

April 01, 2008

## "You...could never be mistaken": reading Alice Dunbar-Nelson's rhetorical diversions in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* and Other Stories

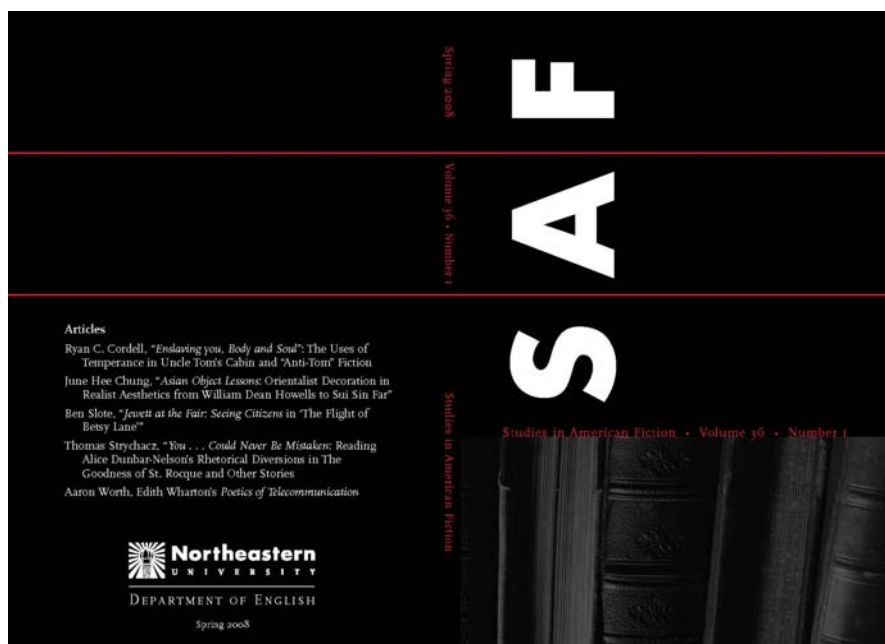
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### Recommended Citation

Strychacz, Thomas. "'You...could never be mistaken': reading Alice Dunbar-Nelson's rhetorical diversions in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* and Other Stories." *Studies in American Fiction* 36.1 (2008): 77-94. <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10018347>

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*Studies in American Fiction* is a journal of articles and reviews on the prose fiction of the United States. Founded by James Nagel and later edited by Mary Loeffelholz, *SAF* was published by the Department of English, Northeastern University, from 1973 through 2008. *Studies in American Fiction* is indexed in the *MLA Bibliography* and the *American Humanities Index*.

## Studies in American Fiction

Volume 36

Spring 2008

Number 1

Thomas Strychacz, "*You . . . Could Never Be Mistaken*": Reading *Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Rhetorical Diversions in The Goodness of St. Roque and Other Stories*

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ISSN 0091-8083

**“YOU . . . COULD NEVER BE MISTAKEN”:  
READING ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON’S  
RHETORICAL DIVERSIONS IN *THE GOODNESS OF  
ST. ROCQUE AND OTHER STORIES***

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The title story of Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories* (1899) tells of young Manuela’s romantic quest to win the heart of Theophilé, who has, as the story begins, temporarily transferred his affections to Claralie. Manuela recites *nouvenas* for his love and the story ends happily. Manuela weds Theophilé; Claralie says that she “always preferred Leon”; and the narrator, attempting to answer the question of “how it happened,” concludes with this sweet admonition: “St. Rocque knows, for he is a good saint, and if you believe in him and are true and good, and make your *nouvenas* with a clean heart, he will grant your wish.”<sup>1</sup> It is the kind of moment that Gloria T. Hull, the scholar who resurrected interest in Dunbar-Nelson, finds hardest to swallow: in her view Dunbar-Nelson “buttresses the traditional and romantic view of women,” and readers today find that “her plots often seem predictable, her situations hackneyed or melodramatic, her narrative style unsophisticated.”<sup>2</sup> To this day, Hull’s evaluation exercises a powerful hold on approaches to Dunbar-Nelson’s work—even those that are otherwise commendatory.<sup>3</sup>

It should give us pause, however, that “The Goodness of Saint Rocque” contradicts almost every assertion of its sweet concluding paragraph. The tone of religious piety is complicated by the fact that the “Wizened One” to whom Manuela goes for help appeals to the supernatural, giving her “one lil’ charm” (9) to wear round her waist *before* making her *nouvena*. Since Claralie has already “mek’ *nouvena* in St. Rocque [the church] fo’ hees [Theophilé’s] love,” it would appear that either St. Rocque fails to grant Claralie’s wish or that the tie-breaker between the pair is the charm and not the *nouvena*. The narrator has already forestalled the possibility that Manuela deserves to win because she, not Claralie, is “true and good, and [makes] her *nouvenas* with a clean heart.” Her primary motivations are jealousy, possessiveness, competitiveness, and pride. The “bitterness of spirit” (5) at the party where Theophilé deserts Manuela is occasioned by the fact that “Theophilé was Manuela’s own especial property” and sharpened by the fact that he deserts her, the girl with “dark eyes,” for “Claralie, blonde and petite” (3). The phrase in apposition implies that interwoven issues of race, class, and color play a central (though unac-

knowledgeable) part in Creole culture and in the struggle between the two girls. The tensions between the two finally erupt at the church of St. Rocque—whose patron saint looks for *nouvenas* made with a clean heart!—where the two exchange “murderous glances” (13). From this perspective, the insouciant final paragraph seems designed to provoke reflection on the ironic discrepancies in the story between various tonal registers.

