

JAMES NAGEL, *Race and Culture in New Orleans Stories: Kate Chopin, Grace King, Alice Dunbar-Nelson & George Washington Cable* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 208 pp.

James Nagel, a prolific scholar with many books on nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction to his credit, among them a monograph on contemporary short story cycles, has turned his attention to collections of short stories published in the Deep South between the late 1870s and 1900. Focusing on four collections of stories reflecting the very complex social reality of New Orleans, he provides close readings of more than fifty stories by one male and three women writers. Their fiction, in complementary fashion, captures the unique blend of ethnic and linguistic diversity shaping this city and its hinterland in Louisiana.

His analyses of the first story cycles of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin and the early New Orleans story circle of Alice Dunbar-Nelson are preceded by a detailed explication of the historical context, with special emphasis on the social regulations concerning racial divides and conventional arrangements like *plaçage*, which fostered the originally frequent disregard of these barriers in the rigid social caste system there. Nagel explains how the *Code Noir* observed in the French colony remained in effect under American rule and persisted after 1865 when the racial stratification was disregarded and collapsed into two classes even prior to the adoption of the Jim Crow laws. Nagel also clarifies the different uses of the ambiguous term “Creole” in nineteenth-century texts, referring either to the descendants of French and Spanish colonials or to “Creoles of color,” and provides many instructive comments on and corrections of readings by earlier interpreters (of the stories by the four writers) which have overlooked specific social conventions.

One of his primary concerns seems to be to demonstrate the cohesion of the four volumes chosen, and his argument for each book thus includes observations on the recurrence of types and characters, of constellations of figures and their preoccupations, on themes and motifs, and the functional use of the perspective of characters in whom the individual authors are primarily interested. In his appreciation of the narrative art of the four writers, Nagel illuminates the problems and often tragic consequences of social restrictions, in-

cluding the prohibition of interracial relationships in the most private sphere of life.

The sequence of the names of the authors in the subtitle of the book does not correspond to the order in which they are treated, as Nagel first considers *Old Creole Days*, Cable’s first collection, which apparently “initiated the use of the Crescent City as a subject for cyclic stories” (18). Nagel shows how the reformist impulse in this outsider (who was of German descent and a Presbyterian) in the “French Catholic city” shapes his ambivalent attitude to and interest in the fading white Creole aristocracy of the region. Their weaknesses and the problematic social practices conditioning the lives of quadroons and their offspring are exposed in his fiction and engender some moving narratives and tragic romances (“Madame Delphine,” “Belles Demoiselles Plantation”) but also trigger generational conflicts caused by the retrograde conservatism of (Francophone) Creoles, which are occasionally resolved by ingenious ladies (“Madame Délicieuse”).

Cable’s critical perspective on Creole customs (tempered at times by deep respect as in “Jean-ah Pocquelin”) prompted a counter-narrative in Grace King’s fictional defense of the scions of the former owners of the land, marginalized by the “push for progress” and the efficiency of “les Américains” and later impoverished by the events of the Civil War. In *Balcony Stories*, King brings out the resignation and pathetic fate especially of women from this social class, some of whom, however, show remarkable strength in coping with the trauma of defeat and deprivation (“La Grande Demoiselle” or “One of Us”). Nagel suggests that at times, King’s narratives reflect nostalgic feelings for the antebellum by showing that former slaves in the bayou country evince deep devotion to their masters (cf., “Monsieur Motte”). But here and elsewhere, Nagel’s readings are enriched by his close analysis of the psychology of the characters who often develop and mature as a result of the challenges and crises they live through. He highlights subtle shifts of perspective in the individual stories, bringing out ironic or tragic effects, and stresses the depth the four authors give to their characters (who are involved in deep emotional conflicts).

He thus argues for and certainly contributes to a reevaluation of an art of fiction that is not done justice to by being dismissed as “local color” writing. In their depiction of society, its practitioners deliberately attempted

and achieved a realism not attained by earlier authors. This was partly the result of their effective use of various linguistic registers: urbane English often replaces the French used by the Creoles; in many stories this is blended with the broad dialect of the Cajuns, or the idioms of the Creoles of color and African Americans in the region.

