Capturing Authenticity Through "Frenchness" in Three Short Stories by Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Grace E. King

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In 1915, Grace King wrote in a letter to Fred Lewis Pattee: "I am not a romanticist. I am a realist à la mode de la Nouvelle-Orleans. I have never written a line that was not realistic, but our life, our circumstances… all that was romantic" (*Grace King of New Orleans* 398). In this statement, Grace King illustrates three major aspects of her literature. She emphasizes an authentic and realistic portrayal of society by suggesting she is a *realist*. And finally, her narratives are deeply connected to the cultural and geographical context of Creole Louisiana. Her use of the French language highlights the multicultural and multilingual uniqueness of the region. Another native of New Orleans, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, also explored the intricate social and cultural fabric of this society in her fiction. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, both she and Grace King contributed to a body of literature that illustrated the complexities and richness of Louisiana Creole identity as it underwent significant transformations throughout the period.[1] Although their understanding of Creoleness may differ, they share a common objective: to celebrate Louisiana's uniqueness by representing the Franco-Creole heritage of the region. Grace King and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, though not self-identified with the Regionalist and Local Color movements, are nonetheless associated with them for their authentic portrayals of Louisiana Creoles and their commitment to depicting the realities of their local and personal experiences. Their stories were part of a wider cultural shift that emerged in response to the dramatic changes of the nineteenth century, an era characterized by industrialization, mass immigration, and the growth of urban centers. In *The Real Thing*,

[1] "Creole" originally defined any individual born in the colonies, regardless of race or social status. During the nineteenth century, the term was first used to distinguish the people who lived there before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 from the newcomers. It was primarily used by Latin populations, mainly French and Spanish, in response to the rising Anglo-American presence. With the growing Americanization and the adoption of the rigid biracial system, the white Creoles, fearing to be associated with Creoles of color after the Civil War, attempted to redefine the term to refer to white persons of French noble ancestry (thereby creating a sort of local aristocratic class). However, the effort was futile, as by the beginning of the twentieth century the word had reverted to its original meaning, which it continues to hold today: a person of mixed heritage at the intersection of European, African, and indigenous cultures, typically with French and/or Creole linguistic ties. See Carl A. Brasseaux, Virginia R. Domínguez, and Angel Adams Parham.

cultural historian Miles Orvell shows how literature mirrored these changes, granting readers a chance to immerse themselves in lives that felt more authentic—where authenticity is the quality of being true to one's nature and representing reality without artifice.

This analysis does not aim to fix authenticity to a singular definition; rather, it investigates how it is rendered in literature through depictions of personal experience and culturally grounded realism. In his essay "L'effet de réel" (1968), Roland Barthes argues that the smallest, seemingly insignificant elements in a narrative—such as an object, a gesture, or a simple act—can generate the feeling of reality, making the text appear more authentic to the reader (87). These details, he claims, do not necessarily have a narrative function, but they are essential in creating the illusion of the real. In the case of King and Dunbar-Nelson, this idea of authenticity is achieved not only through their depiction of local customs and environments but through their attention to seemingly minor details that evoke the essence of Creole life.

In Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "The Fisherman of Pass Christian" (1899) and Grace King's "A Delicate Affair" and "Mimi's Marriage" (1893), readers are invited into the intimate lives of women navigating personal desires within the social and cultural frameworks of their time. As we will see in the first part of this analysis, this sense of authenticity is constructed through specific names, settings, and language that collectively create an atmosphere of "Frenchness" that draws readers into the distinct world of New Orleans society. These authentic touches—whether in the description of a character's home, their interactions, or cultural references—function as Barthes' "insignificant" details, which are in fact central to establishing realism and verisimilitude in the narrative. In the second part, we will explore how authenticity also emerges through the narrative staging of this cultural identity. Through these stories, King and Dunbar-Nelson demonstrate how authenticity in literature is not merely a matter of accurate representation, but of crafting an effect—one where the reader senses the realness of the characters' lives through carefully chosen details. The authors' portrayal of the Creole community is not just an artistic reflection but a constructed reality, one that speaks to the cultural, social, and personal truths of their era. Finally, we will see how authenticity emerges through the characters' experiences. These narratives reflect real-life struggles and personal dilemmas, as female characters offer insights into deeply personal and intimate moments.

Balancing Exceptionalism and Authenticity: the Construction of Frenchness

Dunbar-Nelson and King wrote their short stories in the 1890s, a period marked by significant national and regional transformations, largely due to nineteenth-century industrialization, waves of immigration, and the concentration of populations in cities. These shifts profoundly

influenced how people consumed goods, art, and literature. In reaction to the growing urbanization, individuals—mostly in the cities of the Northeast—began to feel alienated and disconnected from their environment, producing a sentiment of self-estrangement. Literature became a means of escape and a refuge where people could engage with simpler ways of life and take comfort in the depiction of provincial and rural settings. These narratives illustrated their longing for *real things* and experiences that they saw as more genuine and authentic. Dunbar-Nelson's and King's literature seems to answer the growing interest for realism and authenticity as well as the increasing demand for regional fiction. They use literary conventions of Realism, as identified by literary scholar Robin Warhol, presenting truthful and lifelike depictions of characters, their environment, and the public and personal spaces they live in. This includes a keen attention to customs, languages and dialects, all framed "within a social context based on present or historical political realities" (Warhol 511). However, they are also considered regionalists because their stories are embedded in very local and specific places in the Louisiana Creole community. "A Delicate Affair" tells the story of an old Creole widow, Joséphine, who seems to live a lonely life. She never leaves her house and has little social interaction except with her servant, Jules, whom she constantly belittles, and with her friend Mr. Horace, who pays her a weekly visit. In "Mimi's Marriage," the young bride is reflecting on the life she would have led if her father was still alive. She would have married a "*brun*" (suggesting a Creole), she would have travelled, lived in a nice house with many servants, and enjoyed a vibrant social and cultural existence (40). The life she had dreamt of is exposed in sharp contrast to her real life with her actual husband whom her father would not have wanted her to marry but who makes her happy. As for "The Fisherman of Pass Christian," it relates the story of Annette, a young aspiring singer from New Orleans who is vacationing in the resort town of Pass Christian. Despite her social prejudice, she falls in love with a fisherman who hides his true identity as the story later reveals that he is, in reality, a famous French opera singer.

These three women all have one thing in common: they speak French in their daily lives, indicating it is their native language. It is emphasized by the names of the characters that are almost exclusively French.[2] Their status as francophones, even though the stories are written in English, offers a vision of Louisiana as inherently French to a foreign reader. The text itself is interspersed with French words, expressions, and interjections (like the recurring use of "Hein," "Ah, Bah!" in "A Delicate Affair"; "Mon Dieu," "Ma foi," "comme il faut," "brun" in

[2] The main characters have clear French-sounding names: Joséphine, Jules, and Horace in "A Delicate Affair"; Louise, Mimi, and Clementine in "Mimi's Marriage"; Annette, Nathalie, and Monsieur LeConte in "The Fisherman of Pass Christian."

"Mimi's Marriage") and we could argue, a deliberate choice of words that have a similar sound in French or that originate from French. For example, in "A Delicate Affair": "brocade," "ennui," "bric-à-brac" (196, 207, 209); in "Mimi's Marriage": "négligée," "mignonne" (39, 40); in "The Fisherman of Pass Christian": "a beau," "encore," "bravos," "incognito" (47, 50, 58, 59). Although less present than in other stories, King employs *eye dialect*[3] in "Mimi's Marriage" to underline cultural and linguistic differences not only through the incorporation of French words, but also by highlighting a distinct pronunciation, as in this sentence by the main character: "I tell you, sometimes on account of those children I used to think myself in 'ell [making the Creole's attempt and failure to pronounce the h]" (43). Here, the narrator goes as far as to explain a specific feature of Creole speech to the reader.

The hybridization of French and English in the text can be seen as artificial, failing to accurately represent the linguistic realities of Louisiana. Creoles typically used French words because they spoke French, not out of a deliberate attempt to mix the languages. This blending of languages may seem unnatural and forced to a local reader, yet it appears to serve the purpose of evoking a *sense of* Frenchness for outside audiences. By representing this original and authentic oral expression, the writer reinforces the idea of a distinctive community, both genuine and exotic. This portrayal is probably one of the reasons why Dunbar-Nelson and King have been associated with the local color movement. According to Ewell and Mencke, the local color is characterized by the realistic portrayal of a society or a community itself anchored in an environment or space that is considered to be "exotic" by a reader external to the culture (xxxvi). Locals are described as different because of their customs, their languages and dialects, the color of their skin, or their social organization (xxxviii–xxxix). If we consider that these writers were published in national magazines, such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's Monthly* or *Harper's Weekly*, and Northeastern publishing companies, it is undeniable that the readers, foreign to the community, must have seen Louisiana's customs as exotic. Especially for Northerners, Southern customs—and even more so Louisiana's mixed cultural heritage—represented a great source of exoticism and fascination. Latin communities had different conventions. For example, Creoles celebrated the Sabbath as a day of leisure and enjoyment, often marked by bustling cafes, bull-baiting, horse racing, theatrical shows, and dancing balls, which shocked the Protestant Anglo-American communities (Tregle 149). This contributed to the development of French stereotypes centered on lighter morals and a tendency toward promiscuity. This is illustrated in "The Fisherman of Pass Christian" when

[3] *Eye dialect* is a literary technique where words are intentionally spelled in a nonstandard or incorrect way to suggest how they are spoken. It is often employed to reflect a character's background, education, or accent, conveying informal, vernacular, or uneducated speech, sometimes for humorous effect.

people start to gossip after Annette has walked "hand in hand" with the fisherman on the beach, which brings her aunt and cousin to alert her father, and she is sent back home to New Orleans (55).

The perception of Louisiana's Frenchness was a historical construction, as historian François Weil has demonstrated in "The Purchase and the Making of French Louisiana." The Frenchification of the state was a long, heterogenous, political process that evolved over the nineteenth century. After the Louisiana Purchase, the constant commercial and cultural exchanges with France first intensified the feeling of Frenchness, but with the increasing Americanization, "French culture became less of an everyday occurrence and more of an intellectual and political project" (Weil 317). In response to Anglo-American hegemony, the French-speaking community organized associations and published in French—an effort not only to preserve the French language itself but also to uphold the cultural prestige historically associated with Creoleness. Historian Joseph Tregle notes: "The creole would find solace in a vision of past glories, set now in a tradition proclaiming his chivalric origins, the beauties of his Gallic tongue, the purity of his race, and the exquisite refinement of his culture" (173). On the one hand, Tregle's observation reveals the attempt at defining Creoles as a local aristocracy; on the other, it shows how Louisiana was perpetuated as an exceptional and unique space and culture within the United States of America. The creation of French Louisiana played a role in the development of its *exceptionalism*. Portraying New Orleans as unique and quaint, for instance, helped to shape the perception of the city as distinctly different. In *Remaking New Orleans: Beyond Exceptionalism and Authenticity*, Adams and Sakakeeny argue that the city's portrayal as romantic and idealized has been shaped by nineteenth-century literary tradition, tourism and economic development, and further reinforced by social sciences and humanities. They propose to reconsider the "analytical tautology in which cultural authenticity renders New Orleans exceptional, and the city's exceptionalism renders it authentic," particularly in the context of the twenty-first century (2–3). The writings of Dunbar-Nelson and King can be seen as part of this literary tradition that contributed to the idealization of their culture, which prompts the question: is the representation of New Orleans or Louisiana an attempt to convey authenticity? Considering that fiction, by definition, is not reality but a construction or representation of it (an *effect* of reality), authenticity becomes intangible. However, if we regard the attempt to depict reality as a form of authenticity, it raises the question of whether, for both authors, this authenticity functions as a narrative device to produce commercially appealing literature or as a means to explore more complex conflicts related to Creole identities at the turn of the twentieth century. Both Dunbar-Nelson and King, being from New Orleans, portray culture in an authentic way, not only through their personal connection to the spaces they narrate but also through the credibility they bring to their stories, that are deeply