This essay argues in part that in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* Dunbar-Nelson constantly modulates between tonal registers, creating in the process what I call narrative strategies of “rhetorical diversion.” That phrase is intended to suggest what is entertaining (“diverting”) about her stories—an important consideration when a reputation for hackneyed romanticism has prevented a fuller appreciation of her work. More importantly, I use the phrase to denote the way Dunbar-Nelson typically juxtaposes or shifts rhetorical modes in such a way as to make acts of diversion and negotiation a constant feature of our interpretive experience.<sup>4</sup> This happens within stories, as when “St. Rocque” combines romantic material with hard-edged cultural analysis. It also occurs as readers move from, or look back from, one story to another, as we shall see when “St. Rocque” modulates to “Tony’s Wife”—a tonal shift repeated in varying ways throughout the collection. An important effect is to engage readers in an ever-shifting series of decisions about tone and about the significance of tone. We must adjudicate, for example, between the blithe sweetness of “if you believe in him . . . he will grant your wish” and the murderous glances Claralie and Manuela exchange in church. To a hitherto unnoted extent, the meaning of these stories depends on how we engage in that process of adjudication. Does one rhetorical stance modulate to another that supersedes it? Can they somehow be read together? Do they invite readers to revel in diverse, even contradictory, narrative voices, and if so, why?

The import of these questions grows once we recognize their pertinence to the stories’ representations of race. In “St. Rocque,” Creole culture imposes no barriers on Manuela marrying Theophilé; this is no tragedy of the color line. But Claralie’s bloneness is at least partly responsible for the jealousy Manuela feels. The conjunction of color, class, and jealousy shapes the characters’ motivations and the plot they set in motion. How we read the sugary denouement therefore makes a profound difference to our assessment of the racial issues enacted in the story. Does the ending signify, for instance, a stubborn avoidance of racial tensions? Or an ironic deflection from the analyses the story covertly undertakes? I raise these particular questions because they rough out the trajectory of Dunbar-Nelson criticism over the past two decades. The first suggests Hull’s

early perspective on Dunbar-Nelson's work, which is, Hull claims, unfortunately "separated from her black experience" (52). The second embraces the approach of recent scholarship, which has typically read questions of race back into Dunbar-Nelson's work by way of a "hidden or coded local knowledge" about race and ethnicity in Creole culture.<sup>5</sup> Sister Josepha's small brown hands, to cite one example, indicate to the "perceptive—and mainly local—reader that the protagonist of her story is a Creole of color."<sup>6</sup> To that perceptive reader, Manuela's "dark eyes" might do likewise.

These critical accounts acknowledge a sort of diversionary tactic at work in Dunbar-Nelson's fiction: the author, grappling with problems of representing the ambiguous, contested category of "Creole," encodes racial issues so subtly that imperceptive or non-local readers might easily be misled. One goal of contemporary scholars is therefore to employ insider knowledge—the specific, local, historical significations Dunbar-Nelson might have attributed to the concept of "Creole"—in order to allow contemporary readers to apprehend the hidden subtexts of the stories. In most respects this approach is salutary. But one very problematic effect, I will argue here, is to close down Dunbar-Nelson's rhetorical diversions by orienting readers too swiftly toward one way of decoding and making sense of racial signifiers. Writing within a regime where legal and social codes violently enforced discriminatory "readings" of race, Dunbar-Nelson in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* keeps alive a fiercely guarded openness of definition—partly through her representation of ambiguous Creole identities, but still more importantly through the way her stories invite readers to perform a continuing and always insecure negotiation with signifiers of race. In so doing, they encourage reflection about our own cultural narratives of racial being and difference and the way we inscribe them into our experience of narrative forms.

The first sentence of "The Goodness of Saint Rocque," and thus of the entire collection, reads: "Manuela was tall and slender and graceful, and once you knew her the lithe form could never be mistaken" (3). Conveying us from declarative fact to Manuela's unmistakable form, the sentence strikes a note of certainty and intimacy for "you," the reader, which the second playful paragraph then re-establishes as Dunbar-Nelson involves us in "as merry a crowd of giddy, chattering Creole girls and boys as ever you could see" dancing to the "tune of the best band you ever heard" (3–4). Yet that tone does need to be re-established after the puzzling maneuvers of the rest of paragraph one, which seem intended wholly to mislead the reader: first, the narrator tells us that Manuela casts

glances from under her “heavy veil” as “if she feared she was being followed,” and then reveals that “Manuela’s dark eyes were swollen and discoloured about the lids.” These ominous overtones—that Manuela fears being followed (she is involved in crime?) and that her eyes are swollen (she has been beaten?)—do not survive the start of paragraph two. But these possibilities signify momentarily for first-time readers and for any reader who reflects back on a developing structure of experience. Indeed, the light-hearted tone we come to recognize as predominant in the story arrives in paragraph two as a surprise; and as it develops we realize that we have been mistaken all along about the cause and gravity of Manuela’s problems.

The transformation of tone at the beginning of paragraph two can be understood in several different interpretive contexts. In a formalist interpretation (as Stanley Fish explains so well in his work on reader response theory), the reader’s “mistakes” simply vanish, and “The Goodness of Saint Rocque” becomes a sweet tale of love lost and regained.<sup>7</sup> Manuela is not really in trouble; and therefore we are not really troubled. Claims for the melodrama and romanticism of Dunbar-Nelson’s work are imbued with this logic. Emphasizing instead the experience of being mistaken—suspecting that Manuela has been beaten, only to find she has been crying all night from jealousy—makes a vast difference to the way we read the entire story. A suspicion of serious misconduct can inform the kind of reading made at the start of this essay, which hints that the merry, giddy surface of Creole society masks profound problems: treating others as one’s “especial property” and exchanging “murderous glances” in church, not to mention the looming but never quite acknowledged issue of Claralie’s bloneness. From that perspective, the error lies in dismissing too quickly the ominous portents of the first paragraph and accepting too easily the merry tone of the second.