The latter two groups are in the foreground in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's stories in *The Goodness of St. Roque and Other Stories*. Like her novels, these have lately, since Gloria T. Hull's 1988 edition of the works of the author, attracted more attention (cf., a recent essay in the *European Journal for American Studies*<sup>1</sup>). The stories usually narrate the fortunes of members of Louisiana's community of Creoles of color, often including poverty, loss, renunciation and disillusionment, as well as the tragic desertion of a young quadroon by a socially superior lover (e.g., "Little Miss Sophie"). Some of Dunbar-Nelson's stories depict the lifestyle of affluent white Creoles, who regularly attend the French Opera House in New Orleans, and thus reflect the social stratification in the city. They often render the interethnic encounters between Creoles of color and arrivals from the Caribbean as well as members of other ethnic groups in the multicultural ambiance of New Orleans and illustrate the use of voodoo practices as love charms. It is here that a critical reader of Nagel's study may register an aspect of its culture which some recent scholarship in the New Southern Studies's vein has stressed more than Nagel does, namely the city's openness to the Caribbean, for instance, Owen Robinson in his consideration of New Orleans in Cable's short story cycle as a "City of Exiles."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf., Amy Doherty Mohr, "Down the River, Out to Sea: Mobility, Immobility, and Creole Identity in New Orleans Regionalist Fiction (1880-1910)," *Transnational Approaches to North American Regionalism*, ed. Florian Freitag and Kirsten A. Sandrock, Special Issue of *European Journal of American Studies* 9.3 (2014): 14 pp. Web. <http://ejas.revues.org/10368>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., Owen Robinson, "City of Exiles: Unstable Narratives of New Orleans in George Washington Cable's *Old Creole Days*", *Transatlantic Exchanges: The American South in Europe—Europe in the American South*, eds. Richard Gray and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 293–308.

Not surprisingly, Nagel dwells finally on the accomplishments of Kate Chopin in the genre of the short story, and in his concluding chapter pays tribute to her art of fiction expressed in brief sketches and diverse narratives. He shows how their author (writing in her native St. Louis, to which she had returned as a widow) captured the complex social and economic reality in Louisiana, with the subtle exploration of the lot of members of the former Creole aristocracy who had lost control of their plantations, as well as their public and private dilemmas. The interactions across ethnic borders through intimate relationships play a major role. Nagel naturally refers to Chopin's courage in some daring stories in which she explored the private sphere of courtship and love between Creoles, Creoles of color, Cajuns and 'Anglos.' While underlining Chopin's subtle mediation of the psychological and emotional growth of a number of characters and praising the aesthetic integrity of her fiction, Nagel supports the general appreciation of Chopin's accomplishment in conveying the tragic irony of Armand's myopic misjudgment in "Désirée's Baby."

In best academic fashion—which studies by other scholars nowadays sometimes eschew to their own detriment—Nagel draws on biographies and monographs by a large number of experts on the four writers and the genres they represent. He has benefitted from Arlin Turner, Louis Rubin and Alice Hall Petry in the case of Cable, from Helen Taylor or Robert Bush for Grace King. He disagrees with some claims by Gloria Hull in her reading of Dunbar-Nelson's narratives (90, 116) while acknowledging his debt to the doctoral thesis Mary Anne O'Neal submitted at his own university. He naturally relies on Per Seyersted, Emily Toth and Barbara Ewell in the case of Kate Chopin, and carefully engages in a discussion with their findings on the authors and their formative background. He repeatedly corrects misunderstandings (cf., his comments on p. 39 concerning Petry's monograph on Cable, even though he generally appreciates it for its many insights), and he refines readings of individual stories by other scholars provided in a large number of articles.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Thadious Davis, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region and Literature* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press 2011) would have deserved consideration but probably came too late for the current study.

In his highly readable text, which avoids jargon, Nagel principally uses the first editions of the collections as his basis, as he meticulously documents changes from the first appearance of the stories in the substantial endnotes. In a few cases, an attentive reader may come across some puzzling textual problem, as, for instance, is the case in Nagel's discussion of Kate Chopin's "In and Out of Old Natchitoches" in her first collection *Bayou Folk*. In the Penguin Classics reprint, the disclosure that Hector Santien is a disreputable gambler, which disqualifies him from being an eligible partner for beautiful Suzanne St. Denis Godolph, occurs not on the train as claimed (126), but earlier in the narrative.

In general, Nagel's analyses are persuasive if not always exhaustive and should make this study an eminently helpful guide for a closer look at what is not justifiably a less acknowledged fruit of late nineteenth-century American literary productivity. Nagel's study could also inspire a new look being taken in seminars and academic courses at the work of authors whose narrative skills flourished in this distinct sub-region of the Deep South during an era of severe challenges in the economic and social spheres in the decades after the Louisiana Purchase and especially after the Civil War.

Vienna

Waldemar Zacharasiewicz