a rhetorical device for the purposes of abolitionism. Arguably, the main objective of these fictional portrayals of the tragic mulatta within the genre of domestic/sentimental tradition is to address the questions of national identity and promote the idea of national unity by exciting in the reader feelings of pity and sympathy by showing how slavery was becoming "whiter". Therefore, as Eve Raimon points out, "the trope of the 'tragic mulatto' embodies and dramatizes [the] profound tensions and paradoxes of race and nation. At the same time as these seemingly contradictory currents were manifesting themselves in the social order, the literary mulatto emerged as a favorite theme of antislavery fiction."²⁸⁶

Such parallel interrogations of questions of race and nation, illuminated by Stowe's analogy between family reunion and national reunion that utilize the black/white binary, are incongruent with the coexisting local hierarchy in the New Orleans region of the late nineteenth century. This is mainly due to a strong Creole presence in New Orleans that had a reputation of a multicultural city. As Robert Alexander explains quoting from *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, a publication of Arnold Hirsh and Joseph Logsdon:

²⁸⁶ Raimon, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

[U]p until the time that the Anglo-American model became the dominant paradigm, the races had not been consistently segregated in New Orleans. Cable's hometown also had the distinction of being a city that supported the institution of slavery even as it was the domicile of the largest population of free African Americans in the antebellum South. Numbering nearly 20,000 in 1840 and 11,000 as late as 1860, these free people of color 'composed a fully articulated community with complex class structure, that occupied far more than the fringes of society'.²⁸⁷

The existence of the free people of color thus disrupts the idealized national binary notions of race. Both King and Chopin have witnessed Creole power and integration in the community, not as second-class citizens but as equal members of the community. Furthermore, King's non-fiction that includes *New Orleans: the Place and the People* (1895) and *Stories from Louisiana History* (1905) shows her explicit interest in Louisiana history. The paradigm shift from the utilization of the tragic mulatta as an abolitionist trope to the ambiguous stereotype functioning as a tool of the specific Louisiana "colonial" discourse is thus motivated by mimicry, the specific Creole threat, the fluidity of race, the breach of boundaries, and ultimately the competition between Southern belles and New Orleans octoroons.

We have attempted to show that the representational possibilities of this trope are not limited to the abolitionist family/nation analogy, but are appropriated by Chopin

²⁸⁷ Alexander, Robert Allen Jr. "The Irreducible African: Challenges to Racial Stereotypes in George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes*." in: Disheroon-Green, Suzanne and Abney Lisa, Eds. *Songs of the Reconstructing South: Building Literary Louisiana 1865 – 1945*. *Op. cit.*, p. 125.

and King as a region-specific trope fetishizing the black body. The works of the literary predecessors of Chopin and King who invented the tragic mulatta stereotype primarily for the abolitionist cause, as they are introduced in the following paragraphs, are seen as incongruent with the regional appropriation of this stereotype by the two discussed Louisiana authors.

According to the research of Kathy Davis, the first mentioning of the tragic mulatta stereotype can be found in Lydia Maria Child's short story "The Quadroons" published in 1842: "With the publication of two short stories – "The Quadroons" in *The Liberty Bell* for 1842 and "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" in the volume for 1843 – Lydia Maria Child invented the literary character type that would become known in the twentieth century as "The Tragic Mulatta".²⁸⁸ Davis further identifies and defines the tragic mulatta stereotype in Child's fiction in the following manner:

This heroine of much abolitionist literature is a light-skinned woman of mixed race. Typically, she is a daughter of an enslaved mother and a slave-owning father. Sometimes, she is ignorant of her mother's race and status – and therefore her own, as "the child follows the condition of the mother." Instead, she believes herself to be both "free" and "white" until events following her father's death expose her true condition. Remanded back to slavery and deserted by her lover, who is usually white, she dies the victim of male sexual predation.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Cf. Davis, Kathy. "Headnote to Lydia Maria Child's 'The Quadroons' and 'Slavery's Pleasant Homes'." *The Online Archive of Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women's Writings*. Ed. Glynis Carr. 16 April 2008.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, in his examination of the characteristics of Rosaline, one of the tragic mulatta figures of Lydia Maria Child's story "The Quadroons", Jean Fagan Yellin offers yet another standard definition of the tragic mulatta:

[She] is pious, obedient, and domestic, hopelessly struggling to be pure, and notable for her beauty, sensitivity, and moral excellence. Like the patriarchal model of the true woman, she feels that her identity exists only in and through her relationship with the man she loves. [...] Her manners, aristocratic sensibilities, and polished language identify her as a model of patriarchal true womanhood's only goal. [...] Obedient, yet denied the joys of true domesticity, [she] is doomed never to be a wife; her life is blighted, and she dies.²⁹⁰

Clearly, the regional aesthetics of the works of Chopin and King are not fully congruent with such depictions and interpretations of the tragic mulatta stereotype of the antebellum period. In fact, the Louisiana ideological framework constitutes the tragic mulatta figure primarily as a threat to the Southern hierarchy.

Lydia Maria Child concludes her story "The Quadroons" not by a suicide of the quadroon character, but by her insanity - another form of escapism, the resonance of which we can find in Chopin's "La Belle Zoraïde". Arguably, however, Child adds more pathos to her ending in order to arouse the feelings of pity of her readers as well as some form of social action, political action or response. Moreover, she includes a direct address to her readers at the end of the story in order to underscore its abolitionist purpose:

²⁹⁰ Yellin, Jean Fagan. *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 72.

In a few months more, Xarifa was a ranging lunatic. That pure temple was desecrated; that loving heart was broken; and that beautiful head fractured against the wall of frenzy in despair. Her master cursed the useless expense she had cost him; the slaves buried her; and no one wept at the grave of her who had been so carefully cherished, and so tenderly beloved. Reader, do you complain that I have written fiction? Believe me, scenes like these are of no unfrequent [*sic*] occurrence at the South.²⁹¹

Unlike Xarifa, however, la belle Zoraïde is ultimately portrayed by Chopin as being punished for her refusal to internalize white values, and although the reader may feel pity for Zoraïde la folle, the implication of Zoraïde's responsibility for her decision is ominously remaining with the reader after the story has ended. Therefore, Zoraïde's refusal of assimilation of whiteness is seen by her mistress as a subversive action that needs to be punished. Paradoxically, it is precisely Zoraïde's close resemblance to the ideal of beauty that empowers her and that allows her to "disappoint" the expectations of her mistress.

Furthermore, it is important to note that nineteenth-century readers could only relate to the tragic mulatta heroine and pity her if she closely resembled them in her visage and behavior. As Sterling Brown argues, it is a "curious piece of inconsistency on their [the abolitionists'] part, an indirect admission that a white man [and woman] in

²⁹¹ Child, Lydia Maria. "The Quadroons." *The Online Archive of Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women's Writings*. Ed. Glynis Carr. 22 April 2008. <http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/gcarr/19cUSWW/LB/Q.html>.

chains was more pitiful to behold than the African similarly placed.”²⁹² This inherent racism partly disregards the darker-skinned slaves and supports the perpetuation and appropriation of the standards of whiteness.

Another important difference constituted by Chopin and King and their appropriation of the tragic mulatta from their abolitionist predecessors is the lack of the identification of the “white female liberators”. As Kathy Davis examines the history of the tragic mulatta figure that was introduced into the literary canon by Lydia Maria Child, she exposes the role of the doubling white female figures who function as potential liberators in the tragic mulatta stories and she argues that they can be interpreted in the following manner:

[T]his trope of sisterhood [can be interpreted] as a sign that these tales are ultimately more concerned with issues of white female identity and empowerment than with black women’s lives. In this reading, the “black” female protagonists are little more than surrogates, mere vehicles for white women’s meditations on the tabooed subject of their own vulnerability to sexual violence.²⁹³

This inherently racist figure who would speak “to the concerns of the free women readers [...] who were wrestling with their duty to female slaves”²⁹⁴ is clearly absent

²⁹² Brown, Sterling. “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors.” *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*. Eds. Emanuel A. James and Theodore L. Gross. New York: Free Press, 1968, p. 159.

²⁹³ Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁹⁴ Yellin, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

from the stories penned by Grace King and Kate Chopin, who explore the tragic mulatta figure as a Louisiana social reality.

Another variation of the tragic mulatta stereotype that should be mentioned was offered in 1859 in Dion Boucicault's play "The Octoroon, or Life in Louisiana" that interestingly entails two variants of its ending, one ending happily, an ending reserved for the audience in England, and a tragic ending including Zoe's, (*i.e.*, the octoroon's) decision to poison herself, which was used primarily for the American productions.²⁹⁵

The examination of the tragic mulatta stereotype in the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin in this chapter thus aspired to expand the existing interpretations of the works of these two authors by minimizing the feminist perspective and rediscover these women writers for the subject of race studies by reclaiming the dimension of race in their works. In order to interrogate the category of race in Louisiana regional aesthetics of the Local Color genre, as it is represented by Grace King and Kate Chopin, this chapter is followed by a chapter dealing with other African-American bodies in the texts of these two authors. To be exact, the examination of the tragic mulatta shall be expanded to include the mammy stereotype.

²⁹⁵ Cf. Preface to "The Octoroon." *Nineteenth-Century American Plays*. Ed. Myron Matlaw. New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1985, pp. 97 -99.

IV. Reinterpretation of the Mammy Stereotype in the Fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King: the Limits of Black Sexuality and Tragic Motherhood

The stereotypical (re)presentations of the black female body in the texts of Grace King and Kate Chopin, whether subject to feminist interpretations or to interpretations within the framework of postcolonial theory, are not limited to the tragic mulatta stereotype. The contours of another black body - the mammy - have frequently been fleshed out in their fiction in full accordance with the white supremacist notions of race that were abundant in nineteenth century Louisiana discourse. Therefore, in order to explore further the local epistemologies of race and race representations in the fiction of King and Chopin, this chapter offers an examination of the mammy stereotype in analogy to the examinations of the representations of the tragic mulatta stereotype discussed in the preceding chapter. We shall expand the traditionally applied framework of the virgin/whore dichotomy, and extend its underlying paradoxes to the representations of the mammy stereotype in the fiction of these two Louisiana authors, in order to address another aspect of race and desire - a new dimension of black-white intimacy. Ultimately, by juxtaposing the plantation ideology with post-colonial theory, this chapter will offer a complex look at the controlled representations of the mammy stereotype, and its limitations in the fiction of Chopin and King, and therein interrogate two different codes of sexuality in their fiction.

The suggested limits of representations of the black body are, of course, evident not only within the context of Louisiana regionalist fiction, but also in the fiction of

nineteenth-century abolitionists, such as Maria Lydia Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe, in the fiction of British writers whose works were central to a British understanding of America, such as Frances Wright, Frances Trollope, and Harriet Martineau, and they also continue to haunt the fiction of the twentieth-century works of Julia Peterkin, Edna Ferber, Ellen Glasgow, William Faulkner²⁹⁶ and other authors who may be briefly referred to in this chapter.²⁹⁷ Yet, the limits of representation of the black body in the fiction of Chopin and King are uniquely influenced by the Louisiana region and its particularities. From its beginnings, the European colonization of the Louisiana territory is paralleled by the institutionalized colonization of the black female body, the representations of which are often ambiguous - be it the tragic mulatta stereotype or the mammy stereotype.²⁹⁸ This ambiguity, according to Robert Young, manifests itself in the following manner:

²⁹⁶ For detailed examination of the mammy stereotype in Faulkner's fiction confer: Roberts, Diane „Mammy“ in : *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994.

