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Creolizing the New Woman: The Subversion of Feminist Archetypes in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Early Short Fiction

MLA 2025 Convention, New Orleans
Session 419: (Re)writing the New Woman

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Fig. 1. "Gussie." John H. Adams, Jr.
The Voice of the Negro, August 1904.

Good evening everyone, thank you Gianna for the introduction, and to all of you for being here.

As you may have gathered from my bio, the topic of today's presentation is a bit of an excursion away from my usual area of expertise, so I'm looking forward to receiving feedback or suggestions if there are any specialists of Dunbar-Nelson or of Southern regionalism in the room.

To explicate the different elements of my title and lay out the plan of the presentation, let me start with a brief summary of the argument.

Argument



Fig. 2. Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar-Nelson. n.d. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

After first experimenting with traditional representations of the New Woman (i.e., white middle-class), Dunbar-Nelson repurposes the trope in her regional fiction:

sectional ideological vehicle



intersectional critical tool

There must be “sharp cleavage between the work of art and the propaganda pamphlet.”

Dunbar-Nelson, “Une Femme Dit” (1926)

My main contention today is that Dunbar-Nelson’s early short fiction progressively “creolizes” the New Woman. What I mean by that is that:

- After experimenting with traditional representations of the New Woman as a white and middle-class construct, Dunbar-Nelson repurposes the trope in her regional fiction.
- She transforms it from a sectional ideological vehicle (one that isolates gender from other vectors of oppression) to an intersectional critical tool that throws into relief the increased vulnerability of women belonging to socio-economic and/or ethnic minorities.

My use of the term “critical tool” instead of “ideological vehicle” is meant to emphasize Dunbar-Nelson’s gradual rejection of didacticism in her writing, as evidenced by her declaration, in 1926, that there must be “sharp cleavage between the work of art and the propaganda pamphlet.”

Argument



Fig. 2. Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar-Nelson. n.d. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

I use the verb “creolize” in two main senses:

- Literally, to refer to Dunbar-Nelson’s portrayal of New Woman characters whose ethnicity and/or socio-economic status form an integral part of their identity.
- Figuratively, to describe Dunbar-Nelson’s more general restructuring of New Woman ideology from a set of binaries to a more complex and diffuse value system.

I use the verb “creolize” in two main senses:

First, I use it literally to refer to Dunbar-Nelson’s portrayal of New Woman characters whose ethnicity and/or socio-economic status form an integral part of their identity. This has the effect, I argue, of redefining the perimeter of the debate that the Victorians called the “Woman Question,” which was notoriously class and color blind.

Second, I use it figuratively, to describe Dunbar-Nelson’s more general restructuring of New Woman ideology from a set of binaries to a more complex and diffuse value system

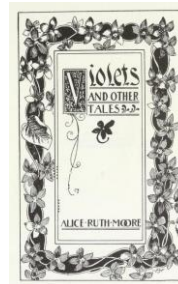
I should note that my use of the term did not originally come from, but in fact resonates rather strikingly with Edouard Glissant’s theory of “creolization” and his underlying conceptions of identity as mobile and relational instead of fixed and essential, which will serve as the concluding note of the presentation.

The New Woman in *Violets* (1895)

From the preface:

- “The author of these pages belongs to that type of ‘ **the brave new woman who scorns to sigh**,’ but feels that she has something to say, and says it to the best of her ability...”

-Sylvanie F. Williams



The most explicit link between Dunbar-Nelson and the New Woman is actually established in the preface of her first short story collection, *Violets and Other Tales*, published in 1895.

The author of the preface, fellow New Orleans activist and club member Sylvanie F. Williams, introduces the then-named Alice Ruth Moore (who was then no older than twenty years old) in the following terms:

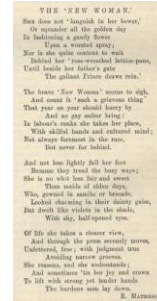
“The author of these pages belongs to that type of ‘**the brave new woman who scorns to sigh**,’ but feels that she has something to say, and says it to the best of her ability.”

Surprisingly, while a couple of scholars have noted Williams’ use of the phrase “new woman,” none have actually commented on its significance for the construction of her authorial image or identified the reference of the quotation in which the phrase is inserted.

The New Woman in Dunbar-Nelson's published work

Source of the quotation:

- "The New Woman," an 1894 poem by Mrs. E. Matheson, published in the British *Chambers's Journal*
- Intertextual references to British poets (Lord Tennyson, Oscar Wilde, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti)
- New Woman characterized as "skilful" and "cultured" (14)
- "... through the press [she] serenely moves, / Unfettered, free; with judgment true" (26-27)



Of course, this caught my attention, and after laboriously looking for the original source, I finally located it in an 1894 British poem titled "The New Woman" written by a certain Mrs E. Matheson and published in a London-based periodical, the *Chambers' Journal*.

The poem, which I unfortunately don't have time to read in full, abounds with intertextual references to British poets (such as Tennyson, Wilde and Rossetti)—all of whom Dunbar-Nelson had read and sometimes emulated in her work. It praises the merit of the New Woman, which is characterized as "skilful, cultured, moving serenely through the press, unfettered, free; with judgment true."

The New Woman in the periodical press



Fig. 3. Cover *Shafts: A Paper for Women*, March 1897.



Fig. 4. Bowley, M. "The New Woman and The Old." [*Sarah Grand*]*the Lady's Realm*, 1898.

This version of the New Woman corresponds to the highly idealized, almost allegorical figure that had been created by the feminist press in the 1890s and that was typically represented as a superior human being embodying Enlightenment ideals, leading the human race (that is, white Eurowestern society) towards civilizational progress.

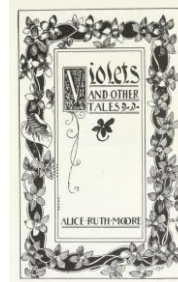
It is quite significant, I believe, that this would be the discursive background against which Dunbar-Nelson chose to set her posture as a writer, as she entered the New Orleans literary scene as a young Black woman.

The New Woman in *Violets* (1895)

“When she [i.e. Dunbar -Nelson] raises issues of women’s rights in these early stories and poems ... her criticism focuses on the plight of all women, with no mention of the particular problems of the black woman.”

(Bryan 1992)

- “A Story of Vengeance”
- “At Eventide”
- “The Woman”



As several critics have pointed out, her early work tends to compartmentalize between gender and other issues such as class or race. As Violet Bryan notes, “When she raises issues of women’s rights in these early stories and poems ... her criticism focuses on the plight of all women, with no mention of the particular problems of the black woman.”

Yet even her stance on contemporary feminist discourses is rather unclear, as the contents of the collection are more ambivalent than typical New Woman fiction. While several sketches explicitly thematize issues related to gender and feature stereotypical “New Woman” characters, they convey rather ambivalent messages and some of them read more like cautionary tales than empowering stories:

For instance,

- In “A Story of Vengeance” an unmarried yet successful middle-aged woman repents from using her influence to ruin her ex-lover, reflecting on the hollowness of her existence despite her financial and professional achievements
- In “At Eventide,” a famous singer retrospectively regrets prioritizing her career over her marriage and is rebuked for her “faithlessness” both by her ex-lover and the narrator of the story

These two rather moralistic tales contrast with another, more complex piece, “The Woman,” a short autofictional essay in which an anonymous clubwoman contemplates the pros and cons of marriage for “well-salaried women.” Despite its somewhat hybrid status, this piece represents Dunbar-Nelson’s most direct engagement with stereotypical representations of the New Woman.

“The Woman” (1895)

- “The freedom which she [i.e. the working woman] enjoys she does not trespass upon, for if she did not learn at school she has acquired since habits of strong self-reliance, self-support, earnest thinking, deep discriminations, and firmly believes that the most perfect liberty is that state in which humanity conforms itself to and obeys strictly, without deviation, those laws which are best fitted for their mutual self-advancement.” (24-25)
- “*Why should well-salaried women marry?*” (21)
- “... the average working-woman of to-day ... has her cares, her money-troubles, her debts, and her scrimpings, it is true, but they only make her independent, instead of reducing her to a dead level of despair.” (22)



Using the characteristically universal and humanist register of New Woman rhetorics, the narrator celebrates the advancement of the modern “working woman”:

- “The freedom which she enjoys she does not trespass upon, for if she did not learn at school she has acquired since habits of strong self-reliance, self-support, earnest thinking, deep discriminations, and firmly believes that the most perfect liberty is that state in which humanity conforms itself to and obeys strictly, without deviation, those laws which are best fitted for their mutual self-advancement.”

The language of the essay is noticeably neutral, and the ideal woman it depicts is as generic as the narrator, whose only distinguishing traits are her gender as well as her intellectual and moral capacity—thus evoking the typically *abstract* representations of the New Woman which dominated collective imagination in the 1890s.

In particular, the economic aspect of the question is evacuated by the framing question, italicized in the text, “*Why should well-salaried women marry?*” which restricts the scope of the debate to affluent, upper-class women and eclipses the situation of working class women. In a rather eloquent passage, the narrator briefly gestures towards the precarity of independent women, yet immediately dismisses it as inconsequential:

- “... the average working-woman of to-day ... has her cares, her money-troubles, her debts, and her scrimpings, it is true, but they only make her independent, instead of reducing her to a dead level of despair.”

“The Woman” (1895)

- “when the right moment comes, she [i.e. the new woman] will sink as gracefully into her lover’s manly embrace” than the “soft, dainty, ... mindless creature ... who looks upon [men] as a race of gods” (27)



Fig. 5. “The New Woman.” *Punch*, 8 Sept. 1894.

Despite its radical feminist import, the essay ends a more consensual note than expected. After delivering a powerful critique of the “serfdom” and “yoke” of marriage, the narrator concludes by saying that “when the right moment comes, she [i.e. the new woman] will sink as gracefully into her lover’s manly embrace” than the “soft, dainty, ... mindless creature ... who looks upon [men] as a race of gods” (27).

This opposition between a strong and independent woman on one side, and a delicate, conventionally feminine one on the other, is once again typical of New Woman representations, which typically set New Women against the Victorian ideal of the “True Woman” as in this *Punch* cartoon from 1894. The essay thus simultaneously sets up and downplays this opposition by attacking traditional courtship and marriage, all the while emphasizing the compatibility between independence and traditional femininity.

So while in representational terms, the collection clearly evokes New Woman fiction in its themes and “sectional” register, ideologically it is much less partisan and Manichean than New Woman discourses.

Creole (New?) Women in Dunbar-Nelson's regional fiction


"Creole' had become in New Orleans a contested site of meaning that whites commonly defined in ways that excluded persons of African descent."

(Gebhard 2016)

"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."

Dunbar-Nelson, "People of Color in Louisiana, Part I"
The Journal of Negro History (1904)

➤ An instance of "rhetorical passing" (Rabinowitz 1994)?



In Dunbar-Nelson's regional fiction, gender features less prominently, whereas ethnicity and class are more salient determinants for her characters' fates. However, although most of the story revolve around Creole identity and culture, they remain very ambiguous when it comes to the characters' racial identification, leaving critics to speculate about the significance of physiological details such as "dark" or "dusky" eyes, "silky hair" or "brown hands."

As Caroline Gebhard explains, after the Civil War, "Creole' had become in New Orleans a contested site of meaning that whites commonly defined in ways that excluded persons of African descent." This exclusionary definition was challenged by Creoles of color, who emphasized on the contrary that Creole identity was not about race, and had always comprised people of Black ancestry.

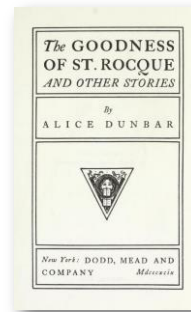
In an 1904 article devoted to this topic, Dunbar-Nelson commented on "the mass of conflicting definitions," yet famously eluded the question by concluding that "The true Creole is like the famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique."

In the same manner, her fictional work sought to capitalize on this ambiguity rather than take a definitive stance, as it allowed her to achieve what Peter Rabinowitz has called "rhetorical passing," which is when a narrative addresses two different audiences and encode meanings that would be retrieved differently by each. In Dunbar-Nelson's case, Creole characters could be read as either black or white, depending on the reader's stance, allowing her to navigate the very delicate politics of race and ethnicity in Louisiana, while appealing to a broad reading public.

Creole (New?) Women in Dunbar-Nelson's regional fiction

Conspicuous absence in the scholarship: why have scholars failed to recognize New Woman traits in Dunbar-Nelson's Creole heroines?

- "Tony's Wife"
- "Little Miss Sophie"
- "Sister Josepha"
- "Odalie"
- "La Juanita"



While to my knowledge, only two scholars have ever discussed Dunbar-Nelson in relation to the New Woman discourses, they have either done so in relation to her first collection, *Violets*, or in relation to her unfinished novel *A Modern Undine*. While there is a rich body of work on the subtle but potent social critique that permeates Dunbar-Nelson's regional fiction, I want to interrogate the conspicuous absence of the New Woman in this part of the scholarship. Why is it that both New Woman and Dunbar-Nelson's scholars have failed to recognize New Woman traits in her Creole heroines, despite the obvious relevance of the trope for her work and the period?

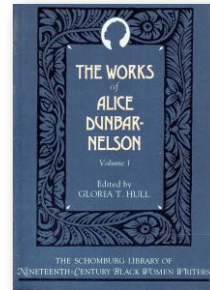
To start with her second short story collection, *The Goodness of St Rocque* published in 1899, five stories stand out for their critical take on gender relations:

- "Tony's Wife" is a chilling depiction of an abusive relationship between an Italian man and a German woman, whom refuses to marry on his deathbed because of her nationality
- "Little Miss Sophie," in turn, illustrates the precarity of "plaçage" for Creole women in the increasingly segregated context of post-war Louisiana
- In "Sister Josepha," a young Creole orphan escapes potential sexual abuse by refusing to be adopted by a man obsessed with her "tropical beauty"
- In "Odalie," a young Catholic woman is raised in strict isolation and enters a convent out of fear of the outside world
- Finally, "La Juanita" is a lighthearted sketch in which a white man gains the respect of his fiancée's Creole community by proving himself as a sailor.

All of these stories feature typical “New Woman” themes such as marriage, education, financial dependence, and sexual exploitation—yet they are no longer disconnected from the other aspects of the characters’ social identities. In all of these stories, the protagonist’s ethnicity, nationality, class, and in some cases, race, are shown to play an intrinsic role in their marginalization and ultimate downfall (except for the last one, the happy ending of which stands as an exception to the rule).

Dunbar-Nelson's unpublished fiction (coll. in Hull 1988)

- "Natalie" (c. 1898)
- "Witness for the Defense" (n.d. estimated c. 1900)
- "The Decision" (c. 1902 -1909)



Unsurprisingly, Dunbar-Nelson's most radical experimentations with the New Woman are to be found among the stories that she did not manage to publish during her lifetime, but that have been collected by Gloria Hull in her 1988 anthology.

These include "Natalie," written around 1898, "Witness for the Defense," which is undated but estimated around 1900, and "The Decision," a slightly later, more autobiographical story. I focus on the first one, which I believe represents Dunbar-Nelson's most accomplished New Woman short story.

“Natalie” (c. 1898)

Natalie:

- a fourteen-year-old Creole girl with “brown arms” and “big black eyes” (153)
- “she exercised [an absolute sway] over the sands and marshes” of Mandeville (153)

Olivia:

- “a delicate summer boarder” (154)
- “a fair-haired, rose-tinted creature, in an ethereal film of fluffy lawn and flower-covered hat” (154)



The story takes place in Mandeville, on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain.

Natalie, a fourteen-year-old Creole girl with “brown arms” and “big black eyes” who “exercised [an absolute sway] over the sands and marshes” of Mandeville.

She is upset to find a “trespasser” on her beach, whose “type” she immediately recognizes: Olivia, also a teenager, is a stereotypical “delicate summer boarder” from the city, embodying middle-class ideals of femininity: she is described as “a fair-haired, rose-tinted creature, in an ethereal film of fluffy lawn and flower-covered hat.”

This opposition, as mentioned earlier, is typical of New Woman imagery and automatically evokes the binary of True vs. New Woman.

“Natalie” (c. 1898)

Olivia is soon “initiated into the mysteries of the artesian well”:

- “Upon the stone beneath the trickling stream there was a glass, and Natalie explained how glasses could be colored by simply letting them stay under the action of the water for a day, then the sulphur and iron would turn the white into a clear amber with iridescent lights throughout.” (157-58)



Fig. 6. Artesian well, Lee State Park, South Carolina. 2024.

However, the story takes an unexpected turn, as the two girls get along and Natalie “initiate[s]” Olivia to the “mysteries of the artesian well” in her backyard.