embedded in the "real" world. As Martínez suggests, in fictional works, the author does not present authentic truths directly but instead depicts these truths through the voices of fictional characters. Despite this, some readers still attribute authenticity to the author, viewing their narratives as genuine expressions of personal identity and experience. This interpretation can extend beyond the individual, encompassing collective identities such as race, class, nationality, or gender, which the author is believed to share or be associated with (Martínez 523). King and Dunbar-Nelson's ties to Louisiana lend them credibility, with their work not only reflecting the authenticity of the region but also transcending personal narratives to provide a stage for broader societal, cultural, and gender-related concerns.

Through their use of French words, the implied authors convey an ironic perspective on the Creole community's struggle to adjust to the emerging Anglo-American reality at the turn of the century. The characters hold on to traditional cultural symbols as a way to resist or deny the erosion of their past cultural and social supremacy. Moving beyond Roland Barthes' concept of "concrete reality" (*réel concret*)—composed of seemingly insignificant gestures and objects that merely serve as surface indicators of realism (87)—the inclusion of French words in the texts carries a deeper symbolic resonance, one that gestures toward identity, memory, and cultural affect. The narratives themselves complicate notions of authenticity by drawing attention to artifice and illusion, reminding readers that appearances can be deceiving, and characters fallacious. For example, the opera singer (Monsieur LeConte)—whose profession suggests theatricality, performance, and pretense—is a perfect example of the metafictional dimension of the story itself that is *told* and *counted* (such as his name suggests, "conte" meaning "tale" in French). By incorporating French traits and French-like qualities, the authors emphasize local distinctiveness while also presenting it in a way that attracts and engages foreign readers.

Staging Frenchness

The depiction of Louisiana's exceptionalism also reflects the authors' tendency to idealize or, at the very least, project a sense of nostalgia for the multicultural society King and Dunbar-Nelson grew up in. In that regard, King and Dunbar-Nelson are closer to the regionalist movement; as Fetterley and Pryse argue in *American Women Regionalists,* "the regionalists did differentiate themselves from the 'local colorists,' primarily in their desire not to hold up regional characters to potential ridicule by eastern urban readers but rather to present regional experience from within, so as to engage the reader's sympathy and identification" (xii). Both King and Dunbar-Nelson portray their characters in a predominantly positive light, fostering a sense of empathy and connection in readers. In "A Delicate Affair," we can only feel sorry for Joséphine who, apart from her irritating behavior toward her servant, is lonely and secluded in her house, a house that seems like a shrine to past glories: from the painting of her young self, to her husband's ("The portrait of monsieur, madame's handsome young husband, hung out of the circle of radiance, in the isolation that, wherever they hang, always seems to surround the portraits of the dead" [197]), to the multitude of old artifacts that echo the "old fashioned square room" (196). The descriptions of the room and the objects that furnish it systematically link a positive feature to a negative aspect. For example, the "silk brocade" is "stiff," the "gilt clock" relates a "poetical idyl" but tells "the hours only in an insignificant aside," the "delicate politeness" of French taste is "bygone," and the value of the "crowd of smaller objects" now resides now only in their rarity and age (196). All these references mirror the idea of a Franco-Creole illustrious past that is now decaying at the end of the century.

Although the representation of Frenchness and the codes associated with it are slightly different in "The Fisherman of Pass Christian" by Dunbar-Nelson, there is a shared interpretation of the Creole community as embodying a sense of refinement, cultural sophistication, and social superiority. The major part of the story does not take place in New Orleans, but in Pass Christian, which is situated in the state of Mississippi at the border with Louisiana, just across Lake Pontchartrain. It was a famous summer destination for the wealthy Creoles residing in the city that wished to escape the heat and the recurring epidemics. If the main character, Annette, is not explicitly referred to as a Creole, it is implied by the traits that characterize her: she is a wealthy French-speaking woman from New Orleans. Because the Creole identity was associated with a long line of European ancestry, they considered themselves part of a superior cast whose heritage was of French and Spanish nobility. This is why Annette is surprised when she meets a fisherman who speaks French very well—highlighting the irony of her social status prejudice, which stems from her own biased privilege. As a fisherman, he does not correspond to the definition of Creole aristocracy, and yet, this