²⁹⁷ For further examination of representations of the black body in Southern fiction confer chapters “Miss Wright, Mrs. Trollope and Miss Martineau or, Three British Women Look at American Slavery” and “Jemima and Jezebel in the New South, Twentieth Century Women on Race” in: Roberts, Diane. *The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Region*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

²⁹⁸ For an alternative view of the „post-colonial“ New Orleans confer: Taylor, Helen. “ ‘The perfume of the past’: Kate Chopin and post-colonial New Orleans.” *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*. Ed. Janet Beer. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp.147 – 160. Helen Taylor focuses on the complexities of the Anglo-French Louisiana and their reflections in Chopin's fiction. According to Taylor, Chopin's fiction records “what a newly post-colonial state felt like within a larger homogenising nation, *particularly in terms of the impact on its French Creole and French Acadian peoples*” (147, emphasis added). Most notably, by alluding to the institution of *plaçage*, Taylor underscores the parallels between Paris and New Orleans as colonial cities that were “defined as the sex capitals of their nations” (148), and thus addresses the roles of Southern women and their fictional counterparts. Chopin's exploitation of the Local Color setting for the purpose of unconventional treatment of issues of race and gender within the southern context is explored by application of the dichotomies of sex/purity, city/country, reason/emotionality and it ultimately exposes Chopin's fashioning of “confident female identity” in the post-bellum post-colonial New Orleans.

The repulsion that writers commonly express when describing other races, particularly Africans, is, however, often accompanied at other points, with an equal emphasis, sometimes apparently inadvertent, on the beauty, attractiveness or desirability of the racial other.²⁹⁹

After all, the sexual desirability of the racial Other had been institutionalized in New Orleans in the form of plaçage that perpetuated the fascination with the “fancy” quadroons, and octoroons.³⁰⁰ Not simply an anti-abolitionist rhetorical device publicly refusing the sexuality (and sexual exploitation) of black women, the mammy stereotype in the fiction of Chopin and King is examined in this chapter as an effective tool for the assertion of power over the black body. According to Michele Birnbaum, this stereotype was applicable both during the times of slavery as well as emancipation: “If Southerners had long invoked domestic metaphors to sanction slavery (master as pater, mistress as mother, slaves as extended family – children, ‘uncles’ or ‘mammies’), similar terms of obligation and affiliation underwrote postbellum domestic service.”³⁰¹ Despite the partial shift from slavery’s commodification to exaggerated loyalty and other forms of control of the black female body in domestic service, an ambivalence of this controlling representation is evident from the interdependent opposition of representations of the *black* female body and the *white* female body. From this

²⁹⁹ Young, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

³⁰⁰ Cf. “The Properties of Blood” in: Domínguez, Virginia R. *White by Definition. Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986. In chapter “Defining the Racial Structure” Domínguez analyzes the “conditions under which categories of identity are restructured, and how arbitrary are the legal systems of racial classification that emerge over historical periods [in Louisiana]” (23).

³⁰¹ Birnbaum, Michele. *Race, Work, and Desire in American Literature, 1860 – 1930*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp 30 – 31.

perspective, the appropriation and perpetuation of the mammy stereotype within the Louisiana regionalist discourse serves primarily to maintain the cult of white Southern womanhood. Paradoxically, while supporting the cult of white Southern womanhood by offering the definition of its “Other”, black womanhood and its controlled representations simultaneously erase the sexuality of the black female body and manifest the impossibility of a complete erasure of such desirability. The simultaneous desirability of the black mammy/mother-figure and the asexual and grotesque contours of her body testifying to the “violent” representation of the mammy figure will be exposed primarily in the following stories of Kate Chopin: “Beyond the Bayou”, “Tante Cat’rINETTE, and in Chopin’s first novel *At Fault* and paralleled by examination of Grace King’s stories “Crippled Hope”, “Bayou L’Ombre: An Incident of War”, and “Monsieur Motte”.

The strict racial binary manifest in the imposition of the virgin/whore dichotomy on white and black bodies respectively, as discussed in the previous chapter by referring to the work of Anna Elfenbein and others, continues to shape the literary representations of the mammy stereotype. Furthermore, the polarization of both literal and metaphorical purity and the dirt of literary racial representations in the Southern regions of the United States is rephrased by Diane Roberts in terms of the Bakhtinian categories of the “classic” and the “grotesque”:

Some bodies are “high”, like the statue on the pedestal that so often represents white women in Southern culture, while some, like black women (and black men) are “low”, represented by the unspeakable, “unclean” elements official culture would repress. I use Bakhtin’s model for the ‘classical body’ and the ‘grotesque

body' to express these extremes: "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin, 19 – 20). [...] The classical body is, on the other hand, single, ethereal, sanctioned, and official. It "presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual... All orifices of the body are closed" (Bakhtin, 320).³⁰²

Such a polarization of the racial representations clearly mirrors the dichotomy of the representations of the tragic mulatta figure while displacing the sexual connotations by the emphasis on the material physicality of the black body rather than sexuality. This physicality is neither captivating nor seductive. Rather, the body of the mammy is "magnificently physical"³⁰³ and it is therefore seen as repulsive or grotesque. For instance, this emphasis on physicality is appropriated by Diane Roberts, who examines the role of odor as a marker within the context of racial representations in the following manner:

"In the white mythology of race, odour is a mark of blackness. The grotesque body, because of its opened orifices and centrality of the genitals, stomach and bowels, is signified by smell. Racist discourse still employs notions of "the negro smell" (or, in other cultures, "the Paki smell", "the Arab smell", "the Chinese smell").³⁰⁴

³⁰² Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima*, *op cit.*, p. 3.

³⁰³ Roberts, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

³⁰⁴ Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

The underlying motivation for the representations of the tragic mulatta within the Southern ideological context - her moral degradation – is clearly displaced in the portrayals of the mammy stereotype by physical degradation that is signified by the grotesque body, the body that is:

multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasized, not its closure and finish. It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, 'spirit', reason).³⁰⁵

Therefore, the ambivalent feelings of fear and desire toward the racially Other, as they have been examined in relation to the tragic mulatta stereotype, are manifest in the representations of the mammy stereotype; however, this fear is not translated into literal violence on the body, as in the case of the tragic mulatta (*i.e.*, suicide), but into violence on the *representations* of the body of the mammy - on her grotesque physique, disfigurement, and masculine attributes. The dichotomy of the classical/grotesque bodies and the lady/prostitute dichotomy that inspires the representations of the physical degradation of the contours of the mammy figure and the moral disintegration of the tragic mulatta figure thus clearly continue to impose order on black female bodies in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King.

³⁰⁵ Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Methuen, 1986, qtd. in: Roberts, *Ibid.*, p. 3.

According to historian Catherine Clinton, the mammy stereotype was created above all in response to the antebellum antislavery tendencies:

The Mammy was created by white Southerners to redeem the relationship between black women and white men within slave society in response to the antislavery attack from the North during the ante-bellum period. In the primary records from before the Civil War hard evidence for its existence simply does not appear.³⁰⁶

Generally speaking, the mammy stereotype, as an anti-abolitionist trope, accentuated not only the physicality of the black female body in order to perpetuate the imposition of a hierarchical order in the South but also the asexuality of black women to refuse categorically their sexual exploitation and the fact of miscegenation. David Pilgrim argues in his study of the mammy portrayals and caricatures in American media and film that the asexuality of the mammy figure was essential for the formation of this stereotype and its anti-abolitionist implications:

The mammy caricature was deliberately constructed to suggest ugliness. Mammy was portrayed as dark-skinned, often pitch black, in a society that regarded black skin as ugly, tainted. She was obese, sometimes morbidly overweight. Moreover, she was often portrayed as old, or at least middle-aged. The attempt was to *desexualize mammy*. The implicit assumption was this: No reasonable white man would choose a fat, elderly black woman instead of the idealized white woman. The black mammy was portrayed as lacking all sexual and sensual qualities. The de-

³⁰⁶ Clinton, Catherine. *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982, p. 201 – 202.

eroticism of mammy meant that the wife – and by extension, the white family was safe.³⁰⁷

Clearly, within the framework of abolitionist/anti-abolitionist discourse the role of the asexualized mammy stereotype is juxtaposed to the role of the tragic mulatta, whose sexuality and desirability may be forbidden and problematic, yet indisputable. However, it is crucial to note that the role of the mammy stereotype in the fiction of Chopin and King is embedded not only in nationalist discourse, but also in a variant of Southern colonial discourse where we may claim that the “sexual and colonial relationships become analogous to each other.”³⁰⁸ In order to show that the two discussed stereotypes, the tragic mulatta stereotype and the mammy stereotype, are equally embedded in the colonial discourse where “native women and their bodies are described in terms of the promise and the fear of the colonial land”³⁰⁹, it is necessary to address the objective of such stereotypes within the Louisiana regionalist discourse.

We may agree that within the framework of the Louisiana regionalist discourse, the mammy stereotype in the fiction of Chopin and King can be seen as an effective tool for the assertion of power over the black body, and the limitations that correspond with its assigned “lower” role. The role of the mammy stereotype in Louisiana regionalist fiction, as represented by the two selected authors, functions as a twofold ideological tool. Within the national discourse this stereotype has anti-abolitionist

³⁰⁷ Pilgrim, David. “The Mammy Caricature” 25 April 2008. <<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies>> p. 2, emphasis added.

³⁰⁸ Loomba, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

implications, as was clearly formulated by Catherine Clinton and David Pilgrim; yet, within the Southern discourse the mammy stereotype becomes a complex representation of double sexual codes and the resulting paradoxical definitions of black womanhood and motherhood.

This statement fully corresponds with Hazel Carby's definition of stereotypes that *reconstruct* womanhood, which partially echoes Bhabha's notion of stereotype as a contradictory ideological tool. In her examination of the emergence of Afro-American female novelists, Carby claims that "the objective of stereotypes is not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise or mystification, of objective social relations."³¹⁰ By refusing to simply compare the literary stereotypes to the plantation reality, Carby is further able to examine the underlying ideology of the use of such stereotypes and address the evident ambivalence of such controlling representations that, once again, can be seen as parallel to the tragic mulatta representations. Such examinations offer a much needed background for the interrogation of the representations of the mammy figure in the fiction of Chopin and King, a topic underestimated by many critics of regionalist fiction. Within the Southern ideological framework, the interdependent opposition between the representations of the *black* female body and the *white* female body becomes apparent since, as Diane Roberts points out: "the understanding of what it means to be a white woman in the United States, particularly in the South, is still largely predicated on what it means to be

³¹⁰ Carby, Hazel. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 22.

black.”³¹¹ From this perspective, the appropriation and perpetuation of the mammy stereotype within the Louisiana regionalist discourse does not serve primarily as an apology of slavery on economical or biblical grounds (the “traditional” pro-slavery arguments), but to maintain the cult of white Southern womanhood that defined the white middle-class women primarily as “asexual, spiritual, morally elevated, and angelic.”³¹² In fact, as Rupe Simms suggests, the mammy image cannot be easily reduced to an anti-abolitionist trope because it does not relate exclusively to race. In fact, it embraces the issues of race, gender and region. Therefore, it becomes subject to examinations within the framework of post-colonial theory, feminist theory, as well as regionalist studies:

The mammy image contributed to the stability of white male domination by portraying an ideal type of the Black female slave in her relationship with her master. Through her genuine devotion to servitude and consent to subordination, the mammy exemplified the ruling class definition of white male superiority and the Black female subaltern.³¹³

Unlike the abolitionist discourse that propounded sentimentalist portrayals of the mammy figure who was “tamed on all fronts: tamed into passive Christianity, tamed into sexless maternity”³¹⁴, the sexual/asexual dichotomy of the mulatta and the mammy (and by extension of the Southern belle) that is central to the regionalist representations

³¹¹ Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima*, *op. cit.*, p. 9

³¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³¹³ Simms, Rupe. “Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women.” *Gender and Society* 15.6 (December 2001), p. 882.

³¹⁴ Roberts, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

of both races is further problematized by the mammy as a symbol of motherhood in the fiction of Chopin and King. As formulated by Elizabeth Duquette, who focused her research on the mammy figures in the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the role of the mammy, as opposed to the mulatta, is clear: “during the postbellum period; while young black women would continue to be represented as sexually voracious, older black women would function as the ideal domestic surrogate.”³¹⁵ However, as the following paragraphs unfold, it will become increasingly evident that the relation of the mammy figure to the representation of white womanhood in Southern regionalist fiction is rather paradoxical. Moreover, the sexual/asexual dichotomy applied to the black and white bodies by the abolitionist/anti-abolitionist discourse is, of course, further complicated by the exaggerated fear of black male sexuality that is most frequently represented by the “black rapist” stereotype and animality that is most often represented by the “bluegum nigger” stereotype.³¹⁶

The paradoxical nature of the mammy stereotype becomes evident primarily by juxtaposing the asexual, and often grotesque, body of the mammy with the underlying obsession with the sexuality of the black body. The mammy figure may be confined by the regionalist discourse to an asexual and grotesque stereotyped body; yet, her desirability is repeatedly manifested by descriptions focusing on her exaggerated breasts and buttocks, *i.e.*, her main sexual signifiers (unlike the tragic mulatta stereotype focus on hair and on eyes) and by her primary function as surrogate mother and nurse.

³¹⁵ Duquette, Elizabeth. “The Republican Mammy? Imagining Civic Engagement in *Dread*.” *American Literature* 80.1 (March 2008), p. 22.

³¹⁶ For further details confer: Gunning, *op. cit.*

Sue Jewell notes that the mammy's "large bosom has been described as a haven or safe comfortable place for men to lay their heads."³¹⁷ The desirability of the surrogate motherhood of the mammy figures in regionalist fiction is indisputable. In fact, according to Roberts: "Her place as a mother is central: she must be fecund, fat, and ample-breasted to objectify her generosity, her motherliness, and her place as a figure in Childhood; yet her sexuality must be suppressed. She has become too 'white' to sleep with her husband."³¹⁸ Both Chopin and King present black women as excellent nurses and surrogate mothers for the white children; yet, they repeatedly imply that black women are bad mothers and underestimate the importance of their own children and families.³¹⁹ By combining Diane Roberts' examination of the "Aunt Jemima" myth with Edward Said's theory of the European fascination with Oriental (literally, and metaphorically speaking) sexuality and "Oriental splendor, cruelty [and] sensuality"³²⁰ and the Bakhtinian definition of the grotesque, the battle over representation of the black female body in the fiction of the two discussed authors can be illuminated in terms of colonial discourse and its ambivalent feelings of repulsion and fascination with the black female body. In effect, such an exploration emphasizing the representations of the mammy figure in the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin shall, to a significant degree, oppose both the non-regionalist (sentimentalist) anti-slavery fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Maria Lydia Child and the sentimentalist pro-slavery fiction of

³¹⁷ Jewell, Sue K. *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond. Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy*. London: Routledge, 1993, p. 41.

³¹⁸ Roberts, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

³¹⁹ *Cf.* particularly King's short story "Crippled Hope" examined below.

³²⁰ Said, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Caroline Gilman³²¹ and other authors for whom the mammy principally “typifies the mythic Old South of benign slavery, grace, and abundance [and who] rules the kitchen or she instructs the young ladies in decorum or she buries the family silver in the orchard so the Yankees won’t steal it.”³²²

Representations of the mammy stereotype in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King, though they are constantly being overlooked by literary critics, further testify to the construction of local racial knowledge, as it was illuminated in the chapter examining the tragic mulatta stereotype. Once again, such local knowledge continues to be riddled with paradoxes and ambivalences primarily due to the existence of mutually dependent definitions of black womanhood/motherhood and white womanhood/motherhood. As Hazel Carby phrases it, “two very different but interdependent codes of sexuality operated in the antebellum South, producing opposing definitions of motherhood and womanhood for white and black women which coalesce in the figures of the slave and the mistress”.³²³ The mammy figure, as the symbol of African American womanhood and motherhood, plays an important role in this genre and, combined with the tragic mulatta figure, it offers a valuable insight into the representations of race in literature of the discussed region. Furthermore, acting as an opposite to “negative sexuality [of the] white southern lady [who] embodies virtue, but her goodness depends directly on innocence – in fact, on ignorance of evil [and

³²¹ Cf. Gilman, Caroline. *Recollections of a Southern Matron*. New York: Harper and Bros, 1838.

³²² Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

³²³ Carby, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

who] is chaste because she has never been tempted”³²⁴, the symbols of African American womanhood and motherhood in the fiction of Chopin and King betray the political vision of both of these authors that is sometimes disregarded. The codes of white sexuality, which is defined primarily by the specifically defined category of charm, which “works as a mediator between the contradictory aspects of a chaste versus a titillating sexuality”³²⁵, and the codes of black sexuality, which is defined primarily by “overt sexuality and taboo sexual practices”³²⁶, and possibly voodoo in the New Orleans region,³²⁷ constitute the underlying paradox of the representation of black womanhood and black motherhood in Louisiana regionalist discourse.

At this point it is important to note, as Hazel Carby does, that the dichotomy of white/black sexuality and womanhood is perpetuated not only within the context of the cult of true womanhood, but also in direct or in indirect polemics with this cult:

Popular white women novelists often used their texts to explore the boundaries of the cult of true womanhood and to challenge

³²⁴ Entzminger, Betina. *The Belle Gone Bad: White Southern Women Writers and the Dark Seductress*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002, p. 9.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³²⁷ For a canonical fictional example of the dark seductress, consider the character of Palmyre Philosophe who is portrayed by George Washington Cable in *The Grandissimes* as efficient in spells, divinations and more or less baleful rites of the voodoo in: Cable, George Washington. *The Grandissimes, a Story of Creole Life*. New York: Sagamore Press, 1957. For comparison, see the historical figure encompassing the dark seductress image, Marie Laveaux, the voodoo Queen of New Orleans, who was a free woman of color in: Fandrich, Ina Johanna. *The mysterious voodoo queen, Marie Laveaux : a study of powerful female leadership in nineteenth-century New Orleans*. New York: Routledge, 2005 and: Fandrich, Ina Johanna. “The Politics of Myth-making: an Analysis of the Struggle for the ‘Correct’ Appropriation of *New Orleans Voodoo Queen Marie Laveaux*.” *Social Compass* 43. 4 (December 1996): 613-628.

some of the most confining strictures in definitions of female sexuality. A close reading of these books reveals that this process of questioning the ideology applied only to the white female characters; black women in these texts exist only to confirm their own lack of womanly attributes in contrast to the abundance of virtues in their mistress.³²⁸

Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, which challenges the cult of true womanhood and which is being reinterpreted by contemporary critics primarily as a proto-feminist attempt to define autonomous womanhood, is a perfect example of such perpetuation, with its portrayals of nameless quadroon and mulatto nurses, cooks, and caretakers, and the general omission of black women in Edna Pontellier's proto-feminist struggle for self-definition independent from the concepts of motherhood and wifhood.

Both Kate Chopin and Grace King participate in the perpetuation of the double sexual code, and accordingly incorporate representations of the mammy figure that are predominantly grotesque and asexual. For the most part, they portray the body of the mammy figure as being grossly obese, intensely black, grotesque, and in some cases even physically disfigured. The fear of the racial Other and its impact on the counter-definition of white womanhood, which is indicative of Louisiana regionalist literature, repeatedly manifests itself by the controlling representations of the mammy figure and by negating her desirability. Moreover, comedic qualities are often ascribed to the mammy figure to further discredit her potential desirability. As Sue Jewell phrases it, "Mammy's obesity is responsible, in part, for the comedic nature of the character [...],

³²⁸ Carby, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

women, who are extremely overweight are defined as matronly and humorous if they are mature adults, and humorous if they are young adults.”³²⁹ These generally undesirable attributes of the region-specific representations of the mammy figure that incorporate the impossibility of disentanglement from the definition of white Southern womanhood as well as the impossibility of erasure of the (sexual) desirability of the black female body, as will be exemplified later by the discussion of “tragic motherhood” of the mammy figure, are significantly present, especially in the short fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King.

Although an explicit portrayal of a representative mammy figure is conspicuously missing from Chopin’s second novel, *The Awakening*, her first novel, *At Fault*, incorporates representations of the mammy figure that testify to the above-described controlling imagery of black womanhood in regionalist fiction. Chopin’s portrayal of the *Grosse Tante*, who is the mammy of Thérèse Lafirme, fully adheres to this conventional portrayal of the body of the mammy figure by emphasizing her extremely dark skin as well as her extreme obesity and unpretentious “negro clothes”³³⁰ consisting of a colorful calico cress and an equally colorful “head rag”:

A negress – coal black and so enormously fat that she moved about with evident difficulty. She was dressed in a loosely hanging purple calico garment of the mother Hubbard type – known as *volante* among Louisiana Creoles; and on her head was knotted and fantastically twisted a bright *tignon*.³³¹

³²⁹ Jewell, *op cit.*, p. 39.

³³⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³³¹ Gilbert, *op cit.*, p. 80.

It is relevant to note that the actual name of the mammy of Thérèse Lafirme is not *Grosse Tante* but, as the narrator informs us, Marie Louise. Despite her proper name, Thérèse Lafirme constantly refers to her mammy by the descriptive name that is derived from the mammy's physique ("large aunt"). Therefore, representation of the mammy is controlled in a twofold manner. Firstly, she is portrayed in terms of an overwhelming and singular physique; and secondly, she is named in accordance with such a controlling image. Interestingly, the narrator of *At Fault*, consistently refers to the mammy as "Marie Louise". Such a distinction between the relationship of Thérèse Lafirme to the mammy and between the narrator's relationship to the mammy in this novel constitutes a certain level of complexity; however, it does not negate the region-specific treatment of the representation of the mammy figure. Moreover, the grotesque size of the mammy is juxtaposed in the text with the physique of her mistress, Thérèse Lafirme, who is referred to as "Tite Maitresse" (*i.e.*, Petite Maitresse, meaning "little mistress" or "small mistress"). This name most likely results not only from the emotional attachment of the mammy to her former "baby", but it also seems to imply the actual bodily frame of Thérèse Lafirme. According to Sarah Gleeson-White, the Southern ideology created a very (spatially) limited ideal of femininity, "femininity is ideally pocket-sized, presenting the perfect woman as a miniature and as something to be collected and hoarded."³³² Therefore, we can see that within the context of Louisiana regionalist discourse, the grotesque body of Marie Louise, the *Grose Tante*, delimits Thérèse Lafirme by contrast, and by analogy, the boundaries of white Southern womanhood.

³³²Gleeson-White, Sarah. "Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers." *The Southern Literary Journal* 33.2 (Spring 2001), p. 113.

A similar representation of the body of the black mammy can be found in Chopin's short story "Tante Cat'rinette" from her second collection of short stories entitled *A Night in Acadie* (1897). In this case, however, the asexualization and general undesirability of the mammy figure is further developed by adding masculinized characteristics to her exaggerated and grotesque features, and by ascribing to her the habit of smoking.

"Tante Cat'rinette stood in the doorway of her home, resting a gaunt black hand against the jamb. In the other hand she held her corn-cob pipe. She was a tall, large-boned woman of a pronounced Congo type. [...] her bare arms and neck that gleamed ebony like against the unbleached cotton of her chemise. A coarse skirt was fastened about her waist, and a string of many-colored beads knotted around her throat. She held her smoking pipe between her yellow teeth."³³³

Clearly, this strategy of using masculine attributes in the representations of the mammy figure is another challenge to the assumption of sexual attractiveness of slaves to their masters. As Sue Jewell notes in her examination of the symbols of African American womanhood:

some argue that the [...] effort to masculinize African American women, assigning them physical attributes and emotional qualities traditionally attributed to males [...] is directly related to the extent that African American women represent a threat to those in power.³³⁴

³³³ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 497 - 498.

³³⁴ Jewell, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

In effect, such attempts to erase the sexuality of the mammy figure by ascribing masculine attributes to her produce a grotesque hybridity of the resulting image that is analogous to the hybridity of the tragic mulatta figure - the “hybrid” with seductive power. The grotesque imagery of this story, which is shaped by Southern ideology, is further apparent in Chopin’s comparison of the silhouette of Tante Cat’rnette to that of a beast: “She [Tante Cat’rnette] could have been mistaken for one of the beasts browsing there where she passed.”³³⁵ The enormous and, by implication, beastly physicality of Tante Cat’rnette is juxtaposed with Miss Kitty, the descriptions of whose physique remains completely absent from the story, with the exception of the following reference: “Miss Kitty’s hand lay outside the coverlid; a shapely hand, which her few days of illness and rest had not yet softened.”³³⁶ The immediate present physicality of Tante Cat’rnette, who is dark, tall, large-boned, and “beastly” is contrasted with the absence of any physical description of Miss Kitty, of whom the reader only gets a glimpse of her elegant and delicately-shaped hand. The perpetuation of the Southern ideology by means of presenting an image of the classical body of the white mistress and the grotesque body of her mammy in this story is further accentuated by the physical strength and determination of Tante Cat’rnette, who claims to have her axe ready in case the town officials try to take her house, which is destined for demolition: “I got my axe grine fine. Fus’ man w’at touch Cat’rnette fo’ tu’n her out dat house, he git ‘is head bus’ like I bus’ a gode’.”³³⁷

³³⁵ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 501.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 502.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 498.

Chopin's first collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk* (1894), a precursor of the subsequent unfolding of complex themes of race, gender, and region in her later fiction, also offers glimpses of stereotyped mammy representations. For instance, Sylvie from Chopin's story "Athénaïse", who is a matron running the *chambers garniers* in New Orleans is portrayed as:

a portly quadron of fifty or thereabout, clad in an amble *volante* of the old-fashioned purple calico so much affected by her class. She wore large golden hoop-earrings, and her hair was combed plainly, with every appearance of effort to smooth out the kinks. She had broad, coarse features, with a nose that was turned up, exposing wide nostrils, and that seemed to emphasize the loftiness and command of her bearing, - a dignity that in the presence of white people assumed a character of respectfulness, but never of obsequiousness.³³⁸

This portrayal of a quadron matron very closely resembles representation of another mammy figure, Louise, in Chopin's story "The Matter of Prejudice" from *A Night in Acadie*, her second collection of short stories: "Presently an old black woman answered the summons. She wore gold hoops in her ears and a bright bandana knotted fantastically on her head."³³⁹ These examples of representations of the black female body in Chopin's fiction further testify to the region-specific formation of racial representations and racial knowledge. At this point, we can only agree with McCullough that "while Chopin was able in her fiction to disrupt certain dominant norms of femininity, she often did so only at the cost of offering images that

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

reinscribed others and thus would have reassured her largely white audience.”³⁴⁰ From this perspective, the regionalism of Chopin seems to parallel another regionally and ideologically defined concept - Said’s concept of Orientalism, which he defines primarily as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”³⁴¹ Replacing the binary opposition of the West versus the Oriental with the opposition of black versus white in the context of regionalist fiction, Said’s theory is resonant with the present examination of stereotypes on both ontological and on epistemological levels.

As foreshadowed by the previous paragraphs, Grace King also appropriates the stereotyped controlling representations of the black female body in her fiction. Her short story, “The Crippled Hope”, from her first collection of short stories *Balcony Stories* (1893) is the most appropriate text for examination of such controlling representations. The main character, the sick-nurse “little Mammy”, is portrayed not only as an asexual black body, but primarily as a body whose physique is disfigured and grotesque:

Pure African, but bronze rather than pure black, and full-sized only in width, her growth having been hampered as to height by an injury to her hip, which had lamed her, pulling her figure awry, and burdening her with protuberance of the joint. Her mother caused it by dropping her when a baby, and concealing it, for fear of punishment, until the dislocation became irremediable.³⁴²

³⁴⁰ McCullough, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

³⁴¹ Said, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³⁴² Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

King further explicitly focuses on the issue of the grotesqueness of the “little Mammy” and provides a particularly detailed description of the bodily disfiguration of the “little Mammy” in the following manner:

[A]ll children’s legs were of equal length except her own, and all were alike, not one full, strong, hard, the other soft, flabby, wrinkled, growing out of a knot at the hip. A whole psychological period apparently lay between that conclusion and – a broom-handle walking-stick; but the broomstick came, as it was bound to come – thank heaven! from that premise, and what with stretching one limb to make it longer and doubling up the other to make it shorter, she invented that form of locomotion which is still carrying her through life, and with no more exaggerated leg-crookedness than many careless negroes born with straight limbs display.³⁴³

Thus, King’s portrayal of the mammy figure is explicitly compliant with the mammy stereotype in a twofold manner. Firstly, it establishes the body of the black mammy as sexually undesirable and grotesque, and secondly, it implies that the maternal feelings of black mothers are, to say the least, questionable. Thus, in “The Crippled Hope” King was able to offer a stereotypical figure completely opposed to the figure of the tragic mulatta by capturing the black female body as pathetic, asexual and grotesque:

Hobbling on a broomstick, with, no doubt the same weird wizened face as now, an innate sense of the fitness on things must have suggested the kerchief tied around her big head, and a burlap rap of an apron in front of her linsey-woolsey rag of a gown, and the bit of a broken pipe-stem in the corner of her mouth, where the pipe should have been, and where it was in after years.³⁴⁴

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

Furthermore, as the following paragraphs shall illuminate, King's controlling representations of the black female body became instrumental in a paradoxical erasure of the possibility of black motherhood and of the functionality of the black family, *i.e.*, "tragic motherhood", and its replacement by an emotional investment and a bond of intimacy across the color line that borders with homoeroticism – a surprising parallel to miscegenation.

King's collection of five longer stories set during both the Civil War and the Reconstruction era, *Tales of Time and Place* (1892), includes a closely autobiographical story "Bayou L'Ombre: an Incident of the War" that significantly perpetuates the ideology-laden representations of the black female body, *i.e.*, the grotesque body. In this story, we can find several instances of controlling images of the black female body. It is particularly the portrayal of Dead-arm Harriet that emerges as another significant case of the mutilation of the black female body from King's story, "Bayou L'Ombre":

Dead-arm Harriet stood before them, with her back to the bayou, her right arm hanging heavy at her side, her left extended, the finger pointing to the sky [...] They could all remember the day when Dead-arm Harriet, the worst worker and most violent tongue of the gang, stood in the clearing, and raising that dead right arm over her head, cursed the overseer riding away in the distance. The wind had been blowing all day; there was a sudden loud crack above them, and a limb from a deadened tree broke, sailed, poised, and fell crashing to her shoulder, and deadening her arm forever.³⁴⁵

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111 – 112.

As this story makes clear, Dead-arm Harriet is not only disfigured, but her disfigurement is a form of mystical punishment for her disobedience and lack of humbleness. The controlling bodily representation and the resulting grotesque body is clearly a result of her inability (and unwillingness) to perform the prescribed role of a dutiful slave. Moreover, the story of “Bayou L’Ombre” is peopled with other black women whose portrayals support the plantation dichotomy of classical white bodies and the grotesque “Other”, such as Old Aunt Mary, the plantation sick-nurse, who was “commonly credited with conjuring powers [and often] held a corn-cob pipe between her yellow protruding teeth”³⁴⁶ or Heelen whose “long wisps of wool, tightly wrapped in white knitting-cotton, rose from irregular sections all over her elongated narrow skull, and encircled her wrinkled, nervous, toothless face like some ghastly serpentine chevelure”³⁴⁷ or Lou Ann who was “working her muscles until her little horns of hair rose and moved with the contortions of her face.”³⁴⁸

Unlike the above described opposition between the classic body of the white mistress and the grotesque body of the mammy in the fiction of Kate Chopin, though riddled with paradoxes, Grace King’s controlling representations of the black female body offer an additional dimension of this region-specific representation of the black female body. Perpetuating the mythology of the “Lost Cause” in her fiction, she not only juxtaposes the physicality of the black mammy with the *absence* of physicality and

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p 109.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

asexuality of the white mistress; indeed, she further opposes it with the ideological stereotype of the confederate woman. Helen Taylor in her article “Women and Dixie: The Feminization of Southern Women's History and Culture” exposes the importance of King’s journals for the understanding of Southern ideology:

It is salutary to turn to the journals of Grace King, particularly in view of her significant role as Confederate defender and keeper of the southern flame way into the twentieth century. [Grace King was] an elite woman of letters whose family and literary connections, [and] ideological commitment to the Lost Cause make her an important figure in the history of southern letters.³⁴⁹

King’s journals were edited and published by Melissa Walker Heidari in order to expose King’s role in the formation and perpetuation of the region-specific representations of womanhood. Heidari introduces her volume with the following explanation: “While her [King’s] interests in history tended to be in the remote past, almost all of her fiction centered upon her interpretation of contemporary events, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the changes they made on the lives of women.”³⁵⁰ King’s story “Bayou L’Ombre: An Incident of the War” continues to perpetuate the opposing (yet interdependent) definitions of white and black Southern womanhood, yet it expands these opposing definitions in order to perpetuate not only the hierarchy of the Old South (strictly dividing the “classical” body of the plantation mistress on its metaphorical pedestal from the “grotesque” body of the racially Other women) but also

³⁴⁹ Taylor, Helen. “Women and Dixie: The Feminization of Southern Women’s History and Culture.” *American Literary History* 18. 4 (Winter 2006), p. 853.

³⁵⁰ Walker Heidari, Melissa, ed. *To Find My Own Peace. Grace King in Her Journals, 1886 – 1910*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2004, p. xx.

the mythology of the Lost Cause. The central heroines of “Bayou L’Ombre”, Christine, Regina, and Lolotte are primarily defined neither by their charm nor their “classic” asexual and fragile bodies, but instead by their patriotism:

[Their] only fear was that the enemy would be beaten too easily, and the war cease too soon to be glorious; for, characteristic of their sex, they demanded nothing less than that their war should be the longest, bloodiest, and most glorious of all wars ever heard of, in comparison with which even “le grand Napoleon” and his Capitaine Picquet would be effaced from memory.³⁵¹

Moreover, the patriotism of the young heroines of “Bayou L’Ombre” is infused with pride for their “country”, *i.e.*, the Confederacy, and its (primarily) racially defined hierarchy:

[T]hey kept reminding each other that it was not the degrading want of money, as in the Hawthorns’ case, that forced them to live on salt meat, corn-bread, and sassafras tea, to dress like the negro women in the quarters, that deprived them of education and society, and imprisoned them in a swamp-encircled plantation, the prey of chills and fever; but it was for love of country, and being little women now, they loved their country more, the more they suffered for her.³⁵²

Being on the same diet as their slaves (and later servants), wearing the same clothes, and being equally underprivileged in terms of education and various forms of socialization due to the war, the heroines of this short story are aware that there is an unbridgeable intellectual difference between themselves and the washerwomen: “The

³⁵¹ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

Yankees! What did it mean to them? How much from the world outside had penetrated into the unlettered fastness of their ignorance? What did the war mean to them?"³⁵³ The physical dimension of the contrast between the white Southern womanhood and black Southern womanhood in King's collection of stories *Tales of a Time and Place* is partly displaced by a definition of the "mistresses" not as the Southern belles, but as Confederate women in accordance with Diane Roberts's definition of such women, which produces one of the underlying paradoxes of the mistress/slave and classical/grotesque dichotomy:

During the Civil War the lady recreated herself to accommodate, even valorize hardship. With the men away, women had to run plantations and farms, sometimes taking to the fields themselves to bring in the crops. [...] The confederate image allowed women to take on traditionally masculine roles with no sacrifice of what the culture identifies as *essential* white femininity: maternal feeling, sexual chastity, adherence to a male economy where property (land) is all-important.³⁵⁴

Thus, in this short story, King's opposition between the white Southern womanhood and black Southern womanhood adheres primarily to the classic/grotesque dichotomy; yet it partly displaces it from the physical realm to the realm of Confederate ideology. Indeed, in this case, the category of white Southern womanhood is far removed from the ideal of the flirtatious, chaste, pure, and honorable belle. Instead, these heroines are proud to sacrifice their pedestal and participate in the war in order to help preserve the patriarchal hierarchy of the South.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³⁵⁴ Roberts, *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

In relation to the already discussed category of regional Aesthetics produced in the South, and the corresponding representations of the black female body in regional fiction, King's story "Monsieur Motte", although it focuses rather on the issues of white motherhood and black surrogate motherhood than on the physical differences in the representations of the white female bodies and black female bodies, it offers further glimpses of the controlling representations of the mammy figure – Marcéliste Gaulois – which are contrasted with the character of Madame Lareveillère. Unlike the proper and virtuous mother, Marcéliste is portrayed not only as a woman who is passionate about Marie Motte, but also as a woman whose passions can be rather extreme:

She [Marcéliste] felt a crushing desire to tear down, split, destroy, to surround herself with ruins, to annihilate the miserable little weak devices of intelligence, and reassert the proud supremacy of brute force. She longed to humiliate that meek Virgin Mother; and if the form on the crucifix had been alive she would have gloated over his blood and agony. She thirsted to get her thin, taper, steel-like fingers but once more on that pretty, shapely, glossy head.³⁵⁵

Furthermore, King explicitly states that it is Marcéliste's "untamed" African blood that is the underlying cause of Marcéliste's extreme passions and rebellion. Therefore, the underlying physical boundary is established and it cannot be crossed:

Her [Marcéliste's] untamed African blood was in rebellion against the religion and civilization whose symbols were all about her in that dim and stately chamber, - a civilization which had tampered with her brain, had enervated her will, and had duped her with false assurances of her own capability.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁵ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

As a result of the physical difference between the madam and the quadroon hairdresser, their respective roles of womanhood and motherhood are defined in different ways in relation to Marie Motte: “Marcélite was not a mother – not her mother. She had stopped at the boundary where the mother ceases to be a physical necessity and becomes a psychological one. The child still clung to Marcélite, but the young woman was motherless.”³⁵⁷ Madame Delarivière, on the other hand, aspired to become Marie’s mother: “ ‘Mademoiselle, do not fear; Mademoiselle shall not leave us, I shall protect her; I shall be a father to her’ [said Monsieur Goupilleau]. ‘And I’, said Madame, drawing Marie still closer to her, - ‘shall be her mother.’ ”³⁵⁸ At the end of the story, Marcélite, allegedly a descendant of “the aristocratic old réfugiée from the Island of St. Domingo”³⁵⁹, instead of receiving gratitude for acting as a surrogate mother to Marie Motte, is reduced to an image of a grotesque hunted beast:

Was this one of their own clean, neat, brave, honest, handsome Marcélite, - this panting, tottering, bedraggled wretch before them, threatening to fall on the floor again, not daring to raise even her eyes? [...] Her *tignon* had been dragged from her head. Her calico dress, torn and defaced, showed her skin in naked streaks. Her black woolly hair, always so carefully packed away under her head-kerchief, stood in grotesque masses around her face, scratched and bleeding like an exposed bosom.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Thus, Grace King in her short fiction offers controlling representations of the black female body that encompass several layers: physical, ideological and psychological. Principally, she adheres to the dichotomy of the classic/grotesque body, as examined in her stories “Crippled Hope” and “Bayou L’Ombre: An Incident of the War”. However, her definitions of white Southern womanhood and black Southern womanhood also unfold on an ideological level by distinguishing between the patriotic confederate lady willing to sacrifice for the perpetuation of the patriarchal Southern hierarchy and the “ignorant” slave.

The above-examined regionalist portrayals of the grotesque bodies, *i.e.*, the bodies of the black mummies in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King, invite further parallel examination of the genre of Southern grotesque, *per se*. As literary criticism of recent decades shows, the grotesque has developed into a specific Southern category. Particularly the works of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O’Connor invite interpretations of their female characters within this image-laden category since “the burden of a simultaneously idealized and detested womanhood haunts [their] stories.”³⁶¹ As a result, many attempts to conceptualize and re-conceptualize the category of the Southern grotesque have emerged. For instance, Sarah Gleeson-White in her recent article “Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers” juxtaposes the argument that “the grotesque worlds of Southern literature [...] allegorize the human condition itself as

³⁶¹ Gleeson-White, Sarah. “A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness: Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O’Connor.” *The Southern Literary Journal* 36.1 (Fall 2003), p. 49.

existential alienation and angst”³⁶² with Carson McCullers’ appropriation of the grotesque realm for “affirming qualities and practices of growth, promise and transformation”³⁶³ because she feels the need to revisit the category of the Southern grotesque and to oppose the view that the Southern grotesque is “a response to a world of violence and upheaval.”³⁶⁴ By applying the definition of the grotesque formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin, Gleeson-White hopes to uncover the “greater possibilities [the grotesque offers] for representation and knowledge.”³⁶⁵ Although her examination of modern Southern fiction opposes the “mainstream” interpretations of the grotesque as an allegorization of existential anguish and strives to offer a re-interpretation of the grotesque that embodies creative growth and transformation, her examination misses a perspective that could be applied to Southern regionalist literature in general and to the works of Kate Chopin and Grace King in particular.

The regionalist portrayals of the grotesque bodies, particularly the bodies of the black mummies in the fiction of Chopin and King precede the modernist Southern grotesque. Approaching these portrayals of female grotesque bodies via the prism of postcolonial theory, particularly by exploring the impact of colonial ideologies and discourses on sexual and racial identities and their representations, and its undermining of the plantation ideology, effectively shows that these portrayals of grotesqueness do

³⁶² Gleeson-White, Sarah. “Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers”, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

not comply with the interpretation of the category of the grotesque as an allegory of existential anguish and Romantic and modernist angst but, quite remarkably, embody the ambivalent feelings of fear and desire toward the racial Other. Therefore, although the grotesque is by no means a new concept in studying and theorizing Southern literature, the above examined short stories of Kate Chopin and Grace King allow for a new perspective on this much-discussed category.

The main reason why the representations of the mammy figure in the fiction of Chopin and King require a re-examination is the clash of sentimentality of these representations with their inherent sexual (and sensual) subtext. Therefore, the sentimental ideology projected onto the mammy figure is undermined not only by the violent, grotesque, and controlling representations of the black female body described above, but also by its ubiquitous (sexual and psychological) desirability; this inherent contradiction in the representations of the mammy stereotype testifies to a dimension that is far removed from its intended sentimental role, which was described, for instance, by Catherine Clinton, in the following manner:

The Mammy was the positive emblem of familial relations between black and white. She existed as a counterpoint to the octoroon concubine, the light-skinned product of a 'white man's lust' who was habitually victimized by slaveowners' sexual appetites. In addition, the Mammy was integral to the white males' emasculation of slavery, since she and she alone projected an image of power wielded by blacks – a power rendered strictly benign and maternal in its influence.”³⁶⁶

³⁶⁶ Clinton, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

It is important to note that the intended sentimentality of the mammy representations is undermined by the sexual subtext that surrounds these representations and, moreover, by the tragic motherhood of the mammies that is, paradoxically, a direct result of their desirability for surrogate motherhood.

In the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King strong maternal instincts of the mammy are reserved particularly for the white children, while her own family is virtually erased from the text. The postbellum perpetuation of the mammy stereotype in Louisiana regionalist fiction does not strive to rectify this absence. Indeed, the mammy representations, in the works of Kate Chopin and Grace King correspond to this underlying paradox of the mammy stereotype. The contradictory image of the mammy repeatedly includes her (grotesque) asexuality as well as exaggerated sexual signifiers that are crucial for her role as a surrogate mother. This sexual subtext of the mammy's desirability is addressed, among others, by Catherine Clinton in a chapter entitled "The Sexual Dynamics of Slavery":

Southern orators who alluded being "suckled at black breasts" were not, as they hoped, simply establishing a tender family feeling between the races with this image of interracial innocence. The vision in fact evoked far more than those spokesmen had bargained for; first and foremost, its erotic component cannot be denied. Whether intentionally or not, the constant harping upon this theme conveyed a sexual rather than a sentimental undercurrent. Second, the image reduced black women to an animal-like state of exploitation: Mammies were to

be milked, warm bodies to serve white needs – an image with its own sexual subtext.³⁶⁷

Clearly, the grotesquely large proportions of the mammy's breasts and buttocks cannot erase the sexual connotations of the central images of the representations of the mammy stereotype that, to revisit the parallels to the tragic mulatta stereotype and Bhabha's notion of stereotype, is "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated"³⁶⁸. The anxious perpetuation of the mammy stereotype as grotesque yet desirable (and often preferred) surrogate mother in the fiction of Chopin and King testify to the contradictory nature of this stereotype in Southern regionalist fiction.