The narrator does provide overt clues that readers need to be wary of the surface of things. After being rejected by Theophilé, for instance, Manuela “let her silvery laughter ring out in the dance, as though she were the happiest of mortals,” and goes home with Henri, “looking up into his eyes as though she adored him” (6). And in church, amid the “murderous glances,” Manuela and Claralie “smiled on others . . . laughed and seemed none the less happy” (13). Dunbar-Nelson’s strategy here is very subtle. The narrator warns that the smiling and laughing surface of Creole society cannot be accepted at face value, and in so doing provides readers with a hint that the *story’s* smiling surface might dissemble. At the same time, the narrator masks that hint by explaining so forthrightly what motivates the girls in church: “For your Creole girls are proud, and would die rather than let the world see their sorrows” (13). By explaining

the psychology of Creole girls, the narrator actually strengthens the bond of intimacy established early in comments such as “you . . . could never be mistaken,” persuading readers that if Creole society cannot be fully trusted then the narrator, as inside guide, certainly can be. But on what basis are we to trust a narrator whose hints of foreboding collide so strongly with romanticized accounts of a “jolly singing ride . . . on the little dummy-train” (5)?<sup>8</sup>

This sense of having to adjudicate between different tonal registers continues more unsettlingly as the story progresses. Consider the description of Manuela’s new-found happiness after her visit to the Wizenod One, when “the baby graves [at the church], even, seemed cheerful” (11). Is this a hackneyed signifier of romantic transformation? Or is it self-consciously hackneyed, an index to the serious reservations we should be having about Manuela’s callous transformation into—of all things—a lover? Questions such as these are also pertinent to the two key statements that underpin the romantic structure of the story: “Breathlessly did Manuela learn that her lover was true” (8), and “Manuela loved Theophilé, you see” (6). If these two lovers are true, and if love does motivate their actions, then the story’s subtextual concern with race- and class-edged jealousy must be resolved by the happy ending that transcends all: love, crossing social barriers, wins out.

But that interpretation is far from self-evident. Manuela learns “that her lover was true” from the Wizenod One, who obviously has a vested interest in having Manuela buy her charm; and when Theophilé returns, the narrator states that his “stay was short and he was plainly bored” (11). The statement that “Manuela loved Theophilé, you see” is much more complex. On the one hand, it possesses a declarative certainty and intimate tone that speaks for its veracity. On the other, “you see” greatly complicates our reception of its tone. The interjection “you see” imputes to the sentence a dramatic context, as if the narrator is suddenly there in person, speaking to the reader familiarly and directly. In such contexts “you see” carries an overtone of persuasion: “you see” refers to what we do not yet see but will inevitably accept once we recognize the trustworthiness of the speaker. “You see,” in short, urges the reader to accept information on the basis not of fact but of the narrator’s friendly insistence. But the trustworthiness of the narrator is precisely what this story puts into question, as the multiplying perplexities of the first paragraphs suggest: the narrator introduces Manuela as a form that “could never be mistaken,” portrays her misleadingly as a potential victim of abuse, allows the reader to participate at a merry picnic where “you” can come home “hand in hand with your dearest one, tired but happy” (5), before springing the surprise that not all such picnics turn out so happily, par-

ticularly when “blonde and petite” Claralie interferes with Manuela’s “own especial property.” From this perspective, the end of the story, with its Saint who “knows” but never tells, with its quadruple conditional questions (“[i]f you had asked” the characters what had happened), and with its devious responses (Manuela “would have said nothing”), seems very much in line with the posture of the opening paragraph: a claim for sweet certainty premised on ignoring the effect of unsettling tonal shifts.

“Tony’s Wife,” the second story of the collection, proves to be a brutal replaying of “The Goodness of Saint Rocque.” The mystery of Manuela’s swollen eyes resolves as a lovers’ quarrel. Not so in the case of Tony’s wife: “When she displeased him, he beat her, and knocked her frail form on the floor. The children could tell when this had happened. Her eyes would be red, and there would be blue marks on her face and neck” (25). Tony’s wife, moreover, is not really his wife; and she wants, like Manuela, to marry, possibly to be a “good woman once, a real-for-true married woman,” or possibly, as Tony reads the situation, because “You want my money” (31). The story is a brilliantly uncompromising study of sanctioned violence—physical, economic, social—directed against women. Tony exploits and abuses his “wife” until he dies; and when he dies his “wife” has no legal, religious, or social standing whatsoever. The money goes to Tony’s brother; the compassionate but ineffectual Father Leblanc “[shrinks] away like a fading spectre” (32); and “As for Tony’s wife, since she was not his wife after all, they sent her forth in the world penniless” (33).

The question of how we might experience the tonal relationships between “Tony’s Wife” and “The Goodness of Saint Rocque” is a complex one. There could hardly be a larger variation of tone between the sugary last paragraph of “Saint Rocque” and the bleak realism that opens “Tony’s Wife,” where a “dingy nickel” purchases “fi’ cents worth o’ candy” from the browbeaten “wife” (19). We might therefore read the two stories purely in terms of tonal contrasts: love versus lovelessness; goodness and sweetness versus violence; romanticism versus realism; a comic plot of harmony restored versus a plot of non-marriage increasingly imbued with bitter irony. Yet, as I have argued, it is also possible to read “Saint Rocque” as a story that displaces, without ever fully losing, its own romantic codes. In that case, the bleakness of “Tony’s Wife” stands as guarantee to the possibility of reading the earlier story ironically. The “error” of interpreting Manuela’s “swollen and discoloured eyes” as a sign of abuse, however momentary our experience of it, proves ultimately meaningful within a pattern of hidden ironies. It signifies, for instance, in the context of a culture of acquisition, leading from Manuela’s and Tony’s tendency to think about their partners in terms of property, to the property that he refuses to leave his “wife,” and back to the marriage between



Manuela and Theophilé, which in retrospect may not promise so charming a future after all. Interestingly, however, the sweetness of the first story also lingers into the second. The “little Jew girl sped away in blissful contentment” (19) upon receiving her candy and lagniappe, mimicking Manuela with her charm leaving the Wizené One. Tony is charmed into generosity by one very small child: “his black brows relaxed into a smile, and he poked the little one’s chin . . . and gave a banana for lagniappe” (20). And even the bitter ending of the story loses something of its sting, for the narrative tone scarcely seems sympathetic to “Mrs. Tony,” who is “meek, pale, little, ugly, and German” (23), who smiles an “inscrutable smile” (29) as Tony lies dying, who does indeed want his money, and who disappears from the story with a kind of bathetic inconsequence, regretting “the time lost from knitting” (33). If the story’s social realism affords a way of re-framing “Saint Rocque,” so does the sweetness of “Saint Rocque” seep into the social realism of “Tony’s Wife.”