man not only speaks French correctly but with "the accent that goes only with an excellent education" (41). Phillip, Annette's cousin, although jealous and annoyed at the fisherman for receiving more attention than he does, is not as surprised as his cousin. Perhaps less sheltered, he suggests that there are French-educated people beyond the boundaries of New Orleans: "That's nothing remarkable. If you stay about Pass Christian for any length of time, you'll find more things than perfect French and courtly grace among fishermen to surprise you. These are a wonderful people who live across the Lake" (41). Annette's ignorance demonstrates the overconfidence and arrogance of the Creole community in their exclusive higher social status. Yet, this is countered by the reversal of their roles at the end of the story. When Annette is back in New Orleans, she discovers that the nameless "fisherman" was in reality "Monsieur LeConte," a famous French opera singer brought to New Orleans for a series of performances who had decided to spend a couple of months in Pass Christian "incognito" (60). Their situation is therefore reversed: she is now chasing him, and he is in a more powerful social position than she is. This dramatic shift evokes the atmosphere of a theatrical comedy, prompting the reader to contemplate the staged nature of both the story and its characters. A second reading of the text invites the reader to reassess what initially seemed insignificant but now carries meaning. For instance, the first encounter between the fisherman and Annette ("The tall fisherman caught her in his arms" [39]) points to the fisherman's activity as more than a random detail. While fishing was a known activity at Pass Christian, the symbolism of the fisherman *catching* Annette—as one would *catch* a fish—serves as a fitting analogy for the predator/prey dynamic between them, foreshadowing and paralleling the attitude of predation and seduction that Monsieur LeConte will then exert on Annette.

If we analyze these stories through the lens of regional fiction, we can assume that Frenchness is staged to produce a sense of authentic representation of a quaint and picturesque regional space. In Dunbar-Nelson's short story, the theater is even part of the intrigue. Annette's new acquaintance is revealed to be an opera singer, and she herself wishes to become one. She discovers his real identity as he is performing on stage at the Opéra français in New Orleans. This mise-en-abyme of the theater and opera alongside the comedy (primarily due to the role reversal) prompts us to reflect on the influence of directors (and in this case, the writers) in shaping what seems to be the reality. The text is written to cleverly manipulate the reader's expectations of exoticism that are satisfied by a French setting and atmosphere. In King's stories, the majority of the plot takes place in one room (the living room in "A Delicate Affair" and the bedroom in "Mimi's Marriage"), a "huis clos" that references the broader theatricality of the collection in which the two short stories appear. As Françoise Buisson has shown, *Balcony Stories* offers a stage where women gather to tell stories, many of which refer to theater or work as a series of little scenes and acts: "The balcony, with its obvious metaphorical

dimension, is thus a stage within the text" (77). We can note to that effect, that the structure of the stories themselves reminds us of theater scenes. In "Mimi's Marriage," the setting is confined to the bridal chamber. In "The Fisherman of Pass Christian," each scene unfolds in a specific location (the pier, under the catalpa-tree, the beach, the fisherman's hut, the Opéra, Annette's home, etc.), creating the impression of a series of short, self-contained scenes, each with its unique scenery and dialogues involving one to three characters. As for "A Delicate Affair," it is similar to a play with extensive descriptions that function as stage directions and set instructions, as well as lengthy and comical dialogues.

This theatrical structure is more than stylistic. As Françoise Buisson notes, King enhances the visibility of her characters—particularly women on the margins—through dramatic devices such as "the *mimesis* of dialogue, the representation of inner life through narrated monologue, as well as a kind of immediate and straightforward relationship between the audience—readers as hearers and spectators—and narrative voices that often seem intermingled" (77). These techniques foster an intimate, almost immediate connection between the narrative voice and the reader, who is positioned not just as a reader but as a hearer and spectator. This intermingling of narrative perspectives—where voice and viewpoint blur—evokes the effect of live performance and breaks down the barrier between text and audience. In this sense, King's use of theatrical elements carries a metaliterary quality, drawing attention to the narrative's performative nature and inviting the reader to reflect on the act of storytelling itself. This self-awareness further highlights the distinction between showing and telling, or between *mimesis* and *diegesis*. While the mimetic strategies heighten the sense of realism and support the quest for authenticity, the diegetic moments remind us of the constructed nature of the narrative. Together, these modes allow the reader not only to witness but to experience the story as a performance—an effect that is especially powerful in guiding non-local readers through the alien world of Louisiana conventions.

However, we must consider that both authors were also writing for a local audience. From this angle, it is difficult to refute that the authenticity of their representation serves as a token of cultural preservation on one hand, and on the other, as a way for the writers to draw attention to details and to parallel plots that only a local reader with a set of shared cultural codes would be able grasp. Notably, the presence of French words or expressions that are never translated nor explained suggests two things: it reinforces the authenticity of the writing by giving it linguistic credibility and implies that the text was intended for local, French-speaking readers. King's and Dunbar-Nelson's stories were written in a very specific historical era for Louisiana and New Orleans residents. Their depiction of Louisiana Creoles is aligned with a common purpose to chronicle and preserve this unique culture. King is famous for her numerous history

books in which she thoroughly documented the history and ancestry of famous and notable Creole personalities and families of New Orleans. Even her fiction seems to serve as a safeguard of old customs and practices. As we have seen, in "A Delicate Affair," Joséphine and her decor represent the decline of the old French-Creole elite. Similarly, in "Mimi's Marriage," we can detect the author's own difficulty to accept the shifting social status of Creoles in Anglo-American Louisiana. Mimi describes her father as a man of honor, intelligence, and honesty, but these qualities, she deplores, "do not count now as in old times, 'before the war'" (43). The Civil War marked a change for many members of the Creole elite, most of whom lost their fortune, as it was the case for the King family. In the same vein as the Lost Cause movement,[4] the author here depicts with nostalgia a Creole community that has been destituted from its privileged social and economic status. However, King appears to have conflicting views on the matter. Her character, who respects her father's values, seems to highlight the limits and the flaws of an old and proud patriarchal society which cannot reckon with the realities of the present. Mimi notes that her father was deeply prejudiced, that he "thought himself better than everybody in the world" (42-43), and that he wanted her to marry a rich Creole. In the end, she admits that if he had not passed away, she would have chosen a husband that he would have approved of, and that she is happier with her own choice, as she states in the last lines of the short story: "I prefer my husband to my *brun*; in fact, Loulou, I adore him. [...] see his photograph—a blond, and not good-looking, and small! But poor papa! If he had been alive, I am sure he never would have agreed with God about my marriage" (53).