Unlike regionalist representations of the "tragic" mulatta figure that was often sexually exploited because of her amalgamation of "black" sexuality and "white" beauty standards, representations of the mammy in the fiction of Chopin and King uncover a new dimension of the sexual dynamic of slavery by being forced to "tragic" motherhood that erases their own children and families. As a result of the highly ambivalent process of stereotyping, the black mammy, used predominantly as an ideological tool for the perpetuation of the myth of the Old South, was stripped of her role of a mother in order to become a surrogate mother to her mistress and to her mistress's children. An outstanding example of such an ideology is Grace King's

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

³⁶⁸ Bhabha, *op cit.*, p. 66.

novella *Monsieur Motte* that, according to Michelle Birnbaum, mourns “what King saw as the prelapsarian days of slavery when, as she pictures it, devotional dusky servants tended to the intimate toilette of white women”.³⁶⁹ Moreover, the mammy is stripped of her role of an authentic mother/wife by being pressured to unwanted liaisons. As historical research by Catherine Clinton shows, “[b]oth male and female slaves were sexually manipulated by owners; records show that slaves were forced into unwanted liaisons with each other, reflecting one aspect of the master’s absolute power over his slaves.”³⁷⁰ In correspondence with the ambivalent sexual dynamics of slavery that continued to influence the post-bellum representations of black womanhood in Local Color, the only “family” ties of the mammy are consistently portrayed by Chopin and King as the ties of love to the white family.

While the motherhood of the mammy figures is tragically erased from the texts, portrayals of the mammy’s exaggerated devotion to their mistress are the most frequent depictions of their emotional ties to their white mistress and to her family to expose their “capitalized maternity [that] transcends regional and racial boundaries”.³⁷¹ For instance, in “Beyond the Bayou”, a short story from her first collection *Bayou Folk*, Kate Chopin offers a portrayal of Jacqueline, who is know as La Folle, who refuses to cross the bayou because “in childhood she had been frightened literally ‘out of her

³⁶⁹ Birnbaum, *Race, Work, and Desire in American Literature, 1860 – 1930. Op cit.*, p. 47.

³⁷⁰ Clinton, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

³⁷¹ Birnbaum, *Race, Work, and Desire in American Literature, 1860 – 1930. Op cit.*, p. 36.

senses', and had never wholly regained them"³⁷²; and the only thing that forces Jacqueline to overcome her irrational fear is her love for the white children. Chopin shows that it is Jacqueline's devotion to the white children that forces her to save one of the children from a nearly fatal accident by bringing the injured child across the bayou in her arms:

"Don't cry, *mon bébé, mon bébé, mon Chéri!*" the woman spoke soothingly as she covered the ground with long strides. [...] She had reached the abandoned field. As she crossed it with her precious burden, she looked constantly and restlessly from side to side. A terrible fear was upon her, - the fear of the world beyond the bayou, the morbid and insane dread she had been under since childhood. [...] Then shutting her eyes, she ran suddenly down the shallow bank of the bayou, and never stopped till she had climbed the opposite shore.³⁷³

In order to emphasize the mammy's devotion to her surrogate child, the portrayal of Jacqueline's struggle with her personal fear, which needs to be overcome in order to act on her „maternal“ instinct to save her *Chéri*, is related in a very graphic portrayal of the physical aspect of her struggle:

Her eyes were bloodshot and the saliva had gathered in a white foam on her black lips. [...] "P'tit Maitre! La Folle done cross de bayou! Look her! Look her yonda totin' Chéri!" This startling intimation was the first which they had of the woman's approach. Her eyes were fixed desperately before her, and she breathed heavily as a tired ox.³⁷⁴

³⁷² Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 218 – 219.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 219 – 220.

Not only was the erasure of Jacqueline's fear of the world beyond the bayou brought about by the extremity of her feelings toward her *Chéri*, but it was also permanent since, by the end of the story, she „quitted her cabin and walked across the old familiar field to the bayou's edge again. She did not stop there as she had always done before, but crossed with a long, steady stride as if she had done this all her life.“³⁷⁵ Thus the conclusion of the story offers a happy ending, because Jacqueline is able freely to visit her *Chéri*.

In a similar manner, Chopin's portrayal of the mammy in her story „Tante Cat'rinette“ shows the black woman who, despite her refusal to leave her house due to the fear of confiscation of her property by the town house, hurries secretly through the night to be able to nurse the sick Miss Kitty as „she pictured all manner of troublesome animals, snakes, rabbits, frogs, pursuing her, but she defied them to catch Cat'rinette, who was hurrying toward Miss Kitty.”³⁷⁶ As soon as Cat'rinette nurses Miss Kitty back to health, she announces her intention to stay with the family permanently: “Well, yere Tante Cat'rinette come back.”³⁷⁷ Her decision is met with a passive acceptance:

They could not well understand why she was back; but it was good to have her there, and they did not question. *She took the baby from its mother*, and, seating herself, began to feed it from the saucer which Raymond placed beside her on a chair. “Yas”

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 501.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 504.

she said, “Cat’rinette goin’ stay; dis time she en’t nev’ goin’
‘way no mo’ ”.³⁷⁸

In the finale of the story the mammy is shown by Chopin to perpetuate the antebellum stereotype linked to her sexuality and race by, once again, assuming her role of a surrogate mother.

Chopin’s novel, *At Fault*, also utilizes this conventional portrayal of the exclusive devotion of the mammy to her white mistress and/or to her children. Marie Louise, who is removed from the Place du Bois plantation to “retire”, remains fully emotionally invested in the life of Thérèse Lafirme and of her plantation:

It was seldom now that she [Marie Louise] crossed the river; only two occasions being considered of sufficient importance to induce her to such effort. One was in the event of her mistress’ illness, when she would install herself at her bedside as a fixture, not to be dislodged by any less inducement than Thérèse’s full recovery.³⁷⁹

With the characters of Jacqueline (La Folle), Tante Cat’rinette, and Marie Louise (Grosse Tante), Chopin captures the “tragic motherhood” of the mammy figures in the postbellum South by explicitly unveiling the metonymic exchange of the mammy’s own children and family for their white counterparts. Consequently, Louisiana regionalist discourse of the nineteenth century, as it is represented by Chopin and King

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 504.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

in this examination, creates a very specific and contradictory racial knowledge that reshapes the notions of race existing outside of the region of the American South.³⁸⁰

This example of region-specific construction and of a controlling representation of race and of its manifestation in the mammy stereotype can also be detected in the works of Grace King, primarily in her novella *Monsieur Motte*, and in her short story “Crippled Hope”. The short story “Crippled Hope” portrays the “little Mammy” as a character who is longing for a white mistress and for a family with whom to identify:

Hardly a day had passed that she [little Mammy] did not see, looking for purchases [...] some master whom she could have loved, some mistress whom she could have adored. Always her mistresses were there – tall, delicate matrons, who came themselves, with great fatigue, to select kindly-faced women for nurses [...] ladies pale from illnesses that she might have reared!³⁸¹

Similarly to Jacqueline, Marie Louise, and Tante Cat’rinette in Chopin’s stories, the “little Mammy” is childless and with no family relations. Therefore, she has no children of her own. However, since she has no white family to identify with, she has no white children metonymically to change the object of her maternal feelings onto her white mistress or onto her children. As a result, from a young age, the “little Mammy” exhibits excellent nursing instincts and applies these instincts to her fellow slaves. Consequently, King portrays her as an invaluable “asset” to her owner:

³⁸⁰ For further details regarding the reshaping of knowledge by colonialism, confer: Loomba, Ania “Colonialism and Knowledge” in: Loomba, *op. cit.*, pp 57 – 68.

³⁸¹ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

Poor little thing! It was not now that her master *could* not sell her, but he *would* not! Out of her own intelligence she had forged her chains; the lameness was a hobble merely in comparison. She had become too valuable to the negro-trader by her services among his crew, and offers only solidified his determination not to sell her. [...] Little Mammy was worth to the negro-trader, simply as a kind of insurance against accidents, than any sum, however glittering the figure, and he was no ignorant expert in human wares.³⁸²

Surprisingly, contrary to the mammy stereotype and to its characteristic kindness and mothering role, King addresses the issue of motherhood of the black women in explicitly negative terms:

And negro mothers are so careless and such heavy sleepers. All night she [little Mammy] would creep at regular intervals to the different pallets and draw the little babies from under, or away from, *the heavy, inert impending mother forms*. There is no telling how many she thus saved from being overlaid and smothered, or, what was worse, maimed and crippled.³⁸³

By establishing the difference between the role of a surrogate mother, which is performed by the mammy figure in an excellent manner, and her role of a mother, for which she is insufficiently “qualified”, King’s fiction testifies to the underlying region-specific controlling representations of race.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 145, emphasis added.

In “Monsieur Motte”, another story testifying to the conventional representations of “tragic” black motherhood that erases the children of the mammy figures from the text and metonymically replaces them by their mistresses (or the mistresses’ children), King succeeds, above all, to “conflate the love of service with the service of love [and] retrieve imaginatively once institutionalized antebellum relations between female slaves and mistresses”.³⁸⁴ The reciprocal desire between the mammy and the damsel, *i.e.*, between Marcélite and Marie, strongly indicates that emotional unions, such as sororial friendships or surrogate motherhood, could be established across the color line, albeit only within the strictly defined and socially constricting framework of ties of domestic employment/service (formerly slavery). For King, as Michele Birnbaum notes, the “religious justification – that servants’ stations are both divinely sanctioned (‘destiny’) and spiritually sanctioning (‘consecration’) – develops from her insistence that black love is an act of faith not a form of obligation.”³⁸⁵ Marcélite’s love for Marie stems from her love and obligation to her former mistress (Marie’s mother) and their mutual bond is sanctioned by the patriarchal authority that Marcélite invented – Marie’s fictional uncle Monsieur Motte – who can sanction this emotional union between the two women by providing the illusion of Marcélite’s employment in his services. Without the illusion that Marcélite is compensated for her care and love of Marie, this bond would create not only a social scandal but also a suspicion of Marie’s origin by implying that Marcélite might be her mother, a suspicion that Marcélite alone cannot dispute:

³⁸⁴ Birnbaum, *Race, Work, and Desire in American Literature, 1860 – 1930. Op. cit.*, p. 48

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

“Now, try, Marcéliste,” continued Monsieur Goupilleau, - “try to remember somebody, anybody who knows you, who knew your mistress; I want their names. Anybody, anybody will do, my poor Marcéliste! Indeed, I believe you; we all believe you; we all know you are telling the truth; but is there not a person, even a book, a piece of paper, anything you can remember?”³⁸⁶

As other intimate relationships across the color-line, the relationship between Marie and Marcéliste must be sanctioned by a proof of her legal or other obligation to her demoiselle. Clearly, acts of loyalty require some form of payment in order to uphold the social distance between the races. Domestic service, especially within the framework of the American South, according to Michele Birnbaum,

has been praised as a kinder and gentler form of labor, yet what historically makes this trade, regardless of social or racial context, according to Judith Rollins, “an occupation more profoundly exploitative than other comparable occupations’ are the personal relationships between employer and employee. What might appear to be the basis of a more humane, less alienating work arrangement, allows for a ‘level of psychological exploitation unknown in other occupations’ (156).³⁸⁷

As the examinations of Chopin’s “Beyond the Bayou”, “Tante Cat’rinette” and *At Fault* and examination of King’s “Crippled Hope” and *Monsieur Motte* suggest, the shift from the sexual commodification of the tragic mulatta stereotype to the restrictive desexualized and grotesque yet desirable role within the framework of domestic service of the mammy stereotype offers a novel perspective on the region-specific

³⁸⁶ Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

³⁸⁷ Birnbaum, *Race, Work, and Desire in American Literature, 1860 – 1930. Op. cit.*, p. 32.

representations of race in general, and of the black female body in particular, in the works of these Louisiana authors. However, the objective of this chapter has been a strictly theoretical examination of the authors' works and not biographical research nor any subsequent speculation to what extent these representations may or may not be based on the authors' personal experience.³⁸⁸

Having expanded the traditionally applied framework of the virgin/whore dichotomy, and having extended its underlying paradoxes to the representations of the mammy stereotype in the fiction of these two authors in order to address another aspect of race and desire, a dimension of black-white intimacy based on exploitative personal relations has emerged. Ultimately, by juxtaposing the plantation ideology with examinations based on postcolonial theory, this chapter has offered a complementary look at another stereotype of the black female in Louisiana regionalist fiction; the controlled representations of the mammy stereotype.

³⁸⁸ For further details on this topic confer, *e.g.*, Toth, Emily. *Unveiling Kate Chopin*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999. In this volume Toth claims that: “[b]eing separated from her mammy was Kate’s first lost – one that was universal for white children, but rarely spoken about. ‘Old Louise’ may have been Eliza O’Flaherty’s mammy as well: she may be the unrecorded woman who nurtured them all and had the earliest role in shaping their characters.”(12)

V. CONCLUSION

The parallel examination of the region-specific category of race in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King testifies to how the reshaping of a theoretical framework *vis-à-vis* Louisiana regionalist fiction offers new valid interpretations. Having addressed the relationship between race and desire - the symptomatic relationship of postcolonial discourse, this examination not only exposes the complex representations of racial stereotypes in the fiction of Chopin and King that oscillate between desire, neglect, violence and grotesqueness for it also contextualizes these stereotypes within the framework of the American national discourse by contrasting them with the racial stereotypes employed in the fiction of Maria Lydia Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Furthermore, this study has shown that the materialization of the ambivalent feelings of fear and desire toward the racial Other in the fiction of Chopin and King is analogous to the category of Otherness that is often applied to the South as a (homogeneous) region. The multivalent potential of regionalist literatures, as it is being examined by contemporary literary critics, raises important questions regarding the categories of race and gender and this dissertation identifies and examines these questions not only in general terms but also in close connection to the regional anchor of the texts of regionalist literature. The application of such a modified approach to the interpretation of the works of the Louisiana local colorists thus raises relevant questions of uniqueness of regional perspectives and invites efforts to reclaim the category of race in this genre.

By addressing the category of racial Otherness, and by examining its impact on the formation of racial representations and stereotypes in Louisiana Local Color fiction, this study invites an interpretation of a category that opposes not only constructions of normative national identity but which also challenges constructions of traditionally conceived regional identity by redefining the South as a heterogeneous region and by re-examining regional racial knowledge in context of the state of Louisiana. Drawing on the existing interpretations of Louisiana Local Color fiction that often romanticizes the Lost Cause, and celebrates the peculiar brand of Southernness and the “significant cultural differences [that] distinguish Louisiana from the larger Southern identity”³⁸⁹, this study offered a re-interpretation of Louisiana Local Color prose work from the postcolonial perspective that, by suggesting parallels with other non-normative literatures, paradoxically transcends the regional aspect of regionalist literature and identifies its global meanings. Such an examination testifies to the complicated hierarchies inherent in regionalist fiction and to the complex relationship between race, gender, region, and nation, which is reflected in portrayals of both black and white Southern womanhood, and the crux of which is identified in this text as the literary representations of the tragic mulatta figure stereotype.

Having exposed the mutually exclusive and interdependent definitions of black and white Southern womanhood in the fiction of Chopin and King, it has become evident that although Chopin may not have shared King’s “obsession with the past

³⁸⁹ Disheroon-Green, Suzanne. “Romanticizing a Different Lost Cause: Regional Identities in Louisiana and the Bayou Country.” *Op. cit.*, p. 307.

[and] desperate nostalgia for a bygone idealized age”³⁹⁰, both of these authors explored similar paradoxes of Southern womanhood that attract the attention of contemporary readers and critics. To a degree, the threat of miscegenation, which is manifest in Chopin’s and in King’s use of the tragic mulatta stereotype, is analogous to the manifestations of the threat of intimations of homoeroticism between the mammy figure and her mistress/surrogate children, which underlie the representations of the mammy stereotype; and, alongside the interdependent definitions of black and white Southern womanhood, both these concepts are in need of critical attention.

Chopin’s and King’s use, and attempted challenge of, the discussed textual strategies testifies to the transition of the Local Color fiction to regionalist fiction, which parallels the interest in a specific region with the “development or discovery of identity, specifically in relation to home region, and community,”³⁹¹ as well as of race and of gender. Paradoxically, the region-specific focus on identity, as it is informed by region, race and gender, transforms regionalist literature into a category with a global impact. For instance, the application of postcolonial concerns on the fiction of Chopin and of King in order to reclaim the category of race in their fiction has further potential to identify parallels of their works with Caribbean literature from the perspective of New Southern Studies, and thus further distance their works from the national/local dichotomy, and the feminist interpretative framework, in search of new directions in critical scholarship that extend beyond the scope of existing criticism.

³⁹⁰ Showalter, *op. cit.*, p.71.

³⁹¹ Pryse, Marjorie and Fetterley, Judith. *American Women Regionalists, 1850 - 1910. A Norton Anthology*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992, p. xvi.

In correspondence with Pierre Bourdieu's emphasis on the movement away from essentialist theories of *aesthetic judgment* to the *aesthetic experience*, which includes the application of "double historicism" (*i.e.*, a contextualization of the social space of both the *originating tradition* as well as of the *application tradition*)³⁹², this critical re-interpretation and revaluation of Louisiana Local Color fiction has reflected on the complex inter-relationship between the Southern "Other" and the American national framework in the nineteenth century and beyond. Moreover, it has addressed the specificity of the formation of a Louisiana racial landscape in order to illuminate the process of reclaiming the works by Local Color women writers in the twentieth and in the twenty-first century – a process that has been accomplished in the case of Chopin's magnum opus *The Awakening*.

By applying the theoretical concepts of postcolonial literary theory to the works of Kate Chopin and Grace King this study introduced novel interpretations of Louisiana Local Color fiction that can be contextualized *vis-à-vis* national literature without eliminating its regional specificities, which culminate in regional portrayals of the tragic mulatta stereotype. Moreover, the application of the category of grotesque, as one of the categories underlying stereotypical representations of the black female body, particularly in the mammy stereotype, offers a contextualization of Louisiana Local Color fiction within the genre of the Southern grotesque, represented most famously by Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty. Although regionalist portrayals of grotesque bodies, particularly the bodies of the black mummies in the fiction of Chopin and King do not comply with the interpretation of the category of the

³⁹² Cf. above p. 53 – 56.

grotesque as an allegory of existential anguish and Romantic and modernist angst, as is often the case in modernist Southern grotesque, they invite a new perspective on this much-discussed category of Southern fiction, and complement the revaluation of the work of these two authors in the twentieth century.

The interrogation of the category of race and of its representation in the genre of Louisiana Local Color, and the subsequent revaluation of the fiction of two of its representatives, Kate Chopin and Grace King, thus shows that possibilities of the tragic mulatta trope within the Louisiana regionalist discourse are not limited to the virgin/whore dichotomy, or the abolitionist family/nation analogy, but are appropriated by Chopin and King as a region-specific trope fetishizing the black body that continues to tantalize readers in the twenty-first century by its contradictory articulations.

RÉSUMÉ

Tato dizertační práce si klade za cíl přehodnotit dílo Kate Chopin a Grace King, dvou nejvýraznějších představitelk fikce takzvaného místního koloritu (*local color*) americké Louisiany písčících ve druhé polovině devatenáctého století a na přelomu devatenáctého a dvacátého století a aplikovat nové kritické náhledy na jejich dílo, které se částečně odchyľují jak od současných feministických reinterpretací jejich děl, tak od jejich soudobých interpretací, které zdůrazňují rozpor mezi národní a regionální perspektivou. Jak tato práce v pěti kapitolách dotvrzuje, postkoloniální literární teorie nabízejí alternativní náhled na kategorii rasy, která je jedním ze zásadních témat žánru místního koloritu. Kategorie rasy, která je v rámci moderních interpretací tohoto žánru často zjednodušována či do určité míry ignorována, je v této práci posuzována v rámci kontextu daného regionu za využití přístupů postkoloniálních literárních teorií, jež jsou zachyceny především v dílech následujících autorů a autorek: Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks*), Homi K. Bhabha (*Location of Culture*), Gloria Anzaldúa (*Borderlands/ La Frontera. The New Mestiza*), Edward Said (*Orientalism*), Patricia Yaeger (*Dirt and Desire*) a Ania Loomba (*Colonialism/Postcolonialism*). V důsledku tato práce zkoumá zobrazování rasových stereotypů, především stereotypu tragické mulatky (*the tragic mulatta stereotype*) a chůvy (*the mammy stereotype*), v kontextu (sexuální) touhy, která je připisována konceptualizaci rasy, což je symptomatické pro postkoloniální teorii.

Rozbor děl Kate Chopin zahrnuje především následující díla: sbírku povídek *Bayou Folk* (1894), sbírku *A Night in Acadie* (1897) a odkazuje též k jejímu nejúspěšnějšímu románu *The Awakening* (1899). Analýza díla Grace King zahrnuje následující tituly: sbírku povídek *Balcony Stories* (1893), novelu *Monsieur Motte* (1888) a sbírku částečně autobiografických povídek *Tales of Time and Place* (1892). Paralelní rozbor díla Kate Chopin a Grace King je doplněn odkazy k dílům dalších představitelk žánru místního koloritu v americké Louisianě na sklonku devatenáctého století, jakými jsou například Alice Dunbar-Nelson se sbírkou *The Goodness of St. Rocque* (1899) a Sallie Rhett Roman s povídkami „Tonie“ (1900) a „Folette of Timablier Island“ (1900). Paralelní rozbor díla Kate Chopin a Grace King není primárně zacílen na porovnání jejich tvorby. Hlavním cílem této analýzy je rozbor paralelních otázek definice a zobrazování rasově definovaných postav v literatuře místního koloritu americké Louisiany, nová kontextualizace rasových stereotypů a jejich následná reinterpretace, která rozlišuje mezi původními interpretacemi stereotypu tragické mulatky z devatenáctého století a mezi novými interpretacemi tohoto stereotypu, jež čerpají z nových teoretických rámců.

První kapitola nazvaná „Úvod: regionalismus amerických spisovatelek jako žánr, jenž reprezentuje a kodifikuje formy kulturní odlišnosti“ (*Introduction: American Women Writers' Regionalism as a Genre that Represents and Culturally Codifies Forms of Difference*) naznačuje rozsah dizertační práce a identifikuje její hlavní témata a teoretický rámec. Též představuje základní primární a sekundární zdroje, ze kterých tato dizertační práce čerpá. Rozlišením mezi nonkonformní (regionální) a normativní

(národní) literaturou se z regionální literatury stává žánr, jenž kodifikuje normy kulturní odlišnosti a zprostředkovává vztah mezi těmito dvěma kategoriemi. Pocity rasové úzkosti (*racial anxiety*) vyvstávající ze střetu mezi nonkonformní a normativní kulturou a literaturou, které jsou zachyceny v tvorbě Kate Chopin a Grace King, jsou v kontextu této dizertační práce motivací pro hledání nových teoretických konceptů, jež umožní reinterpetaci a definici těchto pocitů rasově motivované úzkosti, která se v literatuře místního koloritu projevuje především formou zřejmých absencí či represivních stereotypů při zobrazování rasově definovaných postav. Na závěr tato kapitola zdůrazňuje nutnost rozboru rasových rolí, úzkostí a stereotypů v literatuře místního koloritu americké Louisiany, která byla často podceňována, a upozorňuje na nutnost kontextualizace americké regionální literatury ve vztahu k národní literatuře.