The challenge the first two stories of *The Goodness of St. Rocque* pose to narrative conventions is repeated with various twists throughout the collection, which obsessively groups stories in similar patterns. Love lost in “The Fisherman of Pass Christian,” “By the Bayou St. John,” and “When the Bayou Overflows” is countered by love regained in “M’sieu Fortier’s Violin”; love lost or denied in “Little Miss Sophie,” “Sister Josepha,” and “Odalie” segues into love triumphant in “La Juanita” and “Titee.” Poignant deaths in “Mr. Baptiste” and “Little Miss Sophie” stack up against repressed lives in “Sister Josepha” and “Odalie” and poignant tales of survival in “Titee” and “The Praline Woman.” But everywhere the expected resonances of conventional plot lines fail to develop—or they develop oddly. “Little Miss Sophie,” for instance—the story of a devoted woman working her fingers to the bone to buy back a love-token for the lover who, having scorned her, now needs the ring to inherit a fortune—has come in for some ridicule as a tale of “melodramatic tragedy,” a tale of “quiet heroism” that seems a “bit mawkish” by the standards of the late twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> But no one has yet seen how the story’s seductive conventionality masks the potential shock of its ending. The narrator specifies “something written” (152) on a sheet of paper by Sophie’s dead hand: but that something may be *insufficient to have the ring delivered to its owner!* Since Sophie has deliberately hidden the identity of her ex-lover, the salutation “Louis” will never suffice. The melodramatic tenor of the story in fact rests wholly in the hands of a reader willing to imagine that Sophie must have left the address somewhere—for the alternative is a story that has Sophie dying before she can address her letter, which makes a mockery of her months of work and upends in almost scandalous fashion the mawkish romance the story seems to be creating.<sup>10</sup>

"The Fisherman of Pass Christian," too, seems a good candidate for Hull's accusation about Dunbar-Nelson's hackneyed romances. Naïve Annette, having walked on the beach under the "very romantic" (56) harvest moon with Monsieur LeConte (then masquerading as a fisherman, but really a well known opera singer), has her young love crushed when she discovers he has secretly married "Madame Dubeau, the flute-voiced leading soprano" (61). But to think of the story, Little Miss Sophie-like, in terms of young love betrayed by the deceptive Monsieur LeConte is to miss the even more deceptive ending: are LeConte and Dubeau in fact married? Although the ending of the story seems conclusive enough on that point, the narrator prefaces the news that LeConte and Dubeau are married with the statement that "New Orleans had built up its romance, and gossiped accordingly" (63). In the absence of any authorial verification of the marriage, we are certainly entitled to interpret LeConte's final role (as married man) amid the many he plays in this story as a fabrication on the part of a society determined to have its opera-romance. In retrospect, it is clear that the obvious-seeming interpretation of the story—older man cruelly seduces naïve maiden—rests on a remarkably subtle sleight-of-hand whereby *Annette's* feelings of betrayal stand in place of authorial omniscience.

This sense that a character's masquerades may be variously defined is still more strikingly the case in the brilliant "A Carnival Jangle." This odd story reads like a more gruesome version of "Fisherman," with the Faustian LeConte transforming into a "tall Prince of Darkness" (129) who persuades young Flo to masquerade as a boy troubador at Mardi Gras, in which disguise she is mistaken for "Leon" and murdered. Like "Fisherman," "A Carnival Jangle" refuses key pieces of information: what set of previous circumstances, for instance, inspires the murder? As the narrator states at the end: "masks tell no tales anyway. There is murder, but by whom? for what? *Quien sabe* [who knows]?" (134). But this does not even begin to describe our complex experience of these mysteries. The opening paragraphs disclose a scene of wild revels: "The streets are a crush of jesters and maskers, Jim Crows and clowns, ballet girls and Mephistos, Indians and monkeys" (128). It is during the meeting of such a crowd with an "unmasked crowd" (129), a "bevy of bright-eyed girls and boys of that uncertain age that hovers between childhood and maturity" (128), that the fateful meeting of the naïve Flo and the Prince of Darkness takes place. We are surely invited to assume that the Prince of Darkness is a masked reveler; and it is only in retrospect that Flo's demise and the story's pattern of devilish hints ("it's a daredevil scheme" [131], "I don't know the devil" [133]) point toward the story's striking Gothic undertone: that the Prince may not be in disguise at all. The sud-

den recognition that the Prince of Darkness may *be* the Prince of Darkness offers wholly different ways of reading this story. We might now want to read his retinue—that “team of jockeys and ballet girls” (129)—as wearing masks to cover their devilish forms. But on what grounds could we ever tell whether the ballet girls are girls in disguise, devils in disguise, or, for that matter, undisguised ballet girls?

