

A Sisters' World: Reasons of the South in Grace King's *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters*

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Abstract Grace King documented the American Civil War from the Southern perspective of the losers, in times in which the Northern press urged her to embrace the winners' ideology. As she witnessed the decline of the French colonial project in post-bellum Louisiana, her writing task was to preserve the Frenchified vernacular and the exquisite Creole traditions from oblivion. Her tales and memoirs from New Orleans' history convey the tenacity of former mistresses and colored servants in mutual defense of their refined domestic order and family bonds disrupted by the brotherly fight.

Keywords Grace King. American Civil War. Southern memoirs. Patois. Creole culture and interethnic relations in Louisiana.

Summary 1 "Nègre" Servants and Private Archives. – 2 "Will They Kill Us All?". – 3 Southern Counter-Memories.



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205

1 “Nègre” Servants and Private Archives

In her discussion of the tomboy figure in Kate Chopin's story “Charlie”, Cristina Giorcelli (1996) argues that Miss Laborde's male masquerade did not only challenge a sexual and patriarchal order but also a social one. In her daily interaction with black servants and Acadian playmates, that Southern heroine of European descent also blurred class and ethnic boundaries in the Creole South (Giorcelli 1996, 31). In a similar interethnic perspective, Grace King's stories set in Louisiana in the immediate post-bellum period show a strong interest in a wrongly neglected female world, whose domestic interactions become her vantage point to question the supremacy of Anglo-Saxon America and its dispersal of Southern families. King's historical and literary focus on the aftermath of Civil War illuminates a time of profound disorientation which condemned her region to a long economic stagnation, disbanding, along with the plantation system based on slavery, a Creole community with distinctive Napoleonic values.

Born in a colony of both Protestant and Catholic faith,¹ the New Orleans-born Grace King was the great-granddaughter of a “prosperous lawyer” and of a lady of Huguenot descent who devotedly subscribed to the *Harper's Magazine*, which became “a determining factor” in extending the girl's literary education (*MSWL* 63). It was indeed her mentor, the historian Charles-Étienne Arthur Gayarré, who introduced Grace to the *Harper's* editor Charles Dudley Warner and to the sophisticated literary circles in Boston led by Annie Fields and Julia Ward Howe, the latter embodying an indefatigable model of Southern woman traveler between North and South which King later took over. In the difficult times of the war's aftermath, the social isolation of the defeated Confederates urged the King sisters to become cosmopolitan Southerners and seek “a second *Patrie*” in Europe.² A faithful visitor of the literary Salon of Madame Blanc in Paris (*MSWL* 103), King documented the sympathy of her hostesses in Britain and

¹ King thus depicts the influential reformed pastor, Charles Wagner: “Having disarmed the criticism of Protestant rivalries by his perfect good will and genial humour, he had also gained the friendship of Roman Catholics by his friendly sympathy with them in their political troubles. As a stove radiates faith and hope, strength and energy” (King 1932, 289). All references from this memoir will henceforth appear parenthetically and in footnotes with the initials *MSWL*, followed by page numbers.

² “At this time a very vexatious and semi-political revolution was taking place in New Orleans, feeling dividing the citizens into two furious camps, even the ladies taking part of it. They had no vote in the proceeding but insisted upon rousing their own realm of society into partisan warfare. My own feelings were much engaged in the fight, and it was evident that literary work would be impossible in the turbulent condition life had assumed. Therefore my brother Branch and my mother, in order to separate me from a disagreeable participation which they knew I could not or would not avoid, suggested that the time had come for me to go to Europe” (*MSWL* 103).

France, as well as of the women from the old Continent and from the Northern states who returned her visits. She wrote both as a historian and as a fiction writer on New Orleans as a “place for shelter” for European patriots in times of deep unrest,³ drawing a clear trajectory of the troubled transatlantic history in colonial times and during the Romantic revolutions.

A descendant from Marion, a General of the Revolutionary War, King writes of her grandmother's confrontation with “the sinfulness of New Orleans when she came to the city as a bride, fresh from the piety and civilization of Georgia, which she represented – for so she remembered it – as an earthly paradise” (2). As a Protestant daughter witnessing the cultural and religious battles which divided the colony, King absorbed from her historical investigations and personal memories the echoes of the military and linguistic conflicts recently revived by Thomas Pynchon in *Mason & Dixon* (1997), in one of the most illuminating fictional accounts of multilingualism in colonial America (Sollors 2000). In particular, King relentlessly wrote about the traumatic transformation of the French colony of Louisiana into a region architecturally and stylistically redesigned by the Spanish and American occupants, adding to her New Orleans' stories the literary qualities of Francis Parkman's histories and of Judge Gayarré's chronicles of Louisiana. The latter first accounted for the double shift in power of the early French settlements to the Spanish and Yankee administration, struggling, like Grace, to preserve the city from decay and from the charge of racism made by Americans to erase all the signs of the Napoleonic culture. Before becoming the queen par excellence of short stories writers (*MSWL* 93), King learned to shape her histories in Parkman's writerly way and to convey, like Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville and her mentor Gayarré, in an exquisitely ornate style all the refinements of the “hereditary figures in New Orleans life” (287). On their trail, King depicted, between fact and fiction, the European substratum of New Orleans' colonial history, obscured by the ideological layers placed by Civil War upon those regions. Her many histories of Louisiana start from the foundation of those territories by Jean-Bapiste Le Moyne Bienville, who first settled there to the (Civil) War, which she witnessed as a child. The heroic deeds of this French colonial hero are romanticized in her historical fiction *La Dame de Sainte Hermine* (King 1934), revealing her impulse to re-

3 “As the War progressed, other foreigners came to New Orleans as a place of shelter until the trouble in Europe had passed and they could continue their travels. Standing out among these was a group of Italians, the Com Arch, Silvio Contri and his wife, accompanied by a most beautiful young woman, Rita Zucconi, the daughter of a noted man of letters of Florence, and a friend, the Duc de Massari, young, handsome and intelligent, whom Rita married later in New Orleans. They came every Sunday afternoon to tea, a purely French gathering [...]. They were all devotees of the opera” (*MSWL* 368).

construct a violated cultural background through her serious archival research supervised by Gayarré, to be later fictionalized in tales based on that vanishing world.

The “heavy strain”⁴ of the times in which America established its supremacy as an English-speaking world was also stressed in the *Peter Parley's Universal History*, ghostwritten by Elizabeth and Nathaniel Hawthorne, as the most remarkable event in the two terms of Thomas Jefferson's office, since the greatest achievement of his administration was considered “the purchase of Louisiana from France, in the year 1803. The immense territory included the country between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains [...] The last event of the war was the battle of New Orleans. On the morning of the 8th of January 1815, a strong British army advanced to take the city. But they were driven back with immense slaughter by the Americans, under General Jackson. Peace took place in a very short time after this battle. The United States have not since had any war except with the Indian tribes and with Mexico” (1837, 477-8). King recollects that transition through the eyes of the (mostly female) survivors of the French colony confined in sheltered homes and religious institutions. As the disruptive effects of the city's conquest struck like a blow hard to recover from, King illuminates those interiors deprived of men's presence, and animated by the unaccounted, multilingual dialectics between the Black speech of the former slaves and “the Frenchified English” (MSWL 53) spoken by their mistresses in virtue of their bilingual proficiency. What apparently sustained the ongoing dialogue between colored and Creole cultures even in times of enslavement was the unpredictable interracial interaction of the Latin components with the Louisianans of different colors, in the background of the region's natural beauty. In King's historical narratives, the vivid glimpses of that untamed beauty clash with the deep distress of the Confederated region, disclosing, in the picturesque scenery of the Louisiana's woods on the bayou, a transcendentalist touch which no additional colonial layer could mortify.⁵ Despite these brief, pasto-

4 As King reported to Mr. Brett, the president of Macmillan who hired her to write stories on the Reconstruction era: “I told him that I recollected the period perfectly and that it represented to me not only a heroic but a cruel, heavy strain for the men and women to make a living under every political burden possible for a victorious enemy to lay upon their shoulders. I could recall no softening picture, no romance connected with the period. As for a love story, it was impossible to conceive of one at that time. I spoke bitterly and resentfully” (MSWL 234).

5 “we found ourselves in a new and strange country, different from the one we had lived in hitherto, where we had been led and guided. Now we were to direct ourselves. But we had been educated and trained, as we knew, for this very emergency; we could walk in footsteps made in advance for us [...]. The sun was shining like a conflagration behind the cypress forest on the opposite bank” (MSWL 48).

ral digressions,⁶ King's dramatic representation of the South is never devoid of Gothic accents, especially in her description of a landscape which Emerson himself compared to a female, whose placid sense of defiance and endurance, reassured in the darkest moments of the Confederate guerrillas.⁷

In her accurate historical investigation of the Louisianan territories, King traced the French colonial period, before the drudging path opened by the Louisiana agreement which prompted Napoleon to re-establish slavery in the colonies and sell part of North America to the United States on April 8 1803. The late effect of his failed attempt to quench the revolt led by Toussaint l'Ouverture in Santo Domingo found the Acadian minority of French descent increasingly confined by the rapid anglicization of Louisiana and weakened by auctions and lotteries in a time of mass eviction. Nevertheless, exquisite traces of the ephemeral French colonization survived in the New Orleans's refined manners and cuisine, in old sets of parlor furniture and home décor which King describes as the decency of "our slightly foreign life" (*MSWL* 213). When she turned to fiction, King focused on the difficult adjustments of her people to the changing interracial negotiations that her city went through, in its effort to keep loyal to its European heritage. In fictionalizing the ever changing circumstances, King conceives a constitutively hybrid, modern language which, on the one hand, preserves the distinctively French idiom of Louisiana and on the other, invariably resists the charge of racism against the defeated South instantly made responsible for all "our social injustices, as they were termed, to the colored people" (53). What King replied to the abolitionist press which castigated the Southern States on the ground of black enslavement was that these injustices did not match the intricate structure of racial relations in Louisiana, deconstructing "the Negro Character as the humorous, shrewd, and loyal subaltern to his master and his family as it has been stereotyped in fiction" (376). By dramatizing a quotidian and affective Creole coexistence with the colored people, she illuminates a domestic environment able to question the black/white opposition which constituted the main matter of contention in the national debate about Secession (Nagel 2014, 58-83). The story "The Little Convent Girl" (1893)⁸ confirms the colored variety of the region not exclusively identifiable with the enslaved condition of blacks: it narrates the suicide of a girl

⁶ "The cool disengaged air of natural objects, makes them enviable to us" (Emerson [1844] 1926, 390).

⁷ "Great pine and cypress forests in all their savage force filled the intervening country like a defiant army" (*MSWL* 31).

⁸ The story appeared in the *Century Magazine* (XLVI, August 1893, 547-51) later republished in the collection *Balcony Stories* (King [1892] 1968).

raised as a genteel student in a Catholic boarding school before realizing, at her father's death, of her mother's blackness. King's polemic account of the interracial mixing as constitutive of Louisiana attributes to the domestic relations between slaves and masters a complexity which the new emancipatory legislation did not detect. King clearly shows that waged labor was not the only answer for the social promotion of former slaves since their masters, mortified by the war conditions, could seldom afford to hire them in the same functions. Those slaves kept struggling to maintain the dignified quality of their service in unexpected continuity with the past, within the dynasty-based plantation order⁹ ready to disclose the silenced realities of its disempowered patronage. The persistent relations between mistresses and indoor colored servants in post-bellum Louisiana were never mentioned in the abolitionists' narrative of black captivity while, in King's narratives, they curiously perpetuate forms of affective bonds that the ill fortunes of Secession threatened to erase. The Confederates' defeat did not instantly eliminate the mutual relations of dependence and devotion produced by the old system of domestic servitude. As Robert B. Bush clarifies, in "Jerry" we see blacks incapable of adjusting to freedom: "Freedom from slavery meant freedom from work [...]. They still remain in servitude when servitude grew harder and harder under the changed conditions [...]. They, the negroes, had been freed and exalted - so their preachers preached to them - their owners conquered and abased" (Bush 1983, 246). Helen Taylor (1989, 76) also refers to the "prison" and "chains" of the benevolent protection of former masters since, as King clearly shows, the subjection of the house slaves involved a proximity and intimate acquaintance which involved them into acts of mutual assistance likely to be perpetuated even when slavery was legally abolished. The new order of class and race mobility in "plantations without men" (Taylor 1989,

⁹ "New Orleans, it must be explained, in spite of the abolition of slavery had preserved its good cooks [...]. Their existence was prolonged in comparative comfort and they followed their old families faithfully into lowering degrees of ill fortune, producing their masterpieces of cooking with a proud self-consciousness of what they had been worth in slavery. Freedom, which had been the lure for others, did not compensate them for the poverty that had descended upon them, with exiguous kitchens, bare larders, and wine cellars that were denuded of the condiments that formed the foundation and the pinnacle of good cooking. They did not care to go out into service any longer when their people went the way of all fine gourmets; they stayed in their faithful cabins, associating with none of their kind, 'the new ones', they called them.

To the credit of my mother, she had the wonderfully good fortune to secure the service [...] of one of the *ce-devant* old aristocratic cooks, and to hold her respect and even admiration. Cécile was therefore quite able to maintain her own with any guests, particularly those *du Nord* as she called them, who did not know the good cooking of the *bons vieux Créoles*, the "*gens de chez nous*".

She became our comfort and our pleasure for many years, and stories of her gave into the tradition of the family - jewels of fond recollection" (MSWL 192-3).

77) led to the creation of a community of women still dominated by mistresses in dialogues with their black servants. In her biographical interpretation of *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories* (Harding Davis 1985, 165 fn. 14), Tillie Olsen argues that, as Rebecca Harding Davis's *Bits of Gossip* testified, "during the Civil War the women and children of the South were wholly under the protection of their slaves, and I never have heard if a single instance in which they abused a trust" (Harding Davis 1904, 185). At the same time, King's stories unpredictably reverse those bonds of racial subjection by featuring authoritative black nurses whose healing powers are much appreciated in their Louisianan village. Through their dialogical storytelling, a neglected regional and interethnic history gets disclosed.

While keeping her French heritage alive, King surfaces a Louisianan past sustained by the interethnic interplay in Catholic schools like the one where she herself enrolled as a day boarder, drinking "wine for breakfast", "picking up French" and practicing "her piano on Sunday as though she too were a good little Creole" (MSWL 2). Her well documented tales illuminate convents, boarding schools, and domestic shelters as educational shields firmly raised against the energetic shakes of the foreign armies and cultures that meanwhile had entered town, in an undivided setting resistant to the disruptive force of the Protestant propaganda. King points to the fate reversal operating in those educational institutions which sheltered war widows and their orphaned children. Despite her Huguenot upbringing, King does not ignore the role of these Catholic institutions in reducing the traumatic impact of the Spanish and American invasions and of the racial divisions triggered by the Civil War. In her *Memories*, even the households confiscated by the Union army are managed by former servants who, in a twist of fate, become the new tenants of their masters' mansions.¹⁰ The extravagant and rather grim ways, which kept masters and slaves still related in the extraordinary circumstances of the Civil War, turned former slaves into mediators able to negotiate the Confederates' flight from their homes occupied by the Union officers. In resisting the pressure of the new occupants and of their emerging culture, which is an omnipresent threat in King's narratives, the former slaves do not haste the transition to the wage system but leave, as the author recalls, their Negro quarters to get in charge of the abandoned plantation households, and reluctantly feed their defeated mistresses, securing them the pass they needed to reach their husbands in a Confederate station. As war refugees, the Kings also had their papers coaxed by a former domestic dependent who concur-

10 The same sensational theme was dramatized in *An Hour*, a thriller by Louisa May Alcott (1864) in which the enduring kinship of the slaves still binds them to their masters, preventing a slave revolt before the arrival of the Lincoln's army.

rently opened a boarding-house for Federal officers,¹¹ profiting enormously from the conflict. The rising to the rank of *nouveaux riches* is the unsuspected emancipation of the servant who secured King's family a way out from New Orleans "with nothing but Confederacy money" (*MSWL* 7). Such is the war destiny of the former-slave-turned-servant Coralie who, in *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* (King 1916), makes her fortune as a seducer of high-ranking soldiers of the Federal army after looting the house of her masters. Among the many fate reversals of post-bellum Louisiana, King's memoirs keep challenging the rigid race and class structure usually identified with the American South. Her reports from the South based on witnessing are instances of a family order that the defeat did not literally turn upside down, being rooted in domestic bonds which kept challenging the stark racial divisions advocated by the abolitionist propaganda.

The recurrent character of Marcélite, the crippled quadroon who makes her first appearance in King's first novel, *Monsieur Motte* (1888), later to reappear in "A Crippled Hope", one of the *Balcony Stories* ([1982] 1969, 103-24), is a good example of black healer whose work is much cherished in her Southern community.¹² Her alternative history of racial integration conveys the writer's sincere gratitude and solidarity towards the blacks who kept supporting the New Orleaners in dire straits. "Little Mammy" remarkably exemplifies the unaccounted, interracial collaboration within Southern households which went way beyond the oppositional slave-master relation, as depicted in the daily Creole intercourse with differently colored Louisianans who, in these fictionalized histories, include the Italians' presumed "blackness" of non-African descent. By reducing power relations in the terms of a fierce racial fight between blacks and whites, the winning abolitionists embraced clear-cut oppositional categories which erased the mixed-race of these Mediterranean settlers and "dago" fishermen.¹³

All these differently colored figures never fit the abolitionist representation of the cruelty of the declining ruling class, whose on-

11 "a visitor whom the children knew as one of the dependents of the mother, who had maintained an army of them, shabby old people whom we did not like. This one, however, was a favorite [...]. Energetic, strong, and hearty, the occasion had come for her to make a return for past favors, and she had a suggestion to make in the family councils. My mother had to leave the city to join my father in the Confederacy, but she could not leave without a passport from the power in possession. Her one-time dependent was now in easy circumstances, well dressed, and, according to their story, influential at headquarters. The story was amusing" (*MSWL* 7).

12 "The quadroon woman, Marcelite, I took from life, as also the head of the *Institut*, Madame la Reveillère, who was the old beloved and respected Madame Laville-beuvre" (*MSWL* 61).

13 On these non-black marginals see King's tale "Madrilène; or the Festival of the Dead" ([1892] 1969, 119-82).

ly luncheon dish had become, in critical times, red beans and rice (MSWL 195-6). King writes from the feminized perspective of freed slaves and mourning widows left in charge of empty households, after seeing their husbands and brothers instantly erased from the Southern social scene. King astutely selects this distraught, interracial world to address the unuttered reasons of the South. In doing so, she lets their unemployed servants of mixed and black colors have their share of that dilapidated society, struggling to live up to their human values of loyalty and affection.¹⁴

In one of the earliest King's histories, New Orleans is presented as a Creole woman full of joy:¹⁵ not a Puritan city but an "un-American" "grande dame", that is, a "Parisian" woman well aware of her coquettish and seductive powers. Like her mentor's Gayarré, whose colonial history of New Orleans was "never more attractive as a heroine of literature" (MSWL 182), King celebrates the city's Creole beauty which, in many ways, corresponds to the lure of actress Adah Isaacs Menken who, like other notable Southern writers, including Mark Twain, made her fortune in the North expressing, in the Whitmanian cadences of *Infelicia* (1868), her nostalgia for the fallen aristocracy. In a similar elegy to the threatened European stratification of her Creole background, King's New Orleans is a city of impoverished sisters, alternatively presented as nuns and siblings (*soeurs converses*), who inaugurate, in their persistent cohabitation with their former servants, a new, neglected chapter of the American Civil War.

2 "Will They Kill Us All?"

King's Southern stories and histories make us aware that, within the context of post-bellum Louisiana, the Northern, Manichean perspective had wrongly included the Creoles of Louisiana within the emancipated category of the "freed blacks". Being the latter free but penniless and homeless, they found themselves either forced to migrate to the industrial cities in the North, or to remain in the plantations with the surviving female members of their families. The survivors of that female-centered world had no better chance than sharing the crops with their former slaves and provide them with tools and a cabin, having no financial resources to turn their voluntary service into

¹⁴ "Four years later they took them out and put them on again, and the servants and children were dressed in their best clothes for the return trip to the city, but not as they had come; a little steamboat was sent to us by Papa, who had already gone to the city" (MSWL 22).

¹⁵ "New Orleans is, among cities, the most feminine of women". It is a woman who maintains "the wholesome gayety of the past [...]. Cities and women are forgetting how to laugh" (King 1922, xvi).

the waged work which the times imposed. The persistent interethnic cooperation detectable in King's domestic interiors is aptly rendered through the volatile dialogues between mistresses and servants, whose class difference did not immediately break their mutual relations of dependence.

Like many Louisianans of European descent, Grace King's family was deprived of their household and chose to move to the outskirts rather than wave the Union's flag. Needless to say, the author suffered many a retaliation from the Union army, having equally refused to take the oath after the occupation. King recalls the mortifying practices of the winners including the exposition to violence and dispossession of the Confederate enemies and the sexual denigration of their women. While escaping the latter humiliation enforced by the winners upon Southern women, the King sisters accepted the dignified condition of working women "making their bread and meat by teaching" (MSWL 22) and sustained with their "head held high" (9) the confiscation of their home and their dislocation to the town's outskirts. In her proud representation of this wounded and matriarchal culture, the author retrospectively claims her own respectability and loyalty to the lost Confederate cause, "angered at being described as whores simply because of their political protests" (Taylor 1989, 79-80). Helen Taylor identifies King with a "defeated and humiliated white professional class" (81) strenuously managing the tragedy of the occupation¹⁶ of the Union soldiers who searched any single room looking for weapons.¹⁷

In real life, when urged to address the enemies "in a low tone" (MSWL 5), King's mother successfully allowed time for her husband to quit the city, later to reach him with her children and Grace's grandmother, in a perilous crossing of the bayou, "with alligators swimming around us, and the turtles dropping from their logs into the water" (21).

Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters, Grace King's last and perhaps most accomplished recollection of the Louisianan past, closes the full trajectory of her counter-narrative of the defeated South, in the effort to help her region recover the old colonial splendor from

¹⁶ "The stormy clouds of war, the cruel desolation that followed, the goading of circumstances, the courage of father and mother as they bent their backs to provide the necessities of life for us, the loss of fortune, the abyss into which they were plunged - all this was forgotten in the good things we remembered.

In imagination we could hear the voice of our mother, 'Courage, my children, do not give up; I am with you!' (MSWL 237).