Druhá kapitola nazvaná „Teorie odlišnosti: přehodnocení jižanské fikce místního koloritu“ (*Theories of Difference: Revaluation of Southern Local Color Fiction*) se zabývá především rozbohem statutu regionální prózy a fikce místního koloritu v kontextu americké literatury a kritérii, která jsou určující pro aplikaci těchto dvou kategorií na jednotlivá literární díla. Na úvod tato kapitola identifikuje rozpor mezi pojetím amerického Jihu jako homogenního regionu, jenž je vymezen v protikladu k celoamerickému národnímu prostoru, a mezi heterogenním rázem tohoto regionu, jenž vyplývá z regionálních specifik jednotlivých jižanských států. Dalším krokem je nastínění fenoménu reinterpetace fikce místního koloritu v rámci kategorie regionální literatury na základě děl literárních kritiček zabývajících se rozboru regionální literatury, ke kterým patří Marjorie Pryse, Judith Fetterley či Donna Campbell, přičemž

je osvětlena redefinice regionální literatury, za jejíž tradiční představitele jsou považováni například Mark Twain či Brett Harte a další, a zásadní přínos nové perspektivy, kterou do regionální literatury (nejenom amerického Jihu) vnáší díla autorek, jakými jsou například Kate Chopin, Grace King, Sarah Orne Jewett či Ruth McEnery Stuart. Tato kapitola dále naznačuje způsoby, jakými fikce místního koloritu přesahuje rámec svého žánru, který je definován především malebností a nostalgií, díky reflexi „univerzálních kulturních témat“ a díky problematizaci kulturních norem daného regionu. V důsledku tato kapitola nabízí kritický pohled na posun, kterého dosáhla díla Kate Chopin a Grace King v očích čtenářů a literárních kritiků na konci dvacátého století, a to především zásluhou feministické literární teorie, ale též na problémy, nejasnosti a výzvy, které jsou s tímto posunem spojeny. Na závěr tato kapitola podrobně zkoumá roli regionálních estetických norem a společenských norem, které působí na vznik rasového povědomí (*racial knowledge*) v rámci daného regionu, a tím předestírá problematiku následujících kapitol, které zkoumají zobrazování rasových stereotypů tragické mulatky a chůvy v dílech Kate Chopin a Grace King. Tato kapitola tudíž nabízí pohled na regionální prózu, která stejně jako jiné minoritní literatury, ať již se jedná o postkoloniální literatury, literatury menšinových skupin či literatury jinak definované mimo normativní rámec anglo-amerického kánonu, staví na komplexní regionální epistemologii. Proces přehodnocení a rekontextualizace regionální literatury je představen s ohledem na její schopnost formulovat regionální odlišnosti, a tím oslabit existenci univerzálních estetických a společenských norem. S přihlédnutím ke kritické práci sociologa a filozofa Pierra Bourdieu tato kapitola naznačuje, že regionální normy nejsou čistě subjektivní, a že jejich následné přehodnocení v rámci literární

teorie konce dvacátého století se řídí kolektivní historií (*collective history*) a dvojitou historizací (*double historicization*), z čehož mimo jiné vyplývá, že fenomén reinterpretace fikce místního koloritu a regionální prózy v případě Kate Chopin a Grace King čelí problému, jak sloučit rasistické perspektivy fikce devatenáctého století s jejími interpretacemi ve dvacátém století, které vycházejí převážně z feministické teorie, a jak interpretovat mnohé nejasnosti, které stále vyvstávají při rozboru děl těchto dvou autorek ve vztahu k formaci rasových a genderových identit. Odpověď na tento problém spočívá právě v rozkrytí regionálních struktur a hierarchií, které je obsahem této kapitoly.

Třetí kapitola nazvaná „Reinterpretace stereotypu tragické mulatky v díle Kate Chopin a Grace King: pohled na gender v kontextu regionu a rasy“ (*Reinterpretation of the Tragic Mulatta Stereotype in the Fiction of Kate Chopin a Grace King: Gender as Seen through Region and Race*) tvoří centrální část této dizertační práce. Tato kapitola zkoumá povědomí o rase, které je zakořeněné v daném regionu a žánru, skrze prizma postkoloniální teorie, jejímiž hlavními představiteli jsou Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks*), Homi K. Bhabha (*Location of Culture*) a Edward Said (*Orientalism*). Hlavním cílem této kapitoly je rozkrýt rasové hierarchie daného regionu a pomocí aplikace Bhabhova pojetí stereotypu nahradit nadužívanou dichotomií panna/děvka (*virgin/whore dichotomy*), která je nejčastěji aplikována na studium rasových stereotypů v rámci žánru americké jižanské regionální literatury, novou interpretací, jež čerpá z existence ambivalentního vztahu k odlišnosti jiné rasy v kontextu daného regionu. Tento ambivalentní vztah, který zahrnuje jak strach tak touhu po odlišnosti a fetišizaci

rasy i ženského těla, je objasněn rozborem povídek z tvorby Kate Chopin “Désirée’s Baby” a “La Belle Zoraïde” a nastíněním paralel s románem *The Awakening* (*Probuzení*) a paralelním rozborem povídek “The Little Convent Girl”, “Monsieur Motte”, “Madrilène; or the Festival of the Dead” z tvorby Grace King, které zobrazují stereotyp tragické mulatky. Rozbor stereotypu tragické mulatky skrze prizma postkoloniálních teorií především přispívá k demonstraci sociálních a rasových hierarchií v regionu Louisiany. Tento rozbor též zachycuje paralelní strach a touhu vůči nejednoznačně definované rasové jinakosti, která je výrazným rysem tvorby Kate Chopin a Grace King. Tento ambivalentní vztah strachu a touhy je zpřítomněn zobrazováním násilí (a zanedbání) rasově definovaného ženského těla, které často vrcholí sebevraždou, přestože sebevražda hlavní hrdinky je v dílech Kate Chopin a Grace King znázorněna většinou dvojsmyslným či nejednoznačným způsobem. Za účelem vyzdvižení důležitosti nového teoretického rámce pro studium literatury místního koloritu americké Louisiany tato kapitola dále naznačuje, že fetišizace „bělosti“ (*whiteness*) a bílého těla, především v díle Grace King, ústí v určitou absenci současných feministických interpretací jejího díla, na rozdíl od interpretací díla Kate Chopin, která rasové stereotypy do určité míry problematizuje. Tím se je osvětlen fakt, že rasa není sekundární nýbrž zásadní kategorií řídící textové strategie díla Grace King. Rozbor stereotypu tragické mulatky v této kapitole tedy slouží především k osvětlení specifické role, kterou hraje rasové povědomí v regionální literatuře amerického Jihu, a která je v rozporu s tradičním využitím tohoto stereotypu v ideologickém rámci abolicionistické literatury, a v následném nastolení otázky reinterpretace této role ve dvacátém století. Současně tedy tato kapitola kontextualizuje literární zobrazení

stereotypu tragické mulatky v próze Kate Chopin a Grace King ve vztahu k podobám tohoto stereotypu v tvorbě jejich literárních předchůdkyň, autorek abolicionistické literatury, jakými jsou například Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852) či Lydia Maria Child (*The Quadroons*, 1842), které využívají stereotypu tragické mulatky především pro účely abolicionistické rétoriky, a jejichž hlavním cílem je v rámci tradice sentimentality a domesticity propagovat otázky národní identity a podporovat ideál národní jednoty pomocí pocitů lítosti a sympatie s postavou tragické mulatky. V závěru tedy tato kapitola věnovaná zobrazování stereotypu tragické mulatky v díle Kate Chopin a Grace King naléhavě ukazuje zásadní napětí a paradoxy tohoto literárního stereotypu v globálním kontextu americké literatury.

Rozbor stereotypu tragické mulatky v díle Kate Chopin a Grace King je ve čtvrté kapitole, nazvané „Reinterpretace stereotypu chůvy v díle Kate Chopin a Grace King: hranice černošské sexuality a tragické mateřství (*Reinterpretation of the Mammy Stereotype in the fiction of Kate Chopin and Grace King: Limits of Black Sexuality and Tragic Motherhood*), doplněn rozbohem stereotypu chůvy, který dále osvětluje vznik a literární podobu regionálního rasového povědomí. Tento literární stereotyp je podroben rozboru především v následujících povídkách z tvorby Kate Chopin: “Beyond the Bayou”, “Tante Cat’rinette” a v jejím prvním románu *At Fault* a je doplněn paralelním rozbohem povídek Grace King “Crippled Hope”, “Bayou L’Ombre: An Incident of War”, a “Monsieur Motte”. Náhradní mateřství zobrazované v díle Kate Chopin a Grace King zachycuje další dimenzi mezirasové intimity, a tím ozřejmuje další úhel pohledu na roli touhy v konceptualizaci rasy a na její zachycení v rámci rasových

stereotypů. Za využití Bachtinovy definice groteskna rozbor stereotypu chůvy v díle těchto dvou autorek především ozřejmuje rozsah a komplexitu dvojích sexuálních norem a paradoxní definici „černého“ a „bílého“ ženství v americké Louisianě na konci devatenáctého století. Stereotypní zobrazení postavy chůvy zahrnuje kategorie groteskna, maskulinity a náhradního mateřství, které dále přispívají k rasovým reprezentacím specifickým pro konkrétní region. Zobrazení postav aristokratických jižanských dívek (*Southern belles*), jejichž tělo je nedotknutelnou a uctívanou schránkou je v přímém kontrastu s rasovými reprezentacemi, ať již se jedná o tragické mulatky či chůvy, a dotvrzuje tragičnost nejen „bílého“ a „černého“ mateřství, ale potažmo i ženství. Neslučitelnost tohoto literárního stereotypu s abolicionistickým pohledem, jež je naznačena v úvodu této kapitoly, dotvrzuje specifickou roli rasových stereotypů v literatuře americké Louisiany, a tím koresponduje s literárními reprezentacemi stereotypu tragické mulatky, který byl nastíněn ve třetí kapitole této dizertační práce, a s feministickými či regionalistickými reinterpretacemi tohoto stereotypu ve dvacátém století.

Na závěr tato práce zdůrazňuje, že oscilace mezi touhou, zanedbáváním, násilím a grotesknem, která je evidentní v literárním zpracování rasových stereotypů tragické mulatky a chůvy v díle Kate Chopin a Grace King, a která je v kontextu regionální literatury americké Louisiany na přelomu devatenáctého a dvacátého století v rozporu s národním abolicionistickým diskursem, je materializací rozpolcených vztahů k rasové odlišnosti, jež se zrcadlí též v pojetí amerického Jihu samotného. Následkem tohoto rozboru rasových stereotypů v dílech autorek regionální fikce z regionu americké

Louisiany je především odhalení paradoxu, že vlivem regionálního pohledu na identitu, region, rasu a gender se z regionální literatury americké Louisiany stává literatura s globální působností s přesahy do karibské literatury a nových jižanských studií (*New Southern Studies*). Hledáním nových reinterpretací regionální literatury, které již nezahrnují pouze feministické reinterpretace, se otevírá možnost sledovat nové směry literární teorie a obohatit dosavadní interpretace o nové prvky, jež v tomto případě přináší novou kontextualizaci jižanské jinakosti (*Otherness*).

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