In Dunbar-Nelson's fiction, it is another side of the Creoleness that is expressed, for she had a different understanding of the meaning of "Creole." Dunbar-Nelson also wrote articles and essays on Louisiana's unique history. In "People of Color in Louisiana" published in 1916, she offered a definition of the term:

> The Caucasian will shudder with horror at the idea of including a person of color in the definition, and the person of color will retort with his definition that a Creole is a native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly apparent. The true Creole is like the famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique. (367)

Dunbar-Nelson's definition is closer to the modern understanding of a Louisiana Creole. As the daughter of a former slave, she was considered a woman of color, but she had fair skin, and

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[4] The Lost Cause emerged from Southern supremacists' refusal to accept the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War. In response, historians and intellectuals crafted a nostalgic and glorified image of the Old South that idealized the past while concealing the brutal realities of slavery.

her light complexion let her pass as white. This ambiguous identity is a common theme throughout all of her writings.[5] In "The Fisherman of Pass Christian," she plays with this racial ambiguity. Firstly, the only character who is explicitly called a "little Creole seaside girl" is Nathalie, a local girl whose "patois was quite as different from Annette's French as it was from the postmaster's English" (41). It is portrayed through direct speech: "Mees Annette act nice wit' her lovare" (52). Not only are the English grammar and spelling intentionally wrong, but the eye dialect shows a mix between the French pronunciation "lovare," and the contraction used to transcribe black people's speech as it was often the case in nineteenth-century literature. Secondly, the choice of Pass Christian as the location of Annette's summer destination is quite significant. As Jillian Weber has shown,[6] the history of Pass Christian has alternatively been associated with white Creoles and Free people of color—later considered as Creoles of color. To a New Orleans audience, such ambiguous racial codes would have intrigued and elicited questions about the actual racial status of Annette. By keeping her identity blurry and secret, Dunbar-Nelson shows how superficial the racial boundaries are and provides a point of reflection, with the hope of inspiring reform of these boundaries.

Beyond the effort to preserve Creole culture, both King and Dunbar-Nelson center their narratives on the question of womanhood. Staged Frenchness functions not only as the backdrop for these women's stories but also as a narrative device and catalyst for exploring their inner lives. In "Mimi's Marriage," the enclosed, intimate setting of the scene creates a space resembling a confessional, where the protagonist can voice her deepest thoughts and desires. The Catholic faith—significantly tied to Creole identity—, through the ritual of confession, is thus subverted, becoming a means for self-exploration rather than repentance, while still carrying its symbolic promise of salvation and freedom. Similarly, Pass Christian serves as a liberating space for Annette, offering her a sense of release and acting as a symbolic passage toward self-discovery and female emancipation.

Frenchness, as performed and inhabited by the characters, moves beyond a cultural marker to become a language for articulating personal longing and emotional truth. As Françoise Buisson

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[5] This hybridization was embodied by the figure of the tragic mulatta—a recurring literary trope that symbolized the tensions of racial mixing in the American South. It is a theme that Dunbar-Nelson explores in other short stories such as "Sister Josepha" and "Little Miss Sophie." King also addresses this theme in "The Little Convent Girl" where a young woman drowns in the Mississippi River after reconnecting with her mother in New Orleans, where she uncovers her mixed-race identity.

[6] Jillian Weber explains that the mention of the Mexican Gulf Hotel is symbolic. It "was located on the corner of Second St. and Davis St., placing it squarely in the middle of the racialized tract of land which Charles Asmar and his black heirs owned. By writing her characters into this setting, Dunbar-Nelson is placing them in a space that is legally bound to freed slaves" (24).

points out, language in King's writing, while rooted in the Southern oral tradition, "goes beyond it by taking on a theatrical dimension that can be quite modern and even experimental at times" as she uses it as "a tool for giving both a stage and voices to forgotten women, women of all walks of life who have been condemned or have chosen to be invisible" (77). The final part of this analysis turns to how this performative Frenchness enables King and Dunbar-Nelson to explore female intimacy and desire—transforming stereotypical depictions into more nuanced, authentic representations of womanhood.

Exploring Female Intimacy: from Stereotypes to Authenticity

King's and Dunbar's authentic exploration of Franco-Creoleness go beyond the sole scope of cultural identity, as it enables them to delve into themes of gender and desire. The relationship between Frenchness and eroticism arises from a long history of stereotyping. Literature has played a key role in shaping New Orleans' identity by emphasizing French cultural influences that helped solidify its romantic and sensual imagery. For instance, New Orleans is often referred to as "she," and Grace King extends the symbolism by personifying the city as a woman: "New Orleans is, among cities, the most feminine woman, always using the old standard of feminine distinction" (*New Orleans. The Place and the People* xvi). In Louisiana, local practices shaped by regional French heritage—distinct from those in the rest of the country—came to be perceived as radically different by outsiders. First, the colonial past and the three-partite racial system of the antebellum period (composed of whites, free people of color, and enslaved populations) played a significant role in shaping exoticized views of colonial French and Spanish Louisiana. Then, the diffusion of an eroticizing discourse around local customs, although largely exaggerated, helped give New Orleans the reputation of a scandalous city.[7] French cultural influences, especially through literature, have shaped the city's identity, linking it to sensuality, romance, and an aura of eroticism tied to the essence of Frenchness.

We will follow Fetterley and Pryse's approach to regional fiction as a means for women to regain a form of freedom and emancipate themselves from the classic vision of the female psyche. They note that the dominant ideology of nineteenth-century America tended to

[7] Both travel accounts and literature have described and mythicized the quadroon balls from the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries and the more or less tacitly accepted establishment of a red-light district, "Storyville," in the French Quarter around the turn of the twentieth century. It is often considered as a "Babylon of the South." See Nathalie Dessens and Alecia P. Long.

emphasize an inherent difference between men and women, thereby creating a space of essentializing characteristics around a "women's sphere" of domesticity and motherhood. Yet, they recognize that regional female writers, conscious of these gendered expectations, offered a different vision of female roles. The "woman's sphere" became both a source of liberation and constraint. According to Fetterley and Pryse, "regionalism may reflect the possibilities as well as the limitations of the sex-segregated culture of the nineteenth century" (xiii-xiv). These three short stories function as a way for King and Dunbar-Nelson to break with expected conventions that saw women' status limited by their social roles of mothers and wives. The heroines in these stories distinguish themselves from the stereotypical literary heritage of realist novels, which allowed women protagonists only two possible endings: marriage or death (Warhol 515).

The reference to the opera in "The Fisherman of Pass Christian" invites readers to read Annette's story as a dramatic and tragic story of a woman whose dreams are shattered. She is deceived by the man she has fallen in love with, and by the end, she is neither married nor travelling to Paris to become an opera singer. However, the introduction of the story suggests an alternative interpretation. The first two paragraphs vividly present a sexualized depiction of Pass Christian's natural setting, immediately associating the place with themes of sensuality and lust:

> The breeze from the Gulf is warm and soft and languorous, blowing up from the south with its suggestion of tropical warmth and passion. It is strong and masterful, and tossed Annette's hair and whipped her skirts about her in bold disregard for the proprieties. […] The wet sands on the beach glowed white fire; the posts of the pier where the waves had leapt and left a laughing kiss, the sides of the little boats and fish-cars tugging at their ropes, alike showed white and flaming, as though the sea and all it touched were afire. (37-38)

These references intertwine themes of tropicalism, exoticism, and eroticism as all the elements play a part in representing passion: the "breeze" evokes heat and longing, the beach and the sea are compared to a "fire," and the waves to a kiss. Everything in the environment seems to arouse Annette's senses and desires. Initially, this occurs through the sense of touch, and it soon transforms into sight, as she gazes at the arms of the fishermen as they fold their nets. The description may not qualify as an *effet de réel* in the Barthesian sense—since the "referential illusion" Barthes describes relies on seemingly neutral details that suggest direct reference to reality (88)—instead, the imagery departs from literal mimesis, favoring symbolic or emotional resonance. The two oxymoronic associations of "white" and "fire" do not aim to mirror a literal reality (as fire is conventionally associated with red) but rather express a deeper emotional or symbolic truth. In this sense, it signals another form of authenticity—one that does not depend on objective realism, but a genuine expression of one's experience and feeling. In that regard, it corresponds to Charles Taylor's conception of authenticity as one's true

experience of the self,[8] and to what Matías Martínez has described as a narratological "testimonial authenticity"[9] (526). It does not aim to replicate objective reality but instead conveys the depth and intensity of the character's lived experience.

If the adjective "white" recalls the earlier evocation of racial ambiguity,[10] it also conjures symbolic registers of purity, illumination, and (re)birth. It simultaneously signifies Annette's virginity and her sexual awakening, turning the story into a defining moment in the protagonist's coming-of-age. Annette, a young and naïve girl from New Orleans, lacking a maternal figure, learns through her own experience and emancipation a valuable lesson in Pass Christian about personal desire and social constraints. We know that Annette is in Pass Christian with her family—her aunt Nina and her cousins— while her father has remained in New Orleans. Her cousin Philip, her closest friend and confident, also acts as her protector and chaperone during her stay. The boat they board is named the "little 'Virginie'"—evoking not only the virginal connotation of the name, but also the famous novel *Paul et Virginie* by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1788). This reference is significant for two reasons. First, her relationship with Philip mirrors that of the eponymous couple. They are close friends; they have grown up together; and Philip's attitude towards her suggests they might be promised to each other. He is jealous of the attention she gives the fisherman—he "could not exactly understand why the fisherman should sit so close to Annette and whisper so much into her ears" (52)—and does everything possible to stop their relationship. Second, Annette, like Virginie on the exotic Ile de France, is exploring her freedom and inhabiting a space where she can challenge the social norms and religious constraints imposed upon her. For Annette, this space is Pass Christian, and like Ile de France in *Paul et Virginie*, both locations are physically separated by a body of water from the central representation of social convention—France in the novel and New Orleans in "The Fisherman of Pass Christian," which is situated "across the Lake" (41). Over the course of a summer, Annette attempts to free herself from social constraints; she is described as a bold young woman who ventures into the water and tests the

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[8] Although Charles Taylor primarily analyzes the effects of the culture of authenticity in the modern era, his argument is grounded in an earlier and deeper understanding of authenticity as a form of truthfulness toward the self: "Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfillment or self-realization in which it is usually couched" (29).