In a highly symbolic and crypto-erotic scene, Natalie explains to Olivia how she uses the well to tint drinking glasses:

“Upon the stone beneath the trickling stream there was a glass, and Natalie explained how glasses could be colored by simply letting them stay under the action of the water for a day, then the sulphur and iron would turn the white into a clear amber with iridescent lights throughout.” (157-58)

The metaphorical import of the scene becomes obvious as Olivia’s personality and physical appearance start to change under Natalie’s influence...

“Natalie” (c. 1898)

From binary antagonism to queer relationality:

- “This was only the beginning of a close intimacy between the girls. There were long rambles down the bayou shores into the piney woods, delicious swings on the branches of the old oak ... swims in the brown lake water; a healthy brownness in Olivia’s face, and a pleased sparkle about Natalie in the newfound affection that was so strange to her.” (158)



Fig. 6. Artesian well, Lee State Park, South Carolina. 2024.

The brief antagonism with which the story had opened quickly makes way for a different kind of relationship between the two girls, one that explicitly transcends the binaries of race and heterosexuality:

“This was only the beginning of a close intimacy between the girls. There were long rambles down the bayou shores into the piney woods, delicious swings on the branches of the old oak ... swims in the brown lake water; a healthy brownness in Olivia’s face, and a pleased sparkle about Natalie in the newfound affection that was so strange to her.”

A lot could be said about this passage, which is incredibly rich in terms of imagery and spatial representation. All of the elements of the scene combine to portray what I call Dunbar-Nelson’s creolization of New Woman ideology. The short story not only creolizes the figure of the New Woman by featuring a Creole New Woman, Natalie, but also by subtly portraying a True Woman—Olivia—transitioning from the realm of heterosexual whiteness to a queer Creole space that blurs racial and sexual boundaries.

Edouard Glissant's theory of "creolization"

Creolization vs. métissage:

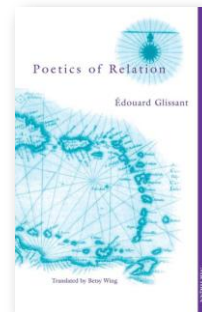
- "If we posit *métissage* as, generally speaking, the meeting and synthesis of two differences, creolization seems to be a limitless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable."

Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1990, trans. 1997)

Philosophy of "relation":

- "a fluid and unsystematic system [of cultures and languages] whose elements are engaged in a radically nonhierarchical free play of interrelatedness"

(Britton 1999, 11)



This subversion of dominant discursive binaries echoes Edouard Glissant's concept of "creolization," which he opposes to the hybridity of "métissage," a term which he sees as reproducing discursive dichotomies:

- "If we posit *métissage* as, generally speaking, the meeting and synthesis of two differences, creolization seems to be a limitless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable."

Glissant's metaphor of diffraction noticeably echoes Natalie's tinted glasses, which function like prisms shining "iridescent lights throughout." More broadly, Dunbar-Nelson's interweaving of Creole identity with liberated affective or sexual relationships parallels the place of creolization in Glissant's overarching philosophy of "**relation**," which can be summarized as

- "a fluid and unsystematic system [of cultures and languages] whose elements are engaged in a radically nonhierarchical free play of interrelatedness"

Conclusion



Dunbar-Nelson's early short fiction evidences a clear departure from binary and sectional discourses on gender (and identity more generally) in favor of more "fluid and unsystematic" representations which call into question the rigid categories that dominated nineteenth-century ideologies.

In particular, the contrast between "The Woman" and "Natalie" epitomizes this trajectory and elegantly captures Dunbar-Nelson's pioneering feminist views, which anticipate modern postcolonial and intersectional critique.

Dunbar-Nelson's early short fiction, I believe, illustrates exactly this shift:

Her early short fiction evidences a clear departure from binary and sectional discourses on gender (and identity more generally), in favor of more "fluid and unsystematic" representations which call into question the rigid categories that dominated nineteenth-century ideologies.

In particular, the contrast between "The Woman" and "Natalie" epitomizes this trajectory and elegantly captures Dunbar-Nelson's pioneering feminist views, which anticipate modern postcolonial and intersectional critique and deserve, I think, more publicity and attention than she has so far received.

Thank you.