¹⁷ "Mamma went to meet him, I as usual holding to her dress. She held her head stiff and high, and spoke haughtily. The officer, holding his head as stiffly, told her that the house was to be searched as it had been reported to headquarters that there were arms concealed in great quantities in it. Assenting, she herself opened the door of her bed-chamber and stood quietly by while her *armoire* and bureau drawers were opened and the contents thrown on the floor" (MSWL 5).

the many blows and ruins of history. Her stories of fatherless daughters and forlorn widows left in charge with their empty estates hardly matched the requests of those Northern publishers who demanded the umpteenth, pre-ordained depiction of a spoiled South, occasionally redeemed by the romance of national reconciliation in which a Southern heroine gets conventionally rescued by a Federal officer.¹⁸ Far less conventionally, King recalls how those officers did not hesitate to evict and dispossess the mourning women who refused to withdraw their loyalty to the Confederation. Their solitary management of their deserted plantations, which the tomboyish Charlie re-actualized in Kate Chopin's homonymous story, would later develop into the unprecedented talent of the entrepreneuse from Georgia, Scarlett O'Hara: the iconic Southern belle from Margaret Mitchell's acclaimed historical romance, *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Among her literary foremothers, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) might be equally read as the genteel story of self-appointed and resourceful female workers, who tragically achieved their independence in a Northern but no less matriarchal community of women, while their father was at war.

As the slavery-based economy slowly declined in the South, in King's (hi)stories mistresses remain at the center of the social scene, oddly exchanging roles with their former slaves, in a controversial form of domestic integration. In this unsuspected, quotidian alliance, mistresses keep spinning with their colored maids, and their corridor's talks structurally generate the modern fluctuations of King's "train of memory" (MSWL 45).¹⁹ Such implausible retrospective turns are aptly articulated through the innovative technique of multiple viewpoints experimented by Virginia Woolf and, more recently, by Irene Maria Fornés's suspensive utterances.²⁰ This nervous, domestic talk preserves the old authority of a model society dominated by

18 In replying to Mr. Thomas Nelson Page, King argues: "I told him that the fault alleged was the want of a love story in it [...] he said: 'That was the fault they found with one of my novels. And I had to remedy it to get it published. Now I will tell you what to do; for I did it! Just rip the story open and insert a love story. It is the easiest thing to do in the world. Get a pretty girl and name her Jeanne, that name always takes! Make her fall in love with a Federal officer and your story will be printed at once!'" (MSWL 376).

19 "Again monotonous and dull years of family life ensue, sinking into the pool of memory like dust that drops from the wind into a forest stream, to sink out of sight as sediment, but which arises in time, as active elements to break through the glassy surface" (MSWL 46). The aesthetic proximity of Grace King's free-floating dialogues with the plurivocal focus of Bloomsbury's poetics is sustained by King's acquaintance with Edward Garnett as Khristeena M. Lute (2016) argues in "Between Grace and Grit: Grace King's American heroine and Her Transatlantic Foremothers".

20 "the kind of ladies who are now extinct who dressed in plain black costumes, generally of silk, and wore black lace instead of a cap over their smooth hair combed in bandeaux. Simple and charming they were, and their little stories were like them. Knitting and crochet needles never worked better than while listening to them [...]. They were formal in addressing one another as 'madame'" (MSWL 286-7).

the "splendid-looking white house" which, even in the most tragic hours, is guarded by the "servant of confidence" who reluctantly provides a temporary shelter to her fugitive masters (13).²¹ These private moments of "Confederate guerrilla" (10) are pivotal elements in this Southern history of the Civil War, written from the perspective of a girl²² grown in defeat and in spoiled interiors animated by Creole dialect and black speech. The broken accents of this domestic lingo partake of a vocal stream which adds a modernist flavor to King's historical fiction. Her *Memories* strike as modernist and naturalistic in style, accommodating an irregular, vernacular flow made of the discarded fragments of her Southern culture. Unlike her more factual historical accounts, this last volume seems dictated by the uneven pace of past images and voices as they surface. It records private whispers and domestic jargons, in what ultimately stands out as the autobiography of a town in the "dreary time" when the enemy was "taking possession of the city" until there were "no more secret talks behind closed doors. The neighbors stayed at home, and their children also" (6).

A Protestant witness of the religious and cultural battles which cyclically troubled her divided country, King absorbed from her family a multilingual colonial legacy whose hybrid language survived the hardships of the French colonial settlement, and the disruptive Spanish and American occupations.

21 "She explained that the master and mistress had gone away and left everything in her charge. She had locked up the house and was living in the 'quarters'.

Mamma demanded hospitality of the night. The woman hesitated. Mamma insisted imperiously, offering to pay for her trouble in opening the house. Both the Negro drivers joined in, explaining our story, and how we were journeying to the ferry. She listened to them and finally agreed to accede to their persuasions: but, she explained, there was no food to be had [...]. She was a good-looking Negro woman, neatly dressed, tall, and dignified. Taking Mamma aside, she told her in a low voice that the master and mistress and all the family had fled from the house in a panic after the death of one of the children from scarlet fever. This staggered Mamma and shook her courage. [...]

'Then', said Grandmamma decidedly, 'we can go in and stay tonight without fear.'

'But we have no food to give you!'

'You have hominy and milk; give us that' (*MSWL* 15).

22 "We children having gone through a great war and suffered defeat and disaster, and having borne ourselves, following the examples of our father and mother, heroically, it seemed to us that, in our yellow-fever parlance, we had become acclimatized to the worst and would henceforth be immune against future attacks of misfortune. We did not know, alas, that such immunity does not exist in his world. It cannot be acquired in life. Our elders of course knew better, and therefore they were not overwhelmed as we younger ones were by the calamity that overtook us [...]. Our ranks closed in over the place of the missing member, and we marched forward behind our father and mother through the years that were before us, years that pass so slowly at first, but which grow swifter and swifter, until in old age they flash by. But it is only in the old age that they reveal the crystal and silver in the sod that buries but cannot hide the past" (*MSWL* 24, 29).

3 Southern Counter-Memories

King explores all the tensions and unpredictable affection originating in domestic proximity of servants, who act and look more like companions than former slaves. One of the original aspects of her writing lies in the way in which she delves into the distorted attachment developed between Southern mistresses and their colored servants, which turned to vexation in the Unionist accounts as the city fell. In her personal history of the Civil War, the writer deconstructs the "furious" (*MSWL* 103) racial division which originated the conflict through the ethnic promiscuity which outlived the plantation system.

As above mentioned, the Reconstruction era produced unexpected role reversals among the intertwined racial components of that society, demonstrating the insufficiency of the abolitionist definitions of captivity and work conditions in the South. Needless to say, not for a moment King's perspective threatens the rooted belief of the modern reader in the morality of Lincoln's cause but it seriously questions the hegemonic representation of slavery imposed by the winners, showing black Marcérite's decision to raise the orphaned son of her former master killed during the war after his mother's death, in another, unsuspected episode of racial interdependence. In "Monsieur Motte", the colored servant does not hesitate to offer a dowry to the orphaned daughter of a former master as if to compensate her of that loss caused by the war which liberated the colored people.

In all the counter-historical notations ironically embedded in King's fiction, the victory of the Union army does not suffice to erase the old rituals of mutual assistance and affection shown by the differently colored Louisianans within the Creole families. Their interracial coexistence is renovated by a Catholic faith in equality which ultimately questions the domestic hierarchies and the racial divisions produced by the violent segregation of the South. The scenario disclosed by King illuminates a post-bellum community in which those divisions were in rapid decline, fostering uncovered forms of solidarity in adversity, despite the presumed power relations based on class and race. In her lively presentation of Louisianans of European descent, "whites of different color" in Matthew Frye Jacobson's words (1999), King draws from her own experience a convincing portrait of female instructors of French origins, like Madame Girard who, in between the many colonial wars and foreign occupations, firmly preserved the stability of educational institutions for girls. Convents and Catholic boarding-schools, along with the domestic settings, became King's standpoint to recover the stamina of a Creole society essentially run by women. In those secluded and profaned shelters, the mixed components of that community of women find refuge.

King is extraordinary in dwelling in the interfaith gaps opened by the confined interiors of those Catholic convents and boarding

schools which made life and education possible to many Southerners of European descent. In this respect, her histories of New Orleans stress that protective role of the Ursuline convent established soon after the arrival of the French administration of Bienville and in service for more than two centuries in New Orleans. It is this city landmark which, during and after the Civil War, successfully contained the process of secularization in French education, making of it a protected venue in which ballrooms for dating and altars for praying were one and the same thing. It was in those boarding schools that many war orphans and octoroons were raised, in the Creole tradition of the integrated, interfaith centers which even Protestant families like the Kings always admired.²³

In her *Memories*, King refers to her Huguenot-born uncle reclaimed to Catholicism while studying law in Baltimore and, in her stories, a number of genteel girls experience the same conversion. Given that private lessons, and waged work at large, were no longer affordable in their dismantled homes,²⁴ that educational facility was the only one which enabled them to study during the Federal occupation.

Young women of mind, like the King sisters, were sent to those Catholic boarding schools mostly run by Jesuits and Capuchins like the Institute of St. Louis where they enrolled and graduated with enthusiasm, sitting next to other Creole students and benefitting from educational standards denied in their frequently besieged community. It is in those classrooms that Grace refined her literary taste and style, since her "English compositions" were taken "with the seriousness of an editor" there (*MSWL* 23). In that genteel style, those reclusive spaces of female resistance preserve the Creole memory of Louisianan history against the arrogance of the Spanish and American governors who could not violate the independence of those religious establishments.

It can be argued that the Ursuline convent is the main chronotope in King's history of *New Orleans. The Place and the People* (1922),

23 "I was the only Protestant among the ladies; indeed I think. I was the only Protestant ever to have been admitted into the sacred precincts of the convent. But I was as angry and excited as anyone against the government, and felt that nothing was too evil to say against a party that was forcing obnoxious laws upon a believing people. Two Ursuline Sisters came to pass a few days with us, refugees they were, from a dispossessed convent in Normandy.

My heart went out to them, and I told them about our famous Ursuline convent in New Orleans, that had played such an important part in our history and in the educational development of our city, and how we all honored and cherished it and were proud of its prosperous, even wealthy condition. The first Sisters had come to us from the Mother house in Normandy, in 1734. The sad-looking Sisters listened to me in a hopeless sort of way and said that they would like to live among such good people as we were" (*MSWL* 285).

24 "An attempt was made to resume lessons, but the governess was forced to go home, and she stayed there" (*MSWL* 6).

which is perhaps her most accomplished non-fictional history of the city, later adapted to a children's audience. Such educational establishments, along with the Jesuit college which trained boys in classical studies, remain a favorite setting in which students from different backgrounds could safely develop their skills looking "out upon the fierce riot of 1877" for the new constitution of Louisiana, and growing confident "that the defeat was only physical" (24). However, as the story of "The Little Convent Girl" demonstrates, those religious shelters failed to protect that youth from a larger world which later unmasked its lost privileges, ultimately revealing to the mulatto girl peacefully raised in the St. Anna's Asylum, that at his death she would be returned to her black mother, breaking for ever her illusion of belonging to the white élite.

"A Delicate Affair", another accomplished tale collected in the *Balcony Stories* (King [1892] 1968, 191-219), also features the convent as a multi-devotional laboratory which, during the Spanish and American occupations, served to discipline the immigration wave from France and other European countries, as factually reported in King's city history, *New Orleans: The Place and the People*. Giving the penury of women in the colonies, the Ursuline convent mediated the flux of marriageable women from the French home country to the colonies where they were rather brutally matched with the immigrant workers,²⁵ before the anthropic composition of Louisianans was dramatically upset by the Civil War.

The tale "Pupasse" (also collected in the *Balcony Stories*, King [1892] 1968, 221-45) comprises the story of a New Orleans orphan of non-Creole descent educated in a French Catholic boarding-school which owes its greatest charm to the dialogic and oral quality of women's voices. The interiors they inhabit are filled with the Frenchified English, street lingos and American slang rooted in the long tradition of female story-telling in America, also nurtured by King's mother's natural talent ("My mother, a charming raconteuse, witty and inexhaustible in speech" *MSWL* 1). From Rebecca Harding Davis to Louisa May Alcott and, more recently, in the stories by Tillie Olsen and Grace Paley, such an oral tradition in American literature developed a lively narrative style out of their empathic poetics of hearing (Daniele 1997). This women's talk constitutes the "parlor" soundscape, which the Louisianan leisure classes design to reconfigure, even in moments of disarray, domestic and educational spaces able to integrate the colored servants and the disbanded orphans of the Confederation. King reconstructs out of memory these dialogical settings which, in their linguistic plurality, counter the hegemonic narrative

²⁵ *The Pleasant Ways of St. Médard* opens with the transatlantic passage of Marie Modeste, a girl in disgrace shipped to Louisiana to become a colonist' wife (King 1916, 36).

of the occupants where masters and slaves, blacks and whites were drastically opposed on a strictly racial basis.

Such a hybrid soundscape is achieved by placing in the foreground the private lingo of Creole families and French boarding-schools. This plurivocal texture woven by matriarchal patronage is, quite experimentally in a historical narrative, articulated through the author's faithful transcription of the distinctive accents and sounds of Louisiana streets which "still retained their French and Spanish appearance" (MSWL 53). King's picturesque, New Orleans characters are therefore sonically sketched through the intercultural features of the "French Creole patois" (220) as the main vehicle of the city's multicultural history. King adopts a culinary metaphor to define this colorful substratum as "our *gombo*, as we call it, a mixture of Spanish and French" (227), finding her main literary source in Joaquin Miller, that "radiant poet" who wrote caring "nothing for the rules of prosody, if he knew them [...] as many lovers of music play, who are driven to music by inward longing" (51). In the same fashion, King's plurivocal narratives accommodate in a supple, European idiom the free-floating chorus of Creole voices which haunted both the servants' quarters and the upper floors, resonating through "the bedrooms of the family and of the French governess", and through the "upper gallery" where her great-grandfather resumed with the rest of the family for their "after-dinner talk". In this aerial and sonic style which, as Lute points out, might have been influenced by Virginia Woolf herself, family lingoes and the servant-mistress chattering are productively engaged in King's powerful counter-narrative of the ostracized South. In her recovery of the multilingual dimension of a territory firmly managed by women in the hardships of Reconstruction, vocal mistresses never overlook the dignified descent of their best cooks, like the mulatto Cécile, in the difficult "art of pleasing a hostess" (197). Their dignified resistance to assimilation, in an increasingly anglicized world, relied on a distinguished household caste pursuing a Southern *bon vivre* sustained by the domestic talents of colored servants. King depicts masters sincerely mourning their loss, in affective scenes that the new waged system could not claim.²⁶ And, even in moments when

26 "Cécile had a fine history. The seventh child of her mother, she had, according to custom, bought her own and her mother's freedom. Her mother was a famous cook in her day and she taught Cécile all she knew. A rumor reached us that Cécile had once been a queen of the Voudous and had taken part in their orgies, and no one had the temerity to ask her about it, one look from her was enough to silence a question.

She died a year or two later [...]. She was laid out in the front room, dressed in black, with a white kerchief crossed over her bosom. Her fine face was serene and peaceful.

Around the room sat women of her age and generation, all light colored, not a black face among them; dignified, serious-looking women dressed in black, with *tignons* neatly tied over their gray wool silent, motionless, impressive. No future memory can hold such a gathering. They had all died out, these representative of a buried past.

the "black night hides all the rest", King ritually re-enacts the power of their domestic alliance. She skilfully adds a private, vernacular touch to the painful sequences of the Confederate retreat, making a loose "after-dinner talk" (4) and sad, "subdued tones" precede the quick abandonment of her family's property.²⁷

In our wild era of white supremacist arrogance, the rediscovery of Grace King's talent may appear a risky task, but it dutifully illuminates a long-neglected, remarkable body of work whose modern style would have certainly deserved a place in the American literary canon if the historical circumstances had not proved so adverse to the Southern culture. The Confederate defeat notably contributed to the rapid eclipse of the King sisters' Catholic circle, leaving them homeless though determined not to lose their wits and their cosmopolitan inclination.

In her acute depiction of the work of memory, King's prose displays the uneven fragmentation of her recollections based on her unique auditory memories. At moments, the latter seem to lead and intuitively dictate their broad, historical trajectories. As if to follow these sonic fluctuations, remembering and traveling often coincide in King's last narrative, approximating, at each retrospective turn, another fragment of her lost American history.²⁸ Her train of thoughts and memories finally mimics the train's cadence of her trips to Europe and to the Northern regions where distinguished Southern exiles, like Julia Ward Howe and Mark Twain, settled to thrive in the flourishing publishing business. In those Northern cities King was ritually questioned about the colored people, and proudly countered the stereotyped vision of the South as a site of black slaughter and exploitation. In this respect, her archival scholarship and artful memorial writing relies on facts but also on private memories to retrieve the lost echo of the whispering voices flowing in empty plantation homes to provide her alternative version of the postbellum

Cécile's own daughter who was present belonged to another generation, with other looks, other manners. She had not past as her mother did; belonged to no caste. One was at the apex of an elevation, the other at its base" (*MSWL* 194-5).

27 "That night the parents talked in subdued tones on the upper front gallery. Grief and humiliation made their faces look strange and different" (*MSWL* 5).

28 "Mile after mile the road fell behind. Station after station was passed: and yet the distance from home seemed only to be increased. But it was exhausted before my troubles were. When the train finally stopped, I was busy in memory taking his magnificent drawing room with its red satin furniture and curtains; his carefully chosen pictures; his choice bronzes on the mantel, and his candelabra glittering with lights; the room filled with music, the locally celebrated Bazile at the piano; and he, handsome and to my eyes perfect in type - the good old New Orleans type - of a society gentleman, chatting and laughing with his guests! Joaquin Miller at his side - for that was the reception I was remembering - and Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, followed by her beautiful daughter Maud, advancing towards him. - but here the porter came for my bags" (*MSWL* 98).

south. Those voices enter her witty historical prose in a writing process which, above all, claims the Creole identity of her city, starting from the French colonial past which King first recovered during an early visit she paid with her inseparable sister May ("my twin almost", *MSWL* 49) to Gayarré's home. In that "corner of France" (39), she appreciated the talent of this "artist in language, each work given its full completeness of sound and significance" (35). Through the art of conversation of this French scholar, the self-taught historian was encouraged to employ the mixed lingo of Louisiana as a distinctively interracial material able to explore the exquisite features of Southern domesticity.

In the literary art which keeps sustaining her historical discourse, King never make direct Confederate claims – after all, she was only a child when she fled with her mother from her besieged household, with an ugly rag doll in her arms.²⁹ Nevertheless, she certainly criticized the abolitionist intellectuals who went down South only to find confirmation bias. In a country divided by prejudices and secessions, a traveling writer like King stood out as a precious interlocutor, always ready to rectify the hegemonic views of Southern writers like the established George W. Cable, who dastardly submitted to the winners' ideology and quickly embraced, in *The Grandissimes* (1880), the anti-Southern stance requested by the triumphant North. As he "proclaimed his preference for colored people over white and assumed the inevitable superiority – according to his theories – of the quadroons over the Creoles" (*MSWL* 60), he seemed to leave to loyal natives like King no alternatives but "write against the disappointments of constant refusals and rejections, a form of literary martyrdom that I knew I could not stand" (48-9).

Hence, never meaning to provide a reversed perspective on the Secession, King always resisted a submissive identification with the winners, polemically balancing the hegemonic platitudes of the philistine chorus which sadly contributed to the stigmatization of the South on the ground of the racial issue. Well aware of the enormous

29 "I recall standing one evening at the side window of Grandmother's room looking at surging flames rising higher and higher through black smoke, up into the sky [...]. The city shook with explosions. I knew, but only vaguely, that the city was being prepared for surrender to the 'enemy', as Grandmother called our foes [...]. All the shipping on the river was being set on fire, and the cotton in the warehouses and presses: and barrels of whiskey were being broken open and the whisky poured into the gutters [...]. Will they kill us all when they take the city, I wondered vaguely, recalling pictures of captured cities of the Bible, where men and women were cut through with spears and swords, and children were put to bed by a nurse, quietly and methodically as usual [...]. As we were driving away, someone thrust into my hand 'for you to play with', and then we were off. The doll, ugly, heavy, and cumbersome, was hideously dressed, but I eagerly clasped it to my bosom, and day and night kept it in my arms, loving it as only little girls love ugly dolls" (*MSWL* 4-5, 9).

ideological role played by the abolitionist propaganda in the final hegemony of Anglo-Saxon culture as the main war consequence,³⁰ King never wrote on the Northern side,³¹ but more effectively addressed the reasons of the South through “the little story of my sisters in a defiant spurt of courage” (61). Her praise of the violated beauty of her Creole culture found an untamed model in the domestic spirit of Victorian feminism which, thanks to Southern travelers like Julia Ward Howe, struggled to culturally unify what war and race had politically divided. Another King’s model of female political practice can be considered the 1876 great Centennial Exhibition of Philadelphia which inspired the inauguration of a Woman’s Department at the great Cotton Centennial Exhibition (Pfeffer 2014) at the 1884 New Orleans World’s Fair. As a writer always allied to the South “by family tradition and social inclination” (*MSWL* 54),³² Julia Ward Howe directed that woman’s section of the Cotton Centennial Exhibition, introducing Louisianan women to the cultural practice of the literary Salon, urging them to proudly display the mementoes of the “long-forgotten mosaic” of New Orleans (57), that is, all the “great historical and artistic treasure it possessed – the miniatures, jewels, laces, documents, and pieces of old furniture shut up in houses of old Creole families who clung even in poverty to the vestiges of ancestral love of display and extravagance” (55). Much of the antique flavor of King’s literary talent relies on that enthused appreciation of the refinement of the French material culture in the bayou. It is through this complex texture of Creole voices and of domestic tools that the author ultimately succeeded in shifting her reader’s attention from the “darkest hours of the Confederacy” (12) to the brilliancy of a Southern legacy which keeps resonating in the uninterrupted kinship of her interracial conversations.

30 In her *Memories*, King mentions the critical moment in which, as a guest of the Clemenses, she bumped into Harriet Beecher Stowe:

“You have read her book?”

‘No, indeed! It was not allowed to be even spoken of in our house!’

But I have never forgotten the episode. The light, fantastic creature running like a wild animal under the trees; her bright, happy face and pleasant voice [...] But she was a pretty apparition to me in spite of her hideous, black, dragon-like book that hovered on the horizon of every Southern child” (*MSWL* 76).

31 “‘Why, why, do we not write our side?’ I asked myself furiously at home before going to bed. ‘Are we to submit to Cable’s libels in resignation?’” (*MSWL* 60).

32 After lobbying for years with her Congressman husband for the annexation of Santo Domingo, in the aftermath of the Civil War, Julia Ward was among the other feminists from the North who, like Louisa May Alcott and Sally Holly, sent female volunteers down South to provide training and education to the freed blacks.

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