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REGIONAL AESTHETICS: THE FORMATION OF IDENTITIES AND STEREOTYPES IN THE FICTION OF GRACE KING AND KATE CHOPIN

Abstract

This article proposes to augment the existing feminist perspectives on the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin, two Louisiana *fin-de-siècle* authors, with region-specific aesthetic and epistemic categories – particularly the category of race – by illuminating the formation of regional identities and stereotypes. This examination is informed primarily by the trend of “new aesthetics” and its distinction between local and global aesthetics, and it aims to examine the recurring category of ambiguity arising from feminist interpretations of Chopin’s and King’s fiction. Utilizing the cultural theory of Pierre Bourdieu to distinguish between the origination/application aesthetic judgment, the fetishization of whiteness is seen as the underlying impulse for regional aesthetic judgments in King’s “Little Convent Girl” and “Monsieur Motte”, and Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby” and, by analogy, in Chopin’s master novel, *The Awakening*.

Key words

Regionalist fiction; local aesthetics; epistemology of race; ethnicity; tragic mulatta stereotype; womanhood marked by race

This article proposes to augment the existing feminist perspectives on the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin, two Louisiana *fin-de-siècle* authors, with region-specific aesthetic and epistemic categories – particularly the category of race – by illuminating the formation of regional identities and stereotypes. This examination is informed primarily by the trend of “new aesthetics” and its distinction between local and global aesthetics, and it aims to examine the recurring category of ambiguity arising from feminist interpretations of Chopin’s and King’s fiction. Utilizing the cultural theory of Pierre Bourdieu to distinguish between the origi-

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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*,¹ 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 as well as 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 academic debates about the literary value of the works of such authors as Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Kate Chopin, and Grace King raise crucial questions regarding aesthetic objects and aesthetic value. The objective of this article is to offer a perspective on regional aesthetics present in the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin, which suggests a new alternative to their contemporary feminist interpretations, and to foreshadow parallels between such aesthetics of "Otherness" and the aesthetics of other regionalist, minority, post-colonial, and "crossblood" literatures.²

The examination of the regional aesthetics of Otherness in the literary works of these two Louisiana regionalist authors invites many parallels that can be traced among regional aesthetics, Native American aesthetics, African American aesthetics, postcolonial, 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. Indeed, within the context of this examination of the fiction of King and Chopin, which 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. Since it appears that the supremacy of the white Anglo-European aesthetics can no longer be upheld, the epistemological foundation of aesthetic judgment needs to be examined, and the paradigms of literary analysis need to be updated. Although the category of Otherness, when applied to the South as a region, is fairly broad and, it has, moreover, recently been challenged by Houston A. Baker Jr.,³ it shall serve as a starting point for the present analysis of regionalist aesthetics. Consequently, this article offers an exploration of the following questions: To what extent can the function of aesthetics be defined by its social space (which is occupied by stereotypes)? 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 cultural studies and

social and literary theory, and 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 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 Criticism⁴, and finally, to be rediscovered by contemporary feminist theory and regionalist studies. Emory Elliot in *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* identifies the crucial tension between the traditional (and narrowly defined) understanding of aesthetics as a set of universal standards of beauty and the existing diverse 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 relevant 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 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. (2002: 14)

Recognizing the need for the contextualization or re-valuation 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” (2002: 17). Therefore, the question should not only be *how* the notion of region produces or alters the aesthetics, in our case in the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin, 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, 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 maneuver, to speculate, and, once again, in pursuing out ends, with eyes wide open, to attempt more promising beginnings (2004: 433).

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 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 provides “a source of autonomy and resistance to the status quo” (qtd. in Castiglia and Castronovo 2004: 426). 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” (Castiglia and Castronovo 2004: 433).

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 Houston A. Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson’s call for “new Southern studies”⁵, 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 those proposed by Elliot, Clark, Castiglia and Castronovo, and others, refuse the claim that aesthetic value is an intrinsic (formal) and universally acknowledged characteristics 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 the objectivity and validity of such aesthetic values as well as the fear of an excessive relativization of these values and their susceptibility to ideology. 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, Aesthetics, and Progressive Politics”. In this article, Mohanty rejects the notion of objectivity as neutrality and suggests that objectivity is an “epistemic ideal in the realm of values” (2002: 32). Furthermore, having repudiated the skeptical postmodern theory of value that denies the possibility of any objective theoretical knowledge, Mohanty rejects 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 both refuses Foucault’s epistemological holism and 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” (2002: 41). 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:

[In terms of 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* (Smith qtd. in Mohanty 2002: 40, emphases in the original).

To allow for the possibility of objective aesthetic and other values, Mohanty proposes to “show how basing aesthetics partially in human nature can be liberating for aesthetic inquiry” (2002: 47). 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” (2002: 54) suggesting that completely context-free aesthetic notions would be defective. Therefore, in relation to multicultural studies, Mohanty calls for a comparative aesthetics, which could help challenge the aesthetic status quo from a cross-cultural perspective based on human nature.

By analogy, in order to avoid excessive aesthetic relativism or extreme forms of politicized aesthetics, this article 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 distinguishing between local and global aesthetics; yet it is also aware of the dangers of aesthetic relativism. Thus, our focus on the local aesthetics and its relation to global aesthetics and the subsequent application of this global/local tension shall provide an intriguing framework with an exciting potential for the reinterpretation of Louisiana regionalist literature; moreover, it will allow us to expose and transcend the problematic coexistence of its nineteenth-century racist overtones and its twentieth-century interpretative frameworks that are predominantly congruent with feminist theory. Furthermore, the interrogation of the discipline of local aesthetics of regionalism and its interconnection with the global aesthetic perspective uncovers 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” (2007: 1) rather than on the interrogation of the universal applicability of aesthetic concepts.⁶ Refining the perspectives on the local and the global within the context of Louisiana and the United States, this exposition of regional aesthetics examines the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin 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 formal-

ist approach to aesthetics is being refused by contemporary theorists, the role of social consensus acquires an increasingly important position in this discipline. One of the theorists who engage 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” (Harker et al. 1990: 1) 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 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 the illusion of the absolute aesthetical value in Bourdieu’s work challenges the subject of the 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 ‘connoisseur’, and of a long individual history, that is, of prolonged exposure to the work of art (Bourdieu 1995: 289, emphases added).

Thus, for Bourdieu the questions of the meaning and 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 rejects claims that the historical anamnesis and the active *epochè* are necessary for the 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 (1995: 297).

Bourdieu's claim that "the oppositions structuring aesthetic perception are not given *a priori*, but are historically produced and reproduced" (1995: 299) is the ultimate refusal of the primacy of form over function of a work of art. 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" (1995: 303). 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" (1995: 306). 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, in harmony with his conception of the 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 (Johnson 1993: 216).

Therefore, as it 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 indeed subordinated to the social sphere, however, is two-fold, and it includes both the originating tradition and the contemporary application of tradition.

From this perspective, the underlying problem of the contextualization of aesthetics in the case of the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin consists in the reconciliation of the opposite, or even a mutually exclusive, interpretative tradition of the nineteenth century with its "ideological work of postbellum reconciliation" (McCullough 1999: 189) and the feminist interpretative tradition of the twentieth century; especially in the case of the 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 the tradition of contemporary critics. Fully in accordance with Bourdieu's theory of double historicization, 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 nineteenth-century local color fiction of the American South, as they are represented by interpretations of the works of Grace King and Kate Chopin in this text, 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 Grace King and Kate Chopin are thus relying on shifting social emphases. As a result, the conventional treatment of this genre is abandoned 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 fiction is primarily connected to the traumatic changes that occurred in the American national climate after the Civil War – and which solidified the South’s position as the “Other” – its main attraction for the readers was the fact that it was marketed as sentimental and generally apolitical. Later, with the rise of New Criticism, the emphasis of many interpretations of the local color fiction 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” (1997: 158). 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, have become relevant. As a result of such innovative valorizations, 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” (Lauter 1991: 244).

Interpretations of regionalist literature 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 on Chopin’s master novel *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” (Notes from Bookland 1899: 5); however, it is in full accordance with the contemporary literary tradition.

We may acknowledge that the feminist interpretations of Chopin’s fiction are 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 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 (1999: 186).

McCullough's examination of Chopin's two collections of short stories, *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897), correctly points out the racially marked representations of womanhood, which can be found, for instance, in "Désirée's Baby", "La Belle Zoraïde", "Loka", and other Chopin's stories. However, the feminist vision in Chopin's fiction is blurred not only by the way she incorporates racial issues in her stories – and, by analogy, by means of ambiguities and "underscored omissions" (Morrison 1992: 6) in *The Awakening* – but also by the fact that particularly in her short fiction she, perhaps slightly less conspicuously, addresses the issues of ethnicity and class. It is mainly Chopin's rather condescending view of Acadians (Cajuns), who are often victimized by class conflict that raises new issues in the interpretation of her regionalist fiction. For instance, "A Very Fine Fiddle", "A Rude Awakening", "In Sabine" and even Chopin's most shocking (and consequently most celebrated) short story "The Storm" testify to the outsider status of the Acadians (and especially the women marked in ethnic and regional ways in Chopin's fiction) whose lives are juxtaposed to the lives of the representatives of the wealthy Créole class in the fiction of Kate Chopin. In *A Question of Class: The Redneck Stereotype in Southern Fiction* Duane Carr argues that:

Chopin is, of course, best known for her novel, *The Awakening*, but she is also the author of two collections of stories in which Acadians appear. Chopin seems to look upon this group of disadvantaged whites rather condescendingly as simple folk, basically children, innocent and natural, in need of guidance and sympathy. The men are lazy, given to fishing and dancing, and it is up to their women to prod them into the work ethic (1996: 53).

Without giving in to margin-fetishist or even ethnicity-fetishizing aesthetics it is becoming clear that although some of Chopin's fiction does not conform to the above discussed conception of ethnocentric aesthetics, and while it addresses feminist issues, a regional awareness, even though it might not be taken as a general panacea, offers one of the most relevant perspectives on her work.

Unlike McCullough, we may extend the questioning of the underlying feminist issues not only to Chopin's short stories, but also to her most accomplished 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 (Wolkenfeld 1994: 241–242).

In fact, the following ending of *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 and on. [...] Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her. "Good-bye – because I love you. (Culley 1994: 109).

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" (qtd. in Culley 1994: 242). 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 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 any actual intention to commit suicide. In fact, it may have been yet another one of Edna's whims rather than a victorious *coup d'état*. This ambiguity in the ending of *The Awakening* cannot be seen as a coincidence. As Kate McCullough argues:

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 (1999: 190).

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 "The Little Convent Girl" that employs the tragic mulatta trope in order to make statements about the racial and gender-devised roles in Louisiana at the turn of the nineteenth-century. The tragedy of being contaminated by the black race drives the otherwise 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 [that] results in tragedy" (1989: 108). 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 flutter of white petticoats, a show of white stockings, as the little convent girl went under the water (Bush 1973: 156).

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 "The Little Convent Girl", she points out that it is evident in this story that King blamed miscegenation, not racism (1992: 51).

Another ambiguous ending is presented by Kate Chopin in her short story "Désirée's Baby" by suggesting a stereotypically conventional reaction of Désirée, the presumed 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 gown 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 (Gilbert 2002: 247).

The victimized character of Désirée who is portrayed as submissive to both racial and gender-specific oppression is, however, problematized by Désirée's agency, although ambiguous, in the final scene of the story. As Elen Peel points out: "Although 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" (qtd. in Brown and Ewell 1992: 69). 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 augmented in the two following respects. 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 of oppression of women in their gender-defined and social roles. As a result, many critics attempt to de-emphasize the shortcomings in the “proto-feminist” texts of these two authors.

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” (1988a: 15). 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” (1988a: 26). 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” (1988a: 21), how do we account for the racial enclosures which are even more pronounced? 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” (1999: 7). 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 work

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 explored further. 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 respect 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, which corresponds with Barbara 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. Consequently, 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 approach that takes into consideration the region as an epistemological, social, and political foundation of aesthetic judgment.

Attempting to find an answer to 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 are faced by a relative dearth of scholarship devoted to this topic. This indicates that there are other categories, such as the categories of race and gender that have steadily received more critical attention. However, Michael Kowalewski, who is one of the few literary critics to 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 is because "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" (1994: 174). 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 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 for 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 (1997: 20, emphasis added).

The following paragraphs shall illuminate how the treatment of social and political marginalization in textual terms results in the following situation: the formerly marginalized voices take center stage in Louisiana regionalist literature. As realism and naturalism were becoming central to the national literary market and offered readers universal themes, 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” that 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.

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 regionalist fiction is primarily centered on female characters that are, furthermore, racially and ethnically marked, and on 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:

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 (1999: 201).

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 – the eroticized mulatta who “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” (Gilbert 2002: 312–313) – and Zaïda Trodon – a young Acadian woman who unsuccessfully plans to marry a member of the Créole class who “[when sober] might betray by some subtle grace of speech or manner, evidences of gentle blood” (Gilbert 2002: 349), Chopin captures a complex portrayal of various versions of regionally, ethnically, and racially marked womanhood and

not simply a universal feminine theme. In her two novels, Chopin may not have incorporated the vast variety of regionally specific Othernesses as explicitly as in her short fiction, yet by her choice of themes and characters she continued to operate within the genre of regionalist fiction, which “has its analogy in a more generalized feminization of Southern fiction and culture” (Campbell 1997: 189). From the opening scene of Chopin’s first novel *At Fault*, we can clearly infer the role reversal that is going to take 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 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 (Disheroon-Green and Caudle 2001: 3).

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 to successfully 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 to decide rationally to sell the timber rights to her property to David Hosmer, and thus enter the business sphere traditionally viewed as male-dominated. In this respect, we can agree with Sandra Gunning who claims that *At Fault* “adheres to the standard plot of the North/South reunion romance between Thérèse and Hosmer to signify the promise of Henry Grady’s New South: the unity between Southern agricultural power and Northern commerce” (1996: 120). Although *At Fault* lacks the stylistic sophistication and narrative complexity of Chopin’s later novel, it successfully foreshadows its major theme – the interrogation of the question of female emancipation.

Edna Pontellier, another strong female character, is portrayed in *The Awakening*, Chopin’s master novel and a “famous statement on middle-class female identity” (Holtman 2004: 78). This time, Chopin explores the domestic sphere, a more appropriate setting for her heroine. 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 that 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 (racially

defined) Other, and therefore, metaphorically speaking, she becomes a tragic mulatta figure herself.⁷ Therefore, Chopin's fiction masterfully addresses issues of feminine perspectives and, by the same token, the racial, ethnically marked and region-specific perspectives.

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 (and least examined) example of such an exploration. Her fiction frequently utilizes racial stereotypes, such as the "Southern belle", the "mammy" and the "tragic mulatta". By exposing these racial stereotypes, we may concurrently answer the third proposed question, i.e., "What is the role of region in the use of stereotypes in the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin?" 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, King is aspiring to romanticize and idealize the relationship between the master and the slave in this story. 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 consequently seen as a source of sorrow for the slaves. In this particular story, King further 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 and mistress (and their 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" (Bush 1973: 147). Therefore, King's narrative strategies bear strong regional characteristics due to adhering to the ideological work of post-bellum 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" (McCullough 1999: 189).

Chopin employs the tragic mulatta stereotype most skillfully in her short story "Désirée's Baby". The story of Désirée, who is a racially ambiguous figure due to her namelessness that is implied by her uncertain origin of a foundling, "purposely left by a party of Texans" (Gilbert 2002: 242) and found and adopted by the Valmondé family, represents the crux of region-specific gender and race issues. Her ambiguously tragic demise, which was described earlier in this text, fully corresponds to the tragic mulatta fate. However, despite the fact that it turns out that it is actually Armand whose blood is tainted and as a result he 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" (Palumbo DeSimone 2002: 132), the most disturbing implications of this story are embodied by Désirée's foil – the character of La Blanche, one of the quadroon maids at the Aubigny plantation. The parallels between Désirée and La Blanche are enhanced by their relationship to Armand Aubigny, Désirée's husband and La Blanche's master, which is implied in the text by revealing Armand's presence at

La Blanche's cabin: "And the way he [the child] cries, [...] is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche's cabin." (Gilbert 2002: 243) and later by a perceptible semblance between Désirée's baby and La Blanche's son. Ellen Peel addresses the parallels between Désirée and La Blanche by arguing that "the two women – and even their sons – may have parallel ties to Armand because of the possible sexual connections between slave and master" (1990: 226). Thus, La Blanche is a living example of miscegenation, the one-drop-rule and the resulting phenomenon of "invisible blackness". However, due to her perceived breach of social customs, i.e., her marriage to the proud creole plantation owner, it is paradoxically Désirée – and not La Blanche – who is portrayed as the tragic mulatta figure and victimized by Armand, while the reader is led to believe that La Blanche, her child, and Armand – the true mulatto – continue to play their role at the Aubigny plantation.

It is becoming increasingly evident that 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. Apart from examples so far mentioned in this text, Chopin's exploration of the intertwined issues of race and gender was most explicitly addressed by several prominent critics, including Anna Shannon Elfenbein⁸, Ellen Peel⁹, Michelle Birnbaum¹⁰, and Sandra Gunning¹¹; yet the region-specific complexities of race in the works of Grace King have been somewhat overshadowed by the attention devoted to Chopin. The following paragraphs aim to illuminate and at least in part rectify this trend.

Due to their emphases 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 and King are conducted in regional terms, rather than in strict geographical terms. Therefore, we can agree with John Stauton that "by presenting regional experience from within, as to engage the reader's sympathy and identification, regionalism becomes a literature both of difference and for difference" (2000: 208).

Apart from the emphasis on the Otherness of characters in Louisiana regionalist fiction, there are other important themes establishing its paradox-ridden status. Above all, it is the "great matrix of loss" including themes of absence, loss, limitation and the past (Campbell 1997: 14). 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 (1987: 38). 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 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 (Bush 1973: 134).

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, 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. Thus, within the scope of several short pages, King is portraying the ultimate fall from grace of one of the most 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 regionalist literature 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: 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 a 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 (1999: 188).

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 lesser form of the white race. Ultimately, the heroines of King's and Chopin's fiction, be it "La Grande Demoiselle, the "Little Convent Girl", Marcélite, 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” (1988b: 42); yet we must also acknowledge that all the aspects of Southern womanhood in the fiction of King and Chopin 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 writers, such as King and Chopin. The category of Otherness of Louisiana regionalist fiction manifests itself primarily in the category of race, which not only 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 play a crucial part in regional identity formation, as portrayed by King and Chopin.

To an extent, the regional aesthetics of Otherness (of gender, race and theme) 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 Henninger, or by the tensions between the genres of local color, realism, and naturalism¹²; however, there is an additional aspect relevant to the examination of regional aesthetics that problematizes King’s and Chopin’s use of such textual strategies as stereotypes or allegory.

It is the essentiality of the category of race and the coexisting fetishization of whiteness in the fiction of Grace King and Kate Chopin that is produced as a specific regional aesthetic dimension and perpetuated by stereotypes of race and gender. As Michelle Birnbaum appropriately 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 alterity: in their difference, she finds herself” (1994: 303). 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 and, metaphorically speaking, also in Chopin’s masterpiece novel, *The Awakening*. The fetishization of whiteness thus becomes the underlying epistemological, social, and political foundation of aesthetic judgment. *Désirée*, *La Belle Zoraïde*, and the little convent girl are victims of Louisiana local epistemology of race in the context of which the encounter with the racial Other typically results in refusal, feelings of antagonism, creation of ideological myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions that are driven not only by fear of the racial Other, but primarily by the fear of the “invisible blackness” that is personified by the tragic mulatta stereotype. 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” (2000: 3). The reification of whiteness stabilizes the categories of identity in Louisiana regionalist 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 that is explored in greater detail elsewhere¹³, 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 Marcéline Gauchois, a quadroon servant, in order to allow her 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" Marcéline who is afraid that by making publicly known that she and she alone is responsible for the improvement of Marie's financial situation, she would 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. (Review of "Monsieur Motte" 1888: 173)

In a more contemporary 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 [that] reveals the inability of one generation to prepare the next for the penalties attached to the female role" (1989: 93). However, apart from the insistence on the invaluable insights to 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 that is not only co-existent but crucial – the dimension of authentic racial identity and corresponding ambiguous moral issues.

The surrogate motherhood of Marcéline is the sole most important relationship in the life of Marie Modeste (Motte) who is being indoctrinated about proper morals in the Institute St. Denis. The maternal instinct of Marcéline, the mammy figure, 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" (Bush 1973: 63). 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. The figure of Monsieur Motte is an image of white power created by Marcéline who has been indoctrinated to place race above anything else. Her endless devotion to little Marie and the emotional bond which she was able to create with her, as well as the financial aspect of her devotion is rendered non-existent when her race comes into question. Although Marcéline provides Marie with both emotional and financial support, and 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:

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, nigger” (trying to humiliate and insult herself) (Bush: 1973: 68).

Although Marcéline 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, ultimately, she is 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 Marcéline 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” (1992: 53). Such centralization of the white character and of white issues at the expense of the character of Marcéline may correspond with King's intent, yet it also perpetuates the fetishization of whiteness:

Marcéline loses her place as provider, her function as mother, and even her prewar role as confidante. In fact, even though Marie would follow Marcéline out of a sense of responsibility, there is no opportunity in New Orleans society for such a 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 (Coleman 1992: 52).

Correspondingly, Marie's *début* represents 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’” (Bush 1973: 94). 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 Marcélite vanish due to Marcélite’s quadroon status. The role of Marcélite 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 Marcélite’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 Marcélite only token reward for her loyalty and her resourcefulness (Coleman 1992: 52).

Therefore, as a result of a preference for “white motherhood” by Madame Lareveillère, Marcélite’s surrogate motherhood is erased on the basis of her race, and the heroine of the story indulges in feelings of pity: “Ah, mon Dieu, ayez pitié de moi, pauvre négresse!” (Bush 1973: 76). 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 especially 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 primarily in King’s story “Monsieur Motte” and the tragic mulatta stereotype, as addressed in reference to Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby”, both of 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 Grace King and Kate Chopin, let us emphasize that the focus on such a regional dimension is not simply the identification of the racist overtones present in the fiction of King and Chopin, but also a plausible plateau for examination of the works of these two authors to potentially enrich their existing feminist interpretations. The next path of interrogation of the fiction of King and Chopin should therefore propose 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, for instance by drawing parallels to postcolonial theory represented by Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said. The motivation for suggesting an analogy between the examination of regional aesthetics and stereotypes in the works of King and

Chopin, and the postcolonial discourse should be informed primarily by the postcolonial 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 in Homi Bhabha's *Location 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.

Notes

- 1 Although the debates concerning the definitions of "local color" and "regionalist" fictions remain inconclusive in the works of many literary critics, including Marjorie Pryse and Donna Campbell, for the purpose of this article a distinction between these two labels needs articulation. 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, rather than applying it as a term with explicit negative connotation. On the other hand, the term "regionalist fiction" will be used in this text to refer to and expose the multiple discursive levels of the works of the two discussed authors, as they are the focus of contemporary critical study of the subversions of the norms of gender, race, and class. This distinction not only avoids trivialization of Louisiana regionalist literature, but it also exposes its Janus-faced reality.
- 2 "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, in Cotten and Acampora.
- 3 Baker and Nelson (2001). 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".
- 4 For further details on this topic, cf.: Ewell (1997).
- 5 Cf. Yeager (2000). As a scholar who is frequently praised for the novel approach to Southern studies called "new Southern studies", Patricia Yeager 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. Yeager 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" (2000: 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" (2000: 8). Refusing the traditional dominant categories of Southern literature defined by Walker Percy, history, family, storytelling, and tragedy, Yeager thus offers alternative categories for interpretation of southern fiction. Yeager'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). Yeager ultimately transforms the traditional dominant categories of Southern literature by emphasizing the body and place.

- 6 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.
- 7 This argument is further developed in Junková (2004).
- 8 Elfenbein (1987) and (1989).
- 9 Peel (1990).
- 10 Birnbaum (1994) and (2003).
- 11 Gunning (1996).
- 12 For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Campbell (1997).
- 13 Cf. Pegues (2009).

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