



Opponent's Report on the Ph.D. Dissertation of Ms. Dagmar Junkova-Pegues' Dissertation,
"Contemporary Reevaluation of Southern Local Color Fiction"

Ms. Junkova-Pegues's dissertation offers an admirable and theoretically informed attempt to reframe several critical areas of contemporary southern studies: nineteenth-century local color fiction and its relationship to twentieth-century regionalism; the limits of feminist analysis in confronting racially determined southern female identity; the functions of stereotypes in grounding racial identity and white normativity; the ways that the hierarchies of race and gender are complicated by the ambiguous heterogeneity of specific regions like Louisiana and—by implication—other colonized spaces.

Clearly, Ms. Junkova-Pegues's chief interest is in the ways that racial categories and racial identity complicate and sometimes deform contemporary critical efforts to understand southern fiction, particularly the fiction of the late nineteenth century, whose popularity and associations with women writers have made "local color" fiction subject, on the one hand, to critical neglect or dismissal and, on the other, to feminist recovery and reevaluation.

One problem that Ms. Junkova-Pegues valiantly attempts to resolve is the complicated (and often contradictory) ways that "local color" and regionalism have been defined and distinguished. While she does a good job of describing the various critical arguments over the terms for this body of fiction, it seems to me that we still end up valorizing "regionalism" (associated with transcendence) at the expense of "local color"—with its specific implications of the "small and local," what is "colored"—ultimately, perhaps, the (female?) body, certainly the material at the expense of the non-material. Ms. Junkova-Pegues rightly insists that the value of the aesthetic of regionalism is precisely "its aspiration to reflect upon, question, and possibly subvert the unique norms" of a region, but why does the term "local color" remain less acceptable than "regionalism"—and how might that unacceptability be connected with the later arguments about the disposability of the "colored" body and the suppression of race in Louisiana fictions?

At the same time, Ms. Junkova-Pegues intriguingly identifies region as a fertile new category for analysis, especially in the ways that she establishes several provocative links with post-colonialism—from the refusal to marginalize the Other, to a hybridized and historicized aesthetics, to the fetishizing of bodies as a projection of culturally specific fears and desires. Regionalism, as she explains, offers a critical tool for interrogating difference. But while the coupling of these terms (region and post-colonialism) seems quite fruitful (not least since they both reflect spatial categories as well as temporal and critical perspectives), one might want to elaborate further on the ways that post-colonialism expands our notions of region itself and how far such an identification might take us. In other words, while Ms. Pegues demonstrates quite ably how post-colonialism expands our conception of region as an analytic category for Louisiana literature, what cautions might we note in this application? In other words, if we were to apply the equation of postcolonialism and region to other texts and other places (beyond southern or Louisiana literature, for example), what limits or specific qualifications might we want to observe? To what extent is the usefulness of this approach limited to the American South, for example? How are the congruences that Ms. Pegues' identifies here applicable more broadly?

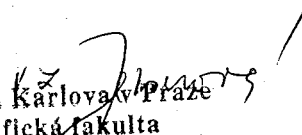
One of the most interesting aspects of this dissertation is the effort, in fact, to articulate theoretically informed critical approaches that will better account for the racial elements of a specific region and its fiction. While I'm not altogether certain that feminist criticism isn't being defined rather narrowly for the purposes of this argument [much feminist criticism does, in fact, take race into account, and not solely as a parallel to gender oppression, but as a complicating distortion of identity], it is true that much contemporary criticism does not adequately account for the ways that race functions in fiction by white southern women. Ms. Junkova-Pegues notes that a regional focus allows us to see how "otherness" in Louisiana fiction is represented "not by their geographical location, but by their constant reference to the racial dimension." That insight seems to underline how southern women writers thought of themselves in terms of race (first) rather than gender and perhaps buttresses Ms. Junkova-Pegues's argument that Grace King's fiction is subverted by her inattention to the implications of racial identity. Of course, if race overrides every other identification, that priority also helps to suppress women's knowledge of their own oppression/identity (and thus effectively contains white women within patriarchal limits by the fear of race). Certainly King has difficulty articulating that oppression, while Chopin (for whom the racial imperative was somewhat lessened), the oppression of women (and the presence of racial identity) could be examined more openly. Perhaps Ms. Junkova-Pegues could elaborate on that paradox.

Ms. Junkova-Pegues is often strongest in applying these theoretical constructs to the fictions themselves. Her readings of the tragic mulatta as a fetishized figure of fear and desire, whose racial "mixture" (the tainting of white purity) was most disruptive to the southern hierarchy—and virtually intrinsic and unavoidable in the specific heterogeneity of Louisiana—are quite insightful. The discussion of the mammy trope likewise is original in revealing how these stories expose "an emotional investment and a bond of intimacy across the color line that borders with homoeroticism – a surprising parallel to miscegenation." Ms. Junkova-Pegues might elaborate that intriguing parallel as a further key to the distinctiveness of region-specific identity.

I am delighted to have played some small part in the development of this fine dissertation and its innovative application of post-colonial theory and a regional aesthetic to southern literature. I strongly recommend this dissertation for a defense.

(Dr.) Barbara C. Ewell
Dorothy H. Brown Distinguished Professor of English
Loyola University New Orleans
Louisiana, USA

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Univerzita Karlova v Praze
Filozofická fakulta
Oddělení vědy
Praha 1, nám. J. Palácha, 116 38