This fantastic terrain of shifting identities unsettles our perceptions of Flo. Her narrative career as unmasked girl (129), boy troubadour (131), Leon (133), and “a horrible something” (134), ends in the final sentence as her identity comes back in horror: “the flash of rockets . . . illumined the dead, white face of the girl troubadour.” But this account does scarce justice to our experience of the indeterminacies of her character. She is “of that uncertain age that hovers between childhood and maturity.” But she is also of uncertain gender. At least, the narrator seems to think so: “And that was why you might have seen a Mephisto and a slender troubadour of lovely form, with mandolin flung across his shoulder, followed by a bevy of jockeys and ballet girls” (131). Flo has become, so the pronoun “his” tells us, a boy. We see that the narrative voice might be representing the view of an onlooker (“you might have seen”), who could easily mistake female for male. But this onlooker happens to be indistinguishable from “you” the reader, who knows that Flo is female despite the disguise. The question of what role readers play at a moment like this is a complex one. The narrator seems to want readers to switch places with an unknowing observer in the street, which is impossible, since we know more than that hypothetical observer. But the oddity of what we are being invited to do alerts us to the fact that under some circumstances Flo *can* be read as a boy.

This narrative crux—the mistaken pronoun “his”—poses a riddle that demands to be experienced rather than merely solved. We must hesitate, adjudicate between competing possibilities, adopt what seems an appropriate role—“Oh, I see, I am supposed to be an onlooker in the street”—before ever recouping the knowledge that Flo is still really a girl. Our experience of hesitation necessarily implies that all the competing possibilities of Flo’s sex signify. We *can* resolve the issue; but the process of resolving it shows, paradoxically, that Flo may be gendered in multiple ways. This does not mean that we must credit the “chief’s” error that Flo is “Leon.” It does mean that we have already experienced the possibility that a character’s “real” sex may be indistinguishable from her/his performances of gender before the “chief” interprets “female” as “male” and before he, in turn, doubles the confusion by pointing out that “male” can be read as “female”: “It’s Leon, see? I know those white hands like a woman’s and that restless head” (133). It is only fitting that, dead, Flo

momentarily possesses a gender-less identity as a “horrible something” before the last description of her as a girl. And it is only fitting that the last description of her emphasizes the fact that she is a girl *troubadour*—as if death has locked her into the one identity that seemed most dispensable, the one most obviously a mask.

I have argued that Dunbar-Nelson’s most common tactic in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* is a subtle interweaving of confident assertion and rhetorical diversion. The stories keep proposing unambiguous positions for readers to accept—“you . . . could never be mistaken” about Manuela, “Saint Rocque” is a sweet love story, Sophie dies heroically, the carnival revelers are just wearing masks—while everywhere complicating the premises we have to assume in order to hold those positions for long. Dunbar-Nelson’s rhetorical strategies therefore depend in part on the gullibility of readers. They depend on our predisposition toward jumping the interpretive gun: we read signs and draw immediate conclusions; we bridge gaps and move much too early toward what Wolfgang Iser, speaking of the way readers begin to weave fleeting patterns into a holistic interpretation, calls a “gestalt.”<sup>11</sup> To come to the conclusion that “Saint Rocque” is a love story keyed by the sweetness of its last sentence, or that “Carnival” is about masked revelry gone awry, means passing over in silence the little tonal oddities, peculiar perspectives, missteps, hesitations, evasions, and murderous glances that crowd both stories—and also means ignoring the process by which we manage to do so.

But Dunbar-Nelson’s diverting strategies can involve readers in an illuminating process of intricate negotiation. Playing one tonal register against another, her stories foster abrupt changes of perception and therefore create shifts in our emotional and intellectual experience. That experience is not simply a matter of a more complex assessment of tone; our assessment must vary according to what kind of context we adduce. Depending on how we read a comment such as “Manuela loved Theophilé” or how we negotiate the relationship between the stories “Saint Rocque” and “Tony’s Wife,” the story of Manuela in “Saint Rocque” becomes a sweet, or bitter-sweet, love story, or an ironic story about how “love” masks possessiveness and racial tension. Similarly, “A Carnival Jangle” becomes a Gothic tale of devilish incarnation, a sentimental rendition of straying daughter and grieving mother, or a surprisingly mordant story of the dangers and delights of gender-switching. And our negotiation of tone in “Carnival” depends in part on the kind of decisions we have already made about stories such as “Saint Rocque.” The cumulative effect of these strategies for readers is, or can be, an increasing skepticism about our ability to settle on a perspective that will manage the multiple perspectives these stories generate.

Dunbar-Nelson's rhetorical diversions are perhaps most provocative in her complex representations of race. A hint of this, we have seen, occurs in "Saint Rocque," where the jealousy directed at Claralie, "blonde and petite," implies a significant undercurrent of racial difference. That undercurrent receives much more substantive attention in the next story, "Tony's Wife." That story begins as if determined to put to rest any remaining trace of racial or ethnic ambiguity from "Saint Rocque": "It was the little Jew girl who spoke" (19). Tony's ethnicity seems just as clear cut: "He was a great, black-bearded, hoarse-voiced, six-foot specimen of Italian humanity. . . . You instinctively thought of wild mountain-passes, and the gleaming dirks of bandit contadini in looking at him" (22). Nationality, too, comes into play: Tony's wife was "meek, pale, little, ugly, and German" (23); Betty, Tony's brother's wife, is a "daughter of Erin, aggressive, powerful, and cross-eyed" (29). Categories like these deliver a sense of immutable identities in a way that many readers today might find predictable and hackneyed if not distasteful. But "Tony's Wife" actively problematizes such assumptions. The title alone provides a clue: Tony's Wife is not his wife. The story hinges in part on a category that turns out to be improperly filled. Yet it is just as telling that other characters, until the very end of the story, are mistaken about it: they believe it to be properly filled. There is nothing self-evident about the category of "wife." It possesses no ontologically secure status because there is no essence that marks, now and forever, Tony's Wife as his wife. The category, like the sign "wife" that stands for it, is conventional, resting ultimately on constructed legal (and linguistic) codes. Once embedded in the discourses and practices of a society, however, categories like these seem natural, or at least self-evident. That is how Tony's wife appropriates the category in the first place; and that is why we readers blithely follow the story's characters into the wholly erroneous supposition that Tony's wife must be his wife.

We do not similarly seek to question whether the "little Jew girl" is really Jewish or Tony is really Italian, but designations of ethnic and national identity in the story turn out to be nonetheless perplexing. The descriptions of Tony's Wife, Betty, and the black-bearded Tony, that "specimen of Italian humanity," imply that national characteristics are equivalent to physical ones. But are we really to conflate "cross-eyed" with being Irish, or meek and ugly with being German? Moreover, the force of "specimen"—that Tony embodies typical national/ethnic/physical characteristics—does not last beyond the appearance of his brother, John, who is "fair and blond, with the beauty of Northern Italy" (29). This description is also determinedly categorical; but it completely contradicts Tony's. The narrative seems to give an "out" here, inviting us to suppose

that the qualification of “Northern” Italy simply broadens the palette of national types. And the series of adjectives qualifying “specimen” masks the indefinite article—Tony is a specimen, not the only one. But that analysis sits awkwardly with the narrative tone, which everywhere seems to urge us to jump the interpretive gun by defining ethnic and national types in unambiguous ways. Indeed, it is only on the assumption that Tony definitively represents Italian humanity that anyone could *instinctively* think of “wild mountain-passes, and the gleaming dirks of bandit contadini” when looking at him. But since there is more than one specimen of Italian humanity, and since we do not associate gleaming dirks with the fair John—though wild mountain passes occur mostly in Northern Italy, the home of John and not Tony—Tony’s representative quality must indicate a set of cultural fictions, and not an instinctive response at all. In our eagerness to accept the narrative’s superficial certainties about ethnic and national facts, we find once again that we have been mistaken.<sup>12</sup>

The implications of “Tony’s Wife” resonate in what may be the most remarkable story of the collection: the short, terse “The Praline Woman.” Dunbar-Nelson composes the story out of the praline woman’s tiny monologues as she sits on Royal Street selling pralines and responding to passersby. And since the passersby never appear except through the praline woman’s comments, her remarks to “you” the pedestrian implicate “you” the reader in a succession of changing roles. In one paragraph, for instance, we read: “You tak’ none [a praline]? No husban’ fo’ you den!”; in the next, “Ah, ma petite, you tak’? Cinq sous, bébé, may le bon Dieu keep you good!” (175). Maman, “chile,” bébé, “étrangér,” madame, m’sieu, Holy Father—readers sport, fleetingly, a number of masks and identities as this story unfolds. Since the only authorial intervention occurs in two brief sentences, another startling consequence is that we can only infer the identity of the praline woman from her own fluid chatter. She is compassionate; religious; a seer, or voodoo woman (“No husban’ fo’ you den!”); mother of two dead children; a rescuer of street children (Didele, who now makes her pralines); comically racist (“I don’t like l’ishman, me, non, dey so funny” [179]; “Here come dat lazy Indien squaw. . . . Hey, dere, you, Tonita, how goes you’ beezness?” [177]). She is even Mother Mary, reaching at the end of the story her apotheosis and promised resurrection: “po’ Tante Marie float away. Bon jour, madame, you come again?” (179).

The praline woman’s racial and ethnic composition seems similarly complex. Her linguistic potpourri of English and French perhaps marks her as Creole. And the story’s title implies that she can be characterized by the pralines, those “pink and brown wares,” over which she waves her fan in the story’s opening sentence. Hinting at racial taxonomies (col-

ors like “pink and brown,” categories like “Indien” and “Tishman”), “The Praline Woman” teases us with the possibility that this story glimpses the kind of “black experience” that Hull missed in Dunbar-Nelson’s work, though encoded in a fluid praline mixture. Yet the story’s narrative constraints, which have us depending almost entirely on the praline woman’s voice for our information, mean that any supposition about the praline woman’s racial identity—African American? Mixed race? White Creole? Creole of color? Pink or brown, or pink and brown?—has to remain inconclusive, completely unprovable. By the same logic, that supposition remains fully possible, never *disprovable*. Each possibility leads a kind of virtual life that guides us further and further from the definite-sounding assertions of the narrative and from the certainties we might want to read back into them.

It is here that contemporary scholarly readings of race in Dunbar-Nelson’s fiction overdetermine her approach. In her two-part essay “People of Color in Louisiana” (1916), Dunbar-Nelson states that the “mixed strains” of Creole identity had the “African strain slightly apparent” and that 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.”<sup>13</sup> Building on those ideas about the “African strain” in the Creole gumbo, scholars have elaborated the cultural contexts that make clues to racial experiences in the story signify. Relying on “hidden or coded local knowledge,” Kristina Brooks argues that Sister Josepha’s small brown hands designate her a “Creole of color.”<sup>14</sup> Violet Harrington Bryan, likewise, argues of “Little Miss Sophie” that to “any reader knowledgeable about New Orleans culture, the words *dusky-eyed* would signify that Sophie was a quadroon.”<sup>15</sup> Following Brooks’ and Bryan’s arguments, Jordan Stouck situates Sophie as an “Abject Mulatta.”<sup>16</sup>

Two key strategies characterize this general approach. First, all of these readers are aware of the difficulty of defining the composition of the Creole “gumbo” and alive to the formidable pressures that make the inscription of color a matter of hinting, encoding, masking. Creole identity for Dunbar-Nelson is “uniquely and distinctly indefinable,” as Brooks argues; the “creole of color experiences identity as constant contradiction,” as Stouck observes.<sup>17</sup> Second, since the stories’ inscriptions of race are coded, all of these writers recognize the importance of what Pamela Menke calls “insider knowledge,” available “only to those who share that same secret,” in comprehending Dunbar-Nelson’s fiction. There are differences of emphasis here. Menke, unlike Brooks or Bryan, contends that today’s readers have more chance than Dunbar-Nelson’s contemporaries of understanding the writer’s coded insights into “passing.” But Menke too, in speaking of “A Carnival Jangle,” has to rely on assimilating the stance of



the perceptive local: "New Orleans natives would recognize [the "mimic Red-men"] as the Mardi Gras Indians, black men who organize themselves in tribes."<sup>18</sup>

The privilege of "insider knowledge," to which we must subscribe if Dunbar-Nelson's coded references to racial issues are to be comprehended, maps out an unexpectedly secure guide about how to read representations of race. The category of "creole of color" refers us to what Brooks concedes is an "unverifiable" racial designation, which, because it is subject to "constant contradiction," in Stouck's words, is always under threat and in crisis.<sup>19</sup> But the consequence for readers is that we access ambiguity in the stories only by compelling characters into this category. Bryan's knowledgeable reader *insists* on designating Sophie a quadroon, even though, Bryan admits, Dunbar-Nelson "does not explicitly use the term."<sup>20</sup> Dunbar-Nelson's stories, for Stouck, "problematize identities"; but there is nothing problematic for Stouck about the way we recognize that Little Miss Sophie *is* a "mulatta."<sup>21</sup> Brooks follows suit: Dunbar-Nelson in "Sister Josepha" "avoids typecasting her heroine" by "[coding] the young Sister's racial identity such that only local readers will be certain to read her color into her character."<sup>22</sup>

For these writers, the activity of readers is complex to the extent that we labor to acquire enough local knowledge to make coded signs signify correctly. Once we have done so, however, our knowledge determines the interpretive direction we must subsequently take; we will, as Brooks says, "be certain to read her color into her character." At that point, our experience of being-in-the-process of negotiating identities collapses. Menke's Mardi Gras Indians exemplify this problem. Having assumed the stance of the New Orleans native, we determine the true racial identity of the "mimic Red-Men." We can no longer be mistaken. But at the moment of no longer being mistaken, we lose the story's ever-shifting play with (un)maskings and shifting identities; we lose the transformative effect of an aesthetic of rhetorical diversion, which keeps reinventing our experience of the characters' identities through a contrapuntal process of making secure claims and then undoing them. This position in no way implies that questions of race should be dismissed from these stories, or that "race" is somehow empty of content. Manuela's jealousy over Claralie's bloneness, the Praline woman's distribution of her pink and brown wares, the narrative mode of "Tony's Wife," which guides us so confidently from Tony's black brows to gleaming dirks and to whatever we think we know about Italians—all show how fully these stories engage cultural processes of invoking, reading, and determining racial signifiers. But that engagement is a transformative one; it refuses to guarantee the definitions these narratives afford.



As "People of Color" demonstrates, Dunbar-Nelson was fully aware of the dangers of overdetermining racial identities. The problem for the "mixed strains" of the Creole gumbo in Louisiana, is that "The history of the State is filled with attempts to define, sometimes at the point of the sword, oftenest in civil or criminal courts, the meaning of the word Negro," which "[b]y common consent . . . came to mean in Louisiana, prior to 1865, slave" ("People of Color," 361). Even among those who stand to lose the most, Dunbar-Nelson notes, "there were jealous and fiercely-guarded distinctions: 'griffes, briqués, mulattoes, quadroons, octoroons, each term meaning one degree's further transfiguration toward the Caucasian standard of physical perfection'" ("People of Color," 361). The challenge Dunbar-Nelson identifies here is how to divert people from a legislative and interpretive regime based on absolute definitions and fiercely guarded distinctions: that is to say, how *not* to make racial definitions certain. Importantly, "People of Color"—the text scholars most often cite in determining Dunbar-Nelson's attitudes toward race—employs precisely the same strategies that characterize her *St. Rocque* stories. The "common consent" that Louisianans gave to the notion that "Negro" signified "slave" appears first as a statement of historical fact. It is only as the paragraph proceeds to show how the *gens de couleur* are marshaled by social authority (a "Caucasian standard of physical perfection") that we look back to find that "common consent" actually refers to a regime of power attempting to persuade its citizens that its interpretations are unmistakable verities. Even her statement about the "true Creole" being "like the famous gumbo of the state" is hedged with all kinds of qualifiers: "he will be disputed by others"; "Sifting down a mass of conflicting definitions"; "it appears"; "a person of color will retort with his definition" ("People of Color," 367). Dunbar-Nelson *dramatizes* problems of definition by making forthright statements that are then taken back, challenged, and considered from different angles. To extract from this a determination of the "true Creole" is to ignore the rhetorical process of making determinations to which Dunbar-Nelson invites us to attend.

Dunbar-Nelson's strategies—her repertoire of standard generic forms, her melodramatic plots, her stereotypical assertions about racial and ethnic identities, all of which get confusedly rearranged within her rhetoric of diversion—challenge absolute determinations at a time when the history of the State, as she says, was "filled with attempts to define" racial significations "sometimes at the point of the sword" ("People of Color," 361). Her rhetoric of diversion answers to a particular historical dilemma: how to foster an imaginative conception of race commensurate with the demographic gumbo of New Orleans without moving readers swiftly toward the interpretive closures exacted by a racist regime. Her strategies also

make it imperative for readers now to recognize the import of our own efforts to impose coherence on these stories' representations of identity. Designating Sophie or Sister Josepha or the praline woman as Creoles of color (or African American) represents a legitimate way of reading the stories; to read it as *the* way enforces an act of categorization the stories themselves resist. The peculiar pattern in *St. Rocque* whereby readers are lured into assumptions the stories do not finally corroborate ultimately invites reflection on the process of trying to decide whether, and under what circumstances, and for what reasons, it makes sense to certify a particular character's racial designation. They invite reflection on the way we participate in creating the significations we derive from the narrative. Perhaps we do so more warily at the behest of a narrative style that keeps urging "you . . . could never be mistaken" before entangling us in the whimsical perplexities of the praline woman's words: "Mais non . . . you are not sure?" (175).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alice Dunbar-Nelson, *The Goodness of St. Rocque And Other Stories*, repr. in *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*, Vol. I, ed. Gloria T. Hull, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 16. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), 40, 53.

<sup>3</sup> Kristina Brooks in "Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Local Colors of Ethnicity, Class, and Place," *MELUS* 23, 2 (1998), 3–26, argues that a "majority of the stories in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* at least flirt with a romanticized exoticism" (17). Jordan Stouck in "Identities in Crisis: Alice Dunbar-Nelson's New Orleans Fiction," *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue canadienne d'études américaines* 34 (2004), 269–89, speaks of the author's "rather conventional narrative forms" (271); and Violet Harrington Bryan's *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature: Dialogues of Race and Gender* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1993) finds Dunbar-Nelson's work "often incomplete" (77), partly because the author felt forced to construct the "romantic (beautiful and tragic) tales that Americans loved to read during post-Reconstruction, especially when told with a woman's delicate touch" (70). Roger Whitlow's "Alice Dunbar-Nelson: New Orleans Writer," in *Regionalism and the Female Imagination: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Emily Toth (New York: Human Sciences, 1985), 109–25, finds many of her stories "melodramatic" (116) and her achievement "somewhat modest" (124). Anne Razey Gowdy's entry "Alice Dunbar-Nelson" in *The History of Southern Women's Literature*, ed. Carolyn Perry and Mary Louise Weeks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2002), 225–30, calls the three tales Dunbar-Nelson re-wrote for inclusion in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*

“melodramatic Creole local color stories” (226). Margaret D. Bauer, too, argues that Dunbar-Nelson in “Sister Josepha” might be downplaying “direct references to the mistreatment of people of color” in order to “avoid displeasing her reader”; “When a Convent Seems the Only Viable Choice: Questionable Callings in Stories by Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Alice Walker, and Louise Erdrich,” in *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*, ed. Ikenna Dieke (Westport: Greenwood, 1999), 4. In this she echoes Pamela Glenn Menke, who argues that Dunbar-Nelson, for all her insights into mixed-race identity, had to “satisfy her readers’ expectations for non-threatening, enjoyable images of Louisiana” (86) in order to “assure the success of her fiction” (84); “Behind the ‘White Veil’: Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Creole Color, and *The Goodness of St. Rocque*,” in *Songs of the Reconstructing South: Building Literary Louisiana, 1865–1945*, ed. Lisa Abney and Suzanne Disheroon-Green (Westport: Greenwood, 2002), 86, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Though less successful, Dunbar-Nelson’s earlier *Violets and Other Tales* (1895), published under the name Alice Ruth Moore, employs a similar strategy, mixing short fiction, poetry, and journalistic vignettes.

<sup>5</sup> Brooks, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, 10.

<sup>7</sup> In a formalist analysis, Stanley Fish explains, one’s experience of mistakes and hesitations “will disappear, either because it has been flattened out and made into an (insoluble) interpretive crux, or because it has been eliminated in the course of a procedure that is incapable of finding value in temporal phenomena.” “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” *Critical Inquiry* 2, 3 (1976), 471.

<sup>8</sup> Scholars typically dismiss as platitudinous what I see as a complicated tactic of posing, and then complicating, forthright statements about Creole life. Of “Little Miss Sophie,” for instance, Violet Harrington Bryan says that Dunbar-Nelson “tended to stereotype her Creole characters in clipped, aphoristic statements about their attitudes and traditions”; “Race and Gender in the Early Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson,” in *Louisiana Women Writers*, ed. Dorothy H. Brown and Barbara C. Ewell (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1992), 127. Roger Whitlow too sees her remarks about Creole life as “almost stereotypes” (119).

<sup>9</sup> Brooks, 12; Whitlow, 115. Menke, too, seems to view Dunbar-Nelson’s tendency to celebrate “generous Creole nobility” as a constraint in “Little Miss Sophie,” whose “seemingly romantic” surface masks an attack on the myth of the honorable white male in the tradition of Louisiana local color stories, but is tempered by its “sentimental conclusion” (83).

<sup>10</sup> The last time I taught this story, one of my students suggested interestingly that the story implies the “slatternly” (148) and “many-progenied” (151) landlady takes the ring for herself.

<sup>11</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), 28. My thanks to Kelly Vogel, who first showed me how useful Iser could be for reading the

complexities of Dunbar-Nelson's work.

<sup>12</sup> I disagree with Roger Whitlow's argument that, for Dunbar-Nelson, the source of Tony's "evil temperament" is "not alcohol but heritage. Put simply: he is Italian" (124). Rather, Dunbar-Nelson *bait*s her readers with a sense that issues of ethnicity and race can be resolved this easily. Whitlow says, rightly, the "reader is presumably to gather that Tony's cruelty is the direct result of his Italian ancestry" (123). What he neglects to add is that Dunbar-Nelson then goes on to subject this presumption to further unsettling inquiry.

<sup>13</sup> Alice Dunbar-Nelson, "People of Color in Louisiana," Part I, *The Journal of Negro History* 1 (October 1916), 367. Hereafter cited parenthetically. Dunbar-Nelson here quotes Grace King's essay "New Orleans, the Place and the People during the Ancien Regime."

<sup>14</sup> Brooks, 8, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Bryan, "Race and Gender," 126.

<sup>16</sup> Stouck, 272.

<sup>17</sup> Brooks, 8; Stouck, 271.

<sup>18</sup> Menke, 80, 77, 82.

<sup>19</sup> Brooks, 6; Stoucks, 271, 269–70.

<sup>20</sup> Bryan, "Race and Gender," 126.

<sup>21</sup> Stouck, 270, 273.

<sup>22</sup> Brooks, 11.