[9] "Testimonial authenticity links to the stylistic evocation of experience on account of the objective nature of the reported occurrences which are authenticated not as factually true or verisimilar, but as experientially true ('I can vouch for having felt that way')" (Martínez 526).

[10] Reinforced by the last description of the protagonist at the end of the short story: "Annette leaned back in her chair, very white and still" (63).

limits of respectability: “It was all very well for a city demoiselle to talk with a fisherman and accept favours at his hands, provided that the city demoiselle understood that a vast and bridgeless gulf stretched between her and the fisherman” (54). Here, the aquatic metaphor of the “gulf” underlines the social divide that separates Annette from the fisherman. When she first meets him in Pass Christian, Annette is unaware of the man’s social status, which allows her to be herself and navigate the boundaries of what is expected from a well-mannered, proper young woman. This is further underscored by the ironic repetition of “city demoiselle,” which encapsulates the societal codes associated with urban life, as well as the physical boundaries of the city that prevent her from fully experiencing her true self. The irony is used as a form of criticism to the incapacitation for young women (“mademoiselle”) to express their authentic selves in a Taylorian sense. Annette’s self-discovery comes with an act of emancipation from social expectations, but she is ultimately brought back to New Orleans and to her reality, where she must obey her father, behave in society, and hide her feelings and her deepest desires—ultimately returning to an inauthentic existence governed by decorum and (sexual) repression.

In her article on King and Dunbar-Nelson’s treatment of female sexuality, Sirpa Salenius demonstrates that the feminine sexual exploration in King’s and Dunbar-Nelson’s work is inspired by French literature: “Nineteenth-century French fiction, in particular, was notorious among Americans for its decadence, that is, its depiction of adultery and introduction of explicit sexuality, including emotional ties and erotic intimacy between women” (28). Many works from this period highlight a female sexuality that is both explicit and self-assumed, such as *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* by Théophile Gautier, and *Nana* by Émile Zola. These well-known novels transcended borders and were read in the United States. Dunbar-Nelson and King were familiar with French literature, and this had a strong influence on their own work. However, Dunbar-Nelson and King could not be as bold and direct as their French counterparts—not only because Victorian social conventions in the American context disapproved of such openness, but also because they were women.

> In order to avoid such marginalization and social stigmatization, Grace King and Alice Dunbar-Nelson expressed female sexuality in subtle ways that obscured the intended meaning underneath the translucent veils of female respectability. In their fictional works, the authors employed gender-based acceptable writing strategies and genres, such as sentimentalism and regionalism, to channel their challenges of heteronormativity. (Salenius 23)

Indeed, sexuality is not expressed as explicitly as in *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, but rather through imagery and subtle references. In “Mimi’s Marriage,” Grace King introduces the subject by describing the bedroom, which symbolically represents the heart of the matter: the matrimonial bed.

> This is how she told about it, sitting in her little room,—her bridal chamber,—not larger, really not larger than sufficed for the bed there, the armoire here, the bureau opposite, and the washstand behind the door, the corners all touching. […] And she was dressed very prettily, too, in her long white *négligée*, with plenty of lace and ruffles and blue ribbons,—such as only the Creole girls can make, and brides, alas! wear,—the pretty honeymoon costume that suggests, that suggests—well! to proceed. (39)

On the day after her marriage, it is within the intimacy of the "nuptial" bedroom that the two young women, Mimi and her confidante, discuss their desires and expectations for the institution of marriage. As Salenius notes: "King's introduction of female lust into the story reflects the reality of Victorian women, who were passionate with their husbands, not publicly but in the intimacy of their private lives within domestic walls" (31). Indeed, young Mimi explains to her friend, Louise, her choice of husband. This choice goes against her father's wishes—and metaphorically against what patriarchal society demanded of her—namely, a man embodying all that was expected of the male figure. This is conveyed by the use of "law" when she explains: "It seemed like a law I should marry a *brun*, a tall, handsome mustache and a fine barytone voice" (40)—a man expected to act as a protector and a provider (a wealthy man who could afford a grand house, servants, elegant adornments, and trips to Europe). However, her father's death gives Mimi the freedom to choose whomever she truly desires, as she admits to having dreams ("Of course I had my dreams, like everybody" [40]). Therefore, she chooses someone her father would have considered a "nobody," someone from a different social class whom she loves intensely (41–42). Moreover, her search for a husband has always been guided by passion, as showed by her little ritual she carried out each time she met a man: "I would try with a flower to see if he loved me,— Il m'aime, un peu, beaucoup, passionnément, pas du tout […] Passionnément was what I wanted, and I always got it in the end" (41). This reference to the childhood game of "he loves me, he loves me not" echoes Mimi's somewhat naïve and innocent character, reinforced by her diminutive nickname (Mimi), by the delicacy of her appearance and by her playful, romantic nature ("mignonne" [40]). Salenius suggests that she is associated with a kind of purity symbolized by the white color of her *négligée* (31). It seems that the author intentionally minimizes the potential scandal of depicting this young girl's desires by associating her with virtuous values. Nevertheless, King emphasizes the francophone element in this story, linking the expression of sexuality closely to the characters' French origins. The eroticism suggested by the room, arranged and ready to receive the couple (ready to "proceed" [39]), is further emphasized by Mimi's attire. The French term *négligée*, italicized in the text, conveys multiple meanings, characterizing an intimate garment that suggests near-nudity, while also implying a sense of neglect and disorder. Considering the parallel between the garment and the wearer, *négligée* symbolizes something "careless" or "unrestrained," reflecting Mimi's willingness to follow her own desires rather than conform to

social norms. This is further explored at the end of the story, as it becomes clear in the conversation between Mimi and Louise that takes place after the wedding night. Mimi has found bliss in her married life: "am I the only one who had dreams? It is the end of dreams, marriage; and that is the good thing about it. God lets us dream to keep us quiet, but he knows when to wake us up, I tell you" (53). Ironically, while marriage signifies the end of a dream, for Mimi, it is a positive turning point: it marks the realization of her long-held desire to explore intimacy, representing her journey into a new phase of personal and physical discovery—her sexual awakening.

Finally, King may push the boundaries even further in "A Delicate Affair," where the relationship between Josephine (the main character) and Myosotis (her childhood friend) could be interpreted as more than just friendship. The title, "A Delicate Affair," itself suggests ambiguity, carrying the subliminal implication of "affair" as adultery. The whole dialogue is subtly oriented by Mr. Horace, who tries to persuade Joséphine to reunite with her lady friend. He reminds her of her marriage, emphasizing how "natural" and "inevitable" it seemed at the time that she should marry (205). He also makes a reference to the wedding night ("it was the last night or time that madame had a best friend of her own sex") for reasons that remain vague and presented as the consequence of "social gossip" and her husband's jealousy and distrust (211). The expression "a best friend of her own sex" is used twice a couple sentences apart, which shows the insistence on the wording "of her own sex." Coupled with the mention of her husband's jealousy, this suggests a relationship that is deeper than a simple friendship. Moreover, the friend's name of "Myosotis," a flower more commonly known as "forget-me-not," indicates the essential and enduring connection between the two women, as Joséphine remembers her. When she hears from Mr. Horace of her illness, Joséphine rushes to her friend's bedside, where they reunite in a final scene. The narrator notes that they both use their "pet names" to refer to one another: "Mon Amour"; "Ma Divine" (218). The three expressions (Myosotis, Mon Amour, and Ma Divine) are in French, a choice that, as we have seen, subtly alludes to and taps into deeper, often unconscious, associations with promiscuity and hidden desires. The use of "Ma Divine" in particular recalls the nickname of the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt, who had toured in Louisiana a few years before this story was written. Bernhardt was not only known for her illustrious career on stage (another reference to the theater), but also for her personal life, which was marked by a series of romantic idylls with some of her female friends, most notably Louise Abbéma. In addition, the conversation of the two reunited women notably omits any mention of men, as the narrator remarks: "If Mr. Horace had not slipped away, he might have noticed the curious absence of monsieur's name, and of his own name, in the murmuring that followed" (219). Whether King attempts to explore the unspoken truths of her character's sexuality or to reconcile long-lost friends constrained by social norms

of marriage, she navigates through the complexities of local societal views on marriage dynamics and women's autonomy. Whether behind closed doors (in the intimacy of the home and bedroom as seen in "Mimi's Marriage" and "A Delicate Affair") or in the outside world, as with Annette in "The Fisherman of Pass Christian," women (young and old, single, newlywed, or widowed) embrace the possibilities that come from following their desires—embodying the idea that true authenticity is found in being true to oneself. The concept of Frenchness here enables the authors to delve into themes that might have been considered unacceptable in American society, providing a more flexible and permissive cultural framework, and possibly allowing them to evade censorship. Just as the term Creole offers a certain fluidity of interpretation, so can the characters' racial and sexual identities.

Conclusion

If we consider Frenchness and therefore Creoleness as tools for writers targeting a broad national audience, we limit our comprehension of their literature to a commercial perspective, reducing exoticism and local customs as mere marketing devices. The texts themselves question the possibility of achieving authentic representation. Could it be that all literature is merely a performance by the writer? In this sense, realist or regionalist literatures, which strive to depict reality, might instead be read as a fabrication, or as a carefully constructed portrayal of local or universal scenarios envisioned by the authors. In fact, the metatextual and metatheatrical dimensions of these stories actively invite the reader to question what is real and what is performed. Rather than offering straightforward historical accounts, Dunbar-Nelson and King explore the dynamic tension between performance and sincerity, between surface identity and inner truth, encouraging a deeper engagement with their characters' intentions and lived realities. Like a literal and metaphorical reminder not to judge a book by its cover—as seen in "The Fisherman of Pass Christian," where the character is neither a fisherman nor from Pass Christian—the narrative redirects attention toward what is authentic within the story. Emotions, embodied experience, and environmental cues become the most reliable conduits of truth. Moreover, these stories are deeply rooted in local knowledge and cultural codes, often accessible only to those familiar with Louisiana's Creole world. King and Dunbar-Nelson use Frenchness as both a pretext and a shield against moral judgment, leveraging its erotic connotations in the reader's mind to explore themes of female desire and emancipation. They draw on American preconceptions of Frenchness—associated with exoticism and eroticism—to situate these themes within a social context that exists on the margins of the dominant American national narrative. As Adams and Sakakeeny argue, New Orleans has historically been framed as a city existing "outside" the mainstream national story:

"New Orleans is considered exceptional to the broader US but also to the American South and Louisiana, and to the Atlantic and the Caribbean, depending on which time and place one is writing about" (5). We suggest that these Louisiana Creole writers genuinely engage with Frenchness as they have themselves experienced it, striving to authentically represent Louisiana's distinctive and unique cultural identity. At the same time, they employ Franco-Creoleness as a tool to address issues specific to the region and its communities, while resonating with universal themes of female experience and struggle at the dawn of the twentieth century.

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