

LIMINALITY IN GENDER, RACE, AND NATION
IN *LES QUARTERONNES DE LA NOUVELLE-ORLÉANS*
BY SIDONIE DE LA HOUSSAYE

A Dissertation

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Dedication

To the memory of my father, Jack Koch, who would have gotten a kick out of calling me “Doctor.”

To the memory of my grandmothers, Caroline Kirkland Conklin and Phyllis Van Houten Koch who bequeathed their love affairs with reading to me, and to my mother, Elizabeth Conklin Koch who continued that tradition.

To my husband John Harris and our four-footed family, who make life a joy.

To fellow residents of coastal Louisiana and Mississippi, may we rebuild for the future without forgetting the past.

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achieved by treading on the keyboard. Rex and Luna, on the other hand, were always quick to tell me when a new chapter was literally good enough to eat. Treats all around.

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Abstract

This project examines themes of race, gender, and nation in a series of four novels by nineteenth-century Louisiana author Sidonie de la Houssaye. The series, called *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans* (The Quadroons of New Orleans), is based on the system of *plaçage*. *Plaçage*, a system of concubinage in which white men took women of mixed racial heritage (such as “quadroons”) as mistresses, becomes a source of conflict and contradiction in the series. The author sees *plaçage* as a tragic necessity for some educated and morally “upright” *quarteronnes*. For others, those *quarteronnes* depicted as libidinous and avaricious, it is a means of benefiting from the destruction of families from the upper echelons of white society.

Between these binaristic visions of *plaçage*, I found that de la Houssaye also offers a more nuanced vision of life in New Orleans for women and women of color in particular. I refer to these nuances as “liminal” spaces; spaces of in-betweenness. In the first two chapters, I explore the liminal racial status of the heroines and how that liminality becomes the basis for a performative model of race. In the third and fourth chapters, I explore the connections between performativity in gender and its connections to performative race. In the final chapters, I explore how the author envisions Louisiana as a place that lacks a unified sense of nationality and how that lack affects the lives of the characters and the author herself.

Although it has long been ignored, the liminal space that is Louisiana has produced a significant body of literature in French as well as in English. These novels are a fascinating sample of the francophone Louisiana *oeuvre*. They also, as I argue, address issues that are currently of great interest to literary scholars working in the fields of gender, race, and postcolonial studies. It is my hope that readers of this dissertation

will agree that these novels, and Louisiana literature in general, merit a great deal of further study.

Introduction

This study focuses on a series of novels written by Louisiana author Sidonie de la Houssaye and published under the pen name Louise Raymond. These novels, her lengthiest creative undertaking, are centered on the topic of the *plaçage* system in New Orleans during the period from 1820 to 1830. Called *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, the series consists of four novels, *Octavia*, *Violetta*, *Gina*, and *Dahlia*, which were published in the 1890s. They have officially been out of print for decades, but continued to be circulated abroad during the French colonial period as a kind of propaganda for schoolchildren. The largest collection of the author's published works, manuscripts, and papers is gathered at Louisiana State University's Hill Memorial library.

During my initial reading of these novels, I searched for a critical entry point. Because of the nature of the *plaçage* system, race was certainly the most obvious problematic in the series. What I discovered as I read was that over the span of hundreds of pages, de la Houssaye was unable to formulate any definitive statement about what really determined one's "race." At times, she portrayed race as a kind of essential, inescapable biological truth where whiteness was the ideal and blackness the abyss. At others, it was possible, through performance, to escape the racial label applied to one's body at birth. If one was born a person of color one could be so virtuous, so behaviorally "white," that one effectively *became* "white." The inverse was also true: even if one was born "white," one could behave in such a negative, "unwhite" fashion that one began to be portrayed as non-white.

I ultimately realized that the majority of the key characters in the series were both "white" and "unwhite" and yet neither "white" nor "unwhite." In other words, these

characters were occupying zones of racial in-betweenness. When I looked at what constituted “whiteness,” “unwhiteness,” and “in-betweenness” for de la Houssaye, I found that racial status relied heavily on gender, sexuality and national status. My examination of these additional categories of identity showed that they, too, tended to be slippery and undefined. Since race, gender, and nation were all so interdependent in the novels and at the same time were all so uncertain and problematic, I decided to make this uncertainty the focus of my work. Could the social slippage in these “*romans de mœurs*”¹ have the potential to make them, instead, “texts of resistance?”

The most apt descriptor that I knew for these undetermined and indeterminable categories of identity was a term borrowed from anthropology—liminality. Liminality signifies being on the threshold between two naturally or socially constructed states of being such as “child” and “adult.” While a liminal existence excludes a person from either of those states, it also relieves them of any limitations inherent in them². Applied as a literary term, “liminality” designates a fluid space in which categories and discourses which cannot be encapsulated by traditional binaries begin to take shape.

Anthropologist Victor Turner most famously made use of the term liminality in his studies on ritual, positing that

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (Turner 95)

¹ Social novels.

² A child, for instance is limited by the requirement of obedience to adults. Adults, on the other hand, or limited by their responsibility for children. If one is between these categories, they might be said to have greater freedom than either children or adults.

As figured by de la Houssaye, a *quarteronne* embodies this state of in-betweenness. She is neither black nor white, neither slave nor citizen, and has no national status. She is both hyper-feminine as an object of male desire and castrating as the empowered phallic female who destroys the men who desire her. This study in no way posits that there is any historicity in de la Houssaye's representation of the lives of the *quarteronnes*, yet it has much to tell us about the landscape of the Western imagination in the nineteenth century. In my analysis of liminal gender, race, and national status in these texts, I hope to show how de la Houssaye both caters to and resists these fascinations and anxieties. We will also examine de la Houssaye herself as a liminal figure: she is a professional author and educator who both seeks the attention of the public and fears its scrutiny. She is maternal and ambitious, socially-elevated and poor, respected and reviled. It is from this social chiasma that she explores the tensions between social controls and private desires.

This study, too, will have an element of liminality, seeking to examine the texts through a "kind of 'analytic pluralism'" that Homi Bhabha and Edouard Said prescribe as "the *form* of critical attention appropriate to the cultural effects of the nation" (Bhabha 3). My approach will consist of a way of reading that is aligned with the work of postcolonial theorists as well as with the thought of critics working in the field of gender studies. Through this type of reading, I hope to be able to examine the works more completely and explore the intersections of gender, race, class, and nation.

Existing Research on de la Houssaye

As with many Louisiana authors, critical attention to de la Houssaye's work has been minimal until recently, and has largely focused on the author's biography and cataloging her oeuvre. To date, no in-depth study focusing primarily on *Les*

Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans has been published. Existing scholarship on the author apparently began with a Louisiana State University master's thesis written by Velma Savoie. Savoie's approach was largely biographical and included photographs and interviews with de la Houssaye's grandchildren. Among these was Emma Tarlton Stafford who donated de la Houssaye's papers, including manuscripts, to Louisiana State University. Though the relative obscurity of the subject matter demanded extensive field research on Savoie's part, the thesis remains a fairly romanticized resumé of de la Houssaye's life and works.

A second Louisiana State University thesis, a 1966 doctoral dissertation written by Joseph John Perret, is more critical, and includes numerous efforts to prove or disprove the historicity of de la Houssaye's autobiography and writings through examination of correspondence and public record. Perret's dissertation also carefully examines the personal and professional relationship between de la Houssaye and fellow "Louisiana"³ author George Washington Cable. Perret addresses accusations that Cable plagiarized de la Houssaye, showing, through excerpts of their correspondence, that de la Houssaye willingly participated in and indeed encouraged the publication of two of her stories under Cable's name. Her stories appeared in his collection of "true" stories of Louisiana in exchange for financial remuneration and his assistance in finding publishers for her other works. Perret's research lends valuable insight into de la Houssaye's social, professional, and financial motivations, as well as into her tendency to reconfigure what she refers to as "historical fact" to serve her creative purposes.

³ Cable was born in Louisiana, but his parents were northerners and he claimed to feel more at home in New England (Perret 84).

More recent work includes a chapter by Alice Parker entitled “Evangeline’s Darker Daughters” which appeared in the volume *Louisiana Women Writers*, published in 1992. The essay offers a psychoanalytic reading of the *Quarteronnes* novels that addresses some issues of performative transgressions in the novels. The chapter focuses mainly on *Octavia* and *Violetta*. A shortcoming of the work is that Parker’s understanding of de la Houssaye’s biography appears to have been largely drawn from Savoie’s romanticized version. Parker seems unaware of the research-supported information presented in Perret’s dissertation that undermines or contradicts some of Savoie’s assertions. Finally, researcher Jarrod Hayes is also reading and critiquing the *Quarteronnes* series, and presented a paper in 2003 describing his interest in “policing race, the spectacle of race, the excess of race, forgetting race, the economy of race, the fiction of race, the genealogy of race, [and] the contagion of race” within the *Quarteronnes* novels. His intention is to further explore these themes in a future expanded work.

In the introduction to *Louisiana Women Writers*, Barbara Ewell makes a case for the need for scholarship on Louisiana women’s literature on the grounds that its strength lies in its “sense of place” (Ewell 5). Place can first be understood socio-geographically, referring to the concatenation of Amerindian, European, African, and American populations which is unique to Louisiana. From the inception of “Louisiana” as a colony, it has been marked as a terrain of tension between cultures. As the land itself repeatedly changed hands, the people who were born in it, forcibly relocated to it, and who

emigrated to it were all inscribed with layers of differing cultural ideologies. As Creole⁴, slave, and emigré populations mingled and grafted onto each other, they created new discourses of their own:

these multiple and intersecting identities have complicated the image of both city [New Orleans] and state, making them ripe for literary use... the peculiar otherness of that experience, imposed onto the more familiar layers of southern myth, gender roles, and color prejudice, is precisely the ingredient that distinguishes the contribution of this group of writers to the fascinating place that Louisiana and its Crescent City occupy in the... psyche.
(11- 12)

For Ewell, place can also be understood to mean a woman's "place" in Louisiana: "the [woman] writer's southern sense of place is indelibly marked by her experience as a woman who does 'know her place,' even if she occasionally refuses to stay in it" (5). De la Houssaye's *quarteronnes* are constantly seeking a "place," whether it is construed as sexual, economic, racial, or national. What they find, and perhaps what the author herself found, is that for a Creole *Louisianaise*, plurality and hybridity, or a refusal to be in only one place, is the key to a liveable life. In de la Houssaye's imaginary, New Orleans in the early nineteenth century is a sort of training-ground where women of color must learn to move fluidly between proscribed positions or "places" in the spectra of gender, race, class, and nation in order to satisfy their desires and needs.

The interest in "minor literatures" that has marked literary criticism in recent years has largely ignored Louisiana writing, and more particularly Louisiana woman's writing, as areas of interest, despite its unique contributions to the body of postcolonial

⁴ "Creole" as a term has been redefined in many ways. Throughout this study, its definition should be taken simply to mean "born in a colony" but not indigenous to the colonized land. My use of the term does *not* have asingular racial or national association.

fiction. As Ewell says, “even our most rigorous effort at inclusiveness finally demonstrates just how much more work needs to be done. For example, not only the inevitable gaps of data on obscure figures, but the omission even of whole categories—such as that of women writing in French—indicate important scholarship still needed” (12). This analysis of de la Houssaye, both a relatively obscure figure and a francophone woman writer, and her *Quarteronne* series is an effort to fill in some of the gaps in the study of Louisiana’s literature and the larger field of postcolonial fiction to which it properly belongs.

Considering the rhizomatic nature of literary influence, as posited by Édouard Glissant, it is important to consider de la Houssaye’s work not only as *influenced* by the discourses and representations that preceded it, but also as *influencing* the discourses and representations that followed it. We can show definitively how de la Houssaye influenced the work of better-known contemporary George Cable, but neglect has prevented us from discovering how the work of this author, who may “seem undistinguished in isolation,” has served to influence the writing of later and more “important” writers. If Louisiana’s literature is a literature of ‘place,’ its study will reaffirm that it, too, has a ‘place’ in francophone, American, and Caribbean literary traditions. It is a literature that is worthy of attention as a body of work which is connected to, but also distinct from literatures that are geographically (Caribbean, Southern, American) and thematically (European) proximal.

Sidonie de la Houssaye

The events of Sidonie de la Houssaye’s life have been gathered and documented from public record as well as from the de la Houssaye’s own correspondence and writing by Perret and Savoie. It is important to note that Perret noted several apparent

embellishments in de la Houssaye's versions of her life story. A brief synthesis of Perret and Savoie's biographies begins with the author's birth on August 17th 1820, on her father's plantation in St. John the Baptist Parish in Southeastern Louisiana (Perret 8). Her given name was H el ene Perret. Her father, Ursin Perret, came from a family of "moderately wealthy sugar planters" who first came to Louisiana from Grenoble, France in 1723 (10). Her maternal great-grandfather, Pierre Bossi  (Bossier), may have emigrated to Louisiana from Flandres⁵, and was also a planter. De la Houssaye claimed to have had a private tutor as a child and later to have attended a convent school briefly, but she was most likely primarily an autodidact (16-17). By 1831, the family relocated to St. Mary Parish on the Gulf Coast in south central Louisiana (18). At the age of thirteen, she was married to Louis Pelletier Delahoussaye, who was exactly twice her age (23). Her husband was most likely in the cattle business, as was his family, but de la Houssaye, her preferred spelling of her married name, represented him as being a steamboat captain on Louisiana's Bayou T eche when she met him, despite the fact that there were no steamboats in Bayou T eche until more than two years after their marriage. What is known with more certainty is that M. Delahoussaye did eventually captain a steamboat some time later in his life (26).

The couple had six children, four of whom, three sons and a daughter, survived to adulthood (27-28). The family lived in St. Martinville until 1841 when they returned to de la Houssaye's former home-town of Franklin in St. Mary Parish. De la Houssaye lived in Franklin for the rest of her life. Financial difficulties prompted her to open a school, "The Young Ladies Academy," in 1849 (29). The school closed as a result of the

⁵ De la Houssaye was "imaginative" when giving biographical information, records refer to Bossi  as a native Louisianian, although Houssaye told George Cable the Flandres version (Perret 14).

Civil War, which worsened the family's financial problems as documented by numerous court records showing suits brought against the de la Houssayes in attempts to recover monies owed. The family house was also sold during this period, presumably to satisfy debts (32).

Louis de la Houssaye later found occupation as the local sheriff. In 1863, he was killed, singled out as a representative of the law, his widow alleged, by a secret southern mafia known as "Les Redoubtables" who later found themselves villified in a novel of the same name. The information surrounding her husband's death is vague, Perret reports, but he was certainly no longer sheriff at the time of his murder, which casts doubt upon de la Houssaye's interpretation of the events (35). Just two years after her husband's death, de la Houssaye's daughter Lilia, who had married in 1859, died leaving eight grandchildren for her mother to raise (38).

With the end of the Civil War, de la Houssaye reopened her school, which closed and reopened more than once. She also served a stint as the town postmistress (36). During the 1870's, Houssaye began to write, and published her first work "Le Mari de Marguerite" in serial form in 1883. By 1884, her correspondence with popular American author George Cable was underway, and she was persistently seeking his help in getting more of her own work published (42). By this point she had written, and was seeking publication for several short stories, a Louisiana novel called *Claire* and a patent medicine story called "The Black Draught" (44). *Octavia*, the first of the *Quarteronnes* series, was also submitted to a publisher in 1884. *Gina*, the second *Quarteronnes* novel, was finished in 1887, presumably followed by *Violetta* and *Dahlia*, though by 1890, de la Houssaye had not yet found a publisher for them (60).

Finally, in 1892 Charles Lassigne from *Le Meschacébé* contacted her about publishing the *Quarteronnes* series (66). It was agreed that the novels would be published, not serially, but as bound books in the following order: *Octavia*, *Violetta*, *Gina*, and then *Dahlia*. De la Houssaye chose the penname “Louise Raymond,” which she used exclusively for the *Quarteronnes* series, presumably because of their controversial subject matter (67). Before she could see these plans come to fruition, however, Sidonie de la Houssaye died after a brief illness on February 18, 1894 at the age of seventy-four (68). That same year, *Octavia* was published and greeted by controversy and protest that undoubtedly stemmed from subject matter which included not only interracial sex but portrayals of pedophilia, incest, and assorted other criminal or frowned-upon behavior. Next, *Violetta* was begun as a serial, finally appearing in bound book form in 1895 (68). *Gina* followed as a serial in 1895 and ran until the fall of 1897. Finally, *Dahlia* began as a serial in the spring of 1897 and ended on July 30, 1898.

Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans

The *Quarteronnes* series tells the stories of several women who are involved either directly or tangentially in the *plaçage* system of concubinage in New Orleans.⁶ Although some of the novels span decades and others only a few years⁷, they all refer to and include a central cast of six quarteronnes who belong to the same generation: Octavia, Violetta⁸, Dahlia, Adoréah (born Jeannette), Althéa (born Gothe), and Gina.

⁶ Due to the rarity of De la Houssaye’s work and the difficulties involved in obtaining copies of the *Les Quarteronnes* series, it is unreasonable to expect that readers of this proposal will be familiar with these texts. To remedy this, I will provide an appendix that summarizes the key events of each novel and shows how they are connected. All references to the novels throughout the proposal can be placed into context via a review of this appendix.

⁷ Specific dates within the novels are absent, although in her introduction the author claims that all of the events take place between 1800 and 1830

⁸ Violetta’s name is probably taken from the character “Violetta Valery” from Verdi’s opera “La Traviata,” which was based on Dumas *filis’* *La Dame aux caméllias*. She uses the name “Valery” as well for several Ashtons in *Dahlia*. Both opera and the work of both Dumas are key influences on the series.

Also central to the novels is a wealthy white Créole woman, Léontine Castel, who is heavily involved in the lives of three of the *quarteronnes*.

In tone, the novels largely belong to the romantic tradition, and their plots are nothing short of operatic. We see the connections to romantic ideals in the characters' individual struggles against authority in the form of society or patriarchal figures as well as emphasis on the power of strong emotion. The connection between "nature" and "purity" in the novels also suggests romanticism. The clearest example of the privileging the value of nature can be found in the virtuous Dahlia's love for flowers and her near-magical ability to cultivate them. Melodrama, a term whose own etymology⁹ recalls music and the opera, is also very prevalent in the novels and there are several apparent links to opera throughout the series. The melodrama's stock-in-trade, dramatic and suspenseful conflict between a villain and an innocent hero/heroine featuring dramatic rescues or tragic deaths, can be found repeatedly in every novel.

In his dissertation, Perret thoroughly discusses de la Houssaye's literary influences. The most important of these, in Perret's analysis, is Alexandre Dumas *père*¹⁰ (282). In correspondence, de la Houssaye refers to Dumas's work several times, even comparing her relationship with Cable to Dumas's with his teams of secretaries, "Alexandre Dumas, d'heureuse mémoire, employait continuellement une dizaine de secrétaires qui inventaient les sujets pour lui, de là, la quantité d'ouvrages qu'il a écrits" (88). Perret also demonstrates how a murder /suicide scene in *Octavia* mirrors one in Dumas *père*'s "Antony," a play to which "our author alluded... on many occasions"

⁹ Melodrama can literally be translated to mean music-drama.

¹⁰ Dumas *père*, son of a French nobleman and a Dominican slave, was a person of liminal racial status, and De la Houssaye's admiration for him and his work may have influenced, or justified, her choice of subject matter to some extent. His work influenced hers in many ways, direct and indirect. Examples include an iron mask in *Dahlia* and the murder-suicide in *Violetta*.

(222). A connection can also be made with Dumas *filis* and *La dame aux camélias*, whose demi-mondaine heroine, like Octavia, dislikes the scent of flowers and thus distances herself from the purifying influence of nature (215). *Violetta*, too, reminds us of this work, since Verdi's opera *La Traviata*, which was based on *La dame aux camélias* and which was performed during de la Houssaye's lifetime, also features a heroine named Violetta. *Gina* has plot elements in common with "Henri III et sa cour," by the same author, as well as with Hugo's *Hernani* (257). Certainly de la Houssaye's complicated plotting and fondness for unexpected twists and connections to a distant past all support Perret's theories regarding the influences of both Dumas *père* and *filis* on her work.

Perret also points out connections in de la Houssaye's oeuvre to works by other authors. Sir Walter Scott's *Bride of Lammermoor*'s characters share the name of Ashton with *Gina*'s cast (266). There are distinct similarities regarding ideas about heredity in the *Quarteronnes* series and the Rougon-Macquart series by Émile Zola¹¹ (198). Longfellow's *Evangeline* seems to have informed her *Pouponne et Balthazar* (285). The gothic overtones and incest fascination in Chateaubriand's *René* also make an appearance in the *Quarteronnes* series, particularly in *Dahlia* which features a domineering patriarch and mutually passionate "siblings." De la Houssaye provided lists of other favorite authors whom she may have been influenced by (or imitated) less explicitly: "ne sont-ce pas là les rois de la littérature? Voyons: Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, Longfellow, Racine, Molière, Goethe..." and "voici... une série d'ouvrages de nos meilleurs auteurs: Mme Anaïs Ségalas, Lamartine, Cooper et autres" (in Perret 355).

¹¹ Zola's correspondence with and influence on De la Houssaye are discussed at length later in the section on "liminality and gender."

Along with the romantic and melodramatic elements in de la Houssaye's work, there is an effort to employ theories of realism and naturalism/essentialism à la Zola or Balzac. Examples of the zolaesque in her work include her insistence on the corrupting influence of "black" blood on Octavia and Violetta, as well as the utter decimation of men and their families as a result of their innate, fatal attraction to *quarteronnes*. De la Houssaye stops short of considering her novels as social laboratories and herself as the detached observer, however, though she did refer to the series as *romans de moeurs* (social novels) and attempt to represent them as fact-based (Perret 206). There is no doubt that the novels are romantic in conception and style, but the introduction of 'realistic' or 'naturalistic' and even 'moralizing' themes add depth to the texts and provide some of the richest passages for critical analysis of the roles of race, gender, and nation in the series.

Liminality and Race

In the first two chapters of this study, I analyze liminality and race. I posit that because occupying racially liminal space is ultimately untenable for most characters, they tend to gravitate towards a more fixed racial category either permanently or temporarily. I identify three basic types of racial category shifts in the novels which I call *passing*, *ascending*, and *sliding*.

Passing relies heavily on physical similarity to the group into which one wishes to "pass," as well as some ability to reproduce the language, mannerisms, and mores of that group. This is the modus operandi of the inherently evil *quarteronne*, likened throughout the novels to orientalized figures: sorceresses, sirens, enchantresses, and demons. They are called "chameleons," able to blend, like the lizard, into whatever social background suits them. These women employ their "whiteness" as a means to

advance personal agendas that are entirely motivated by their “blackness,” and do so with virtually unlimited success.

Passing is typified in the story of Octavia, who is, perhaps, the arch-villainess *quarteronne*, and who serves to coordinate and support the projects of the other “evil” *quarteronnes* throughout the series. In the novel bearing her name, her performance of whiteness is completely convincing to the narrator, “je fus surprise de la décence de sa toilette; jamais, en la regardant, on se fut douté qu’elle avait du sang noir dans les veines” (*Octavia* 44). She also convinces the elevated social circles of Europe where she “passes” as her lover Alfred’s wife. She is described by the narrator as innately endowed with taste, intelligence, grace, and to some extent, kindness towards other women of her race. She is even given some credit for being a loving and faithful partner to Alfred. She is, as Bhabha would say, “not quite/not white” but she is dangerously close (*The Location of Culture* 92).

Octavia’s performance of whiteness is “dangerous” for its ability to devalue biology as the basis for social hierarchies, it also suggests, as Marjorie Garber discusses, an even more terrifying possibility. If Octavia can be mistaken for a white person, then it is must also be possible for a white person to be mistaken for a black person and thus stripped of their innate subjectivity, as we see in Mary’s kidnapping (Garber 283). Passing becomes a crime-- the less intentional, the more severe-- because it threatens a disruption in the dominant power structure: it constitutes a “tres-passing onto the terrain of another class” and a displacing of the white patriarchy (283). Octavia’s punishment for the crime of passing will be her displacement by her lover’s racially “pure” cousin.

As this displacement approaches, de la Houssaye anxiously begins to eliminate references to Octavia’s whiteness and to list the proof of Octavia’s “blackness”:

dishonesty, uncontrolled passion, obsession, and ostentation. This emphatic underscoring of alterity, much of which stands in direct contrast to descriptions of Octavia from earlier in the novel, serves to justify Alfred's decision to return to a system where the reproduction of untainted whiteness is assured. It also reminds the reader that Octavia's transgressive behavior, her passing, should not be viewed as curious or entertaining, but as serious and threatening.

Being neither black nor white, Octavia is un-limited and exists between the boundaries that have been defined by her society to keep women and all non-white persons subjugated. Octavia does not docilely allow her body to be reinscribed with the lack of subjectivity that comes with "the naturalization of social phenomena," however (Loomba 122). Her vengeance is to literally and figuratively penetrate the sanctity of the white patriarch's domain, where she steals the proof of his purity, authority, and virility--his white infant daughter. She uses Mary, her lover's daughter whom she steals and raises as her own,¹² to systematically destroy his legacy by ensuring the death of his children, and, ultimately, Alfred himself. She then escapes unpunished, presumably returning to a place such as the utopically-figured Europe of the texts, where she can continue to define her "race" as suits her needs.

Ascending is a term reserved for quarteronnes who were not only physically indistinguishable from "white" women, but are also identical in terms of de la Houssaye's idea of performative "whiteness." This means they are maternal, self-controlled, educated, chaste, and self-reliant. This is the trajectory of the inherently good *quarteronnes* who, through their seemingly self-hatred, virtue, good taste, pure French, and

¹² Octavia deliberately "perverts" Mary (Alfred's daughter) while raising her as her own child abroad, then returns her to New Orleans and instigates an incestuous affair between Mary and her brother Léonce, who have no idea of their consanguinity. When Alfred is made aware of the affair and Mary's real identity, he finds the couple and shoots Mary, then himself

consistent, flawless enacting of their “whiteness,” become worthy of the love of white men. Some men go so far as to consent to legitimize their relationships and thus the *quarтеронnes* themselves thus permanently elevating the women to the status of “white” in the eyes of French society.

Ascending is perhaps best demonstrated in the story of Gothe. Gothe’s loyalty to the ideologies of white Creole society is both her downfall and her redemption. In order to escape being *placée* into the custody of Don Ignatio, she takes refuge with her beau, the noble white painter, Horace Delmond. She loves the Delmond, but has refused his offers of protection until now in order to safeguard her virginity and honor. Without the financial transactions that typify entry into the *plaçage* system, we can read her virtue as having been *sacrificed* to save her life and her love rather than having been exchanged for financial security. In the catholic and romantic paradigm of the novel, this sacrifice is redemptive. Moreover, the presence of Gothe’s “black blood” and her forced association with her licentious sister Adoréah, *la quarтерonne* and the other *quarтеронnes*, make her extended resistance to erotic and financial pressure seem heroic to the reader. She is fighting against not only societal but genetic influences to which an exclusively “white” heroine is not subject. The “blackness” that in Louisiana denies her the right to a legal marriage with her true love actually legitimizes the sexual exchange into which she ultimately enters. She has made the *best possible* moral choice for a woman in her situation.

Gothe can therefore be read as virtuous, despite being in a sexual relationship that would have been catastrophic had she been a young white Creole girl. In other terms, her physically liminal race makes it possible for her to achieve a purely performative race. She *achieves* a valorized racial identity in the universe of the novel by *deserving* it rather

than being born into it. This stands in contrast to Edward Tinker's *Toucoutou*, in which the heroine is mercilessly taunted and eventually forced to flee New Orleans when her attempt to *pass* is made public. In Cable's story "Tite Poulette," it is discovered through a well-timed *deus ex machina* that the heroine is, in fact, white, though she has always believed herself to be a *quarteronne*. Cable's white hero is thus spared the indignity and complications of loving a *quarteronne* and conveys the same message regarding the essential "truth" of race as *Toucoutou*.

While it still privileges whiteness as the ideal, the conception of race as performative sets de la Houssaye's novels apart from the prevailing opinion of the time, namely that race was essential and absolute. Race is inscribed in the flesh and, particularly, in the blood of a person, giving rise to the infamous "one drop" rule for determining racial status and the binarism of the Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1892. De la Houssaye's novels are remarkable for their (admittedly) partial relinquishing of both antiquated ideas about racial essentialism and hysteria about maintaining "racial purity." They are also relatively unique in ability to imagine multi-racialism as something other than *always* a tragedy or an outrage.

Sliding is the term I reserve for white male characters who associate themselves with unwhite women to the extent that they begin to become like them—libidinous, cruel, and uncontrolled. As this occurs, the author begins to describe them as possessing physical features such as dark coloring or reddened lips that she had heretofore reserved for non-white characters. In some cases, de la Houssaye suddenly reveals that characters who are "sliding" actually do have hispanic or other not-quite-white ancestors, which underscores their new liminal racial status. Again, we find that race can indeed change

over time and that even the fortress of “whiteness” is not unassailable. As I moved on to explore themes of gender in the novel, I made similar discoveries.

Liminality and Gender

In the next two chapters, I go on to examine how characters in the novels tend to have genders that fell between or outside of traditional norms. I begin by analyzing how de la Houssaye departed from traditional visions of a feminine norm in her representations of women. I will argue that while de la Houssaye does not completely reject traditional ideas about what constitutes femininity, she expands the definition to include the kind of qualities that single women like herself need to attain a liveable life. Instead of passive piety, de la Houssaye advocates an active form of inter-female charity which takes women not only out of the home but out of the country. This means that their benevolence will reach the largest possible number of women and children in need.

Instead of chastity until marriage, de la Houssaye advocates a repudiation of sexuality that includes a skeptical take on the benefits of matrimony for women. Far more acceptable and safe is a passionate, sometimes physically erotic attachment to other, similarly idealized women. Submissiveness towards men is replaced by agency—a woman ideally works to ensure that her family can survive and flourish without or even despite a patriarch. Domesticity is reworked to become nurture & maternity.

In de la Houssaye’s vision of the family, it is the mother who takes on central importance rather than the father or the home itself. The family will be intact as long as the children remain in close proximity to the mother, who has been freed to travel wherever she wants or needs to go. She can even to increase her family asexually through adoption if she so chooses. Agency, delimited movement, control over self and others, all privileges that traditionally reserved for men, are the hallmarks of de la

Houssaye's ideal woman. De la Houssaye also privileges education and financial prowess for women, again, kinds of knowledge that were typically considered both masculine and masculinizing. Similarly, the few male characters in the novels who are positively portrayed are these idealized female characters—they are nurturing, charitable, and asexual. We see, then, that most privileged characters in the series are effectively transgendered: they possess all the most valorized characteristics of males and females alike.

Negatively portrayed characters, on the other hand, have a traditionally “feminine” type of weakness. They are the barques of frailty, unable to resist temptation, uncontrolled, unintelligent, unethical, and prodigal. Some male characters begin to become physically frail and effeminate as they fall further from the ideal. In the same vein, we find that female characters who have departed from de la Houssaye's ideal are portrayed as being “masculinized” in a negative way. They embrace violence, lack compassion, lack self-control and are libidinal. These characters are typically over-gendered and over-sexualized, possessing what de la Houssaye sees as the greatest weaknesses of both men and women as we will see in the cases of Octavia, Adoréah, and Violetta.

To a large extent, gender and race function similarly within the *Quarteronne* texts, and it is difficult to disentangle them and analyze them separately. Racial difference amplifies gender difference and vice-versa. As Marjorie Garber says, “... Categories like ‘gender’ and ‘race’ have been made to intersect and cross over one another in the service of political rhetoric and cultural domination. To change sex is to slide along a power differential. To change power is to change sex [and, one could argue, race]” (271). The impossibility of fixing the race of the *quarteronnes* is echoed by the

impossibility of fixing their gender status. In my analysis, I will examine the ways in which gender norms are reinforced and transgressed, as well as how transgression is rewarded and punished in the sexual economy of these novels.

It is important to remember how pertinent the author's own life experience is to the ways in which she develops themes of gender and agency in her work. Though de la Houssaye's authority on racial otherness is at best questionable, her experience in negotiating the divide between femininity and agency in nineteenth-century Louisiana was real. We know from Perret's biography that de la Houssaye was an entrepreneur who founded and ran a school in Franklin, Louisiana for several years. This may explain her familiarity with the extensive bibliography of Western literature that influenced her own. Revelations of her financial difficulties and her expressed desire to be commercially successful as an author explain apparent conflicts of interest in her work. Where her own opinions were not popular or clashed with her public persona as a gently-bred, elderly (white) Creole lady, she supplemented them with more commercially appealing and socially acceptable ones. Moreover, indications in her correspondence that she hoped to see her work sold abroad or translated and distributed in other regions of the country explain an attempt to write novels which could be interpreted as either socially progressive or socially conservative, depending on the inclination of her audience.

Other biographical details relate more particularly to events in the *Quartermen*. Perret shows that de la Houssaye's readiness to opine on sensitive subjects made her many enemies. Her detractors publicly aired their grievances in the newspapers of Franklin and New Orleans. De la Houssaye found the public criticism of her work and her lifestyle very humiliating and a threat to her reputation as an honest woman (Perret 48-50). Hence, from the perspective of a woman, a professional, and a public figure, de

de la Houssaye writes Octavia, Gothe, and Adoréah, who can, to a greater or lesser extent, be said to resemble her in these categories. When Adoréah appears in the newspaper office to publicly flog the reporter who libeled her and when Gothe weeps over being falsely accused of debauchery in society columns, we are perhaps reading de la Houssaye's own resentment and embarrassment at being publicly singled out. These are not the only instances in which the author's frustrations over being criticized for being "more than" or "other than" what she is expected to be are played out in the lives of her characters.

We know, too, from de la Houssaye's biography that she was a reader and correspondent of Émile Zola who encouraged her to keep writing. "In [a] letter dated May 4, 1892, Zola urged her to send her manuscripts to the publisher Charpentier. He also counseled patience" (Perret 66). It is interesting that Zola encouraged de la Houssaye while he reviled the work of other romantic female authors, George Sand in particular. This may be because he was impressed by the efforts at naturalism in her work, efforts which are stronger in *Les Quarteronnes* than elsewhere in her oeuvre. A second biographical connection to Zola is a letter in which de la Houssaye defends *Octavia* to Cable by claiming that "L'horrible drame raconté dans Octavia et vrai dans tous ses détails a excité l'horreur des éditeurs américains qui cependant ne rougissent pas de traduire et de publier les indécences d'Émile Zola..." (Perret 159).

It seems possible, if not indeed probable, that Zola's letter and his own portrait of the *demi-mondaine* Nana, published in 1880, influenced de la Houssaye's depiction of her *quarteronnes* as masculinized, ambiguous figures who are doomed to immorality by their heredity (159). Charles Bernheimer writes of Nana's masturbatory interlude in front of the mirror that "the veil over Nana's [sexual] organ has nothing reassuring about it.

On the contrary, it contributes to a terrifying fantasy of the phallic woman who both absorbs...masculinity and asserts the exclusive power of ...female autonomy” (223). The horror of the phallic woman looms large in *Les Quarteronnes* from Octavia, who single-handedly destroys an entire family and escapes punishment, to Violetta, who “enslaves” men with a single glance. This recasting of the white male as the victim and subject threatens the foundations of white Creole society in a way which paralleled the threats of Americanization: the men are weakened and castrated. Separated from their wives, there is no hope for white male progeny. Moreover, since their lovers are masculinized, non-reproductive women, even illegitimate “unwhite” children are not possible. Those who have legitimate children already see them castrated or destroyed as well: sons die or go mad, daughters enter convents.

The empowered, “phallic” female is capable of more than destruction, however. Though the phallus that gives them agency robs them of reproductive ability, they remain productive in other senses. Adoréah is a musician, a composer, an actress, a painter, a sculptor, and a seamstress. She is literate and has a head for business, which she demonstrates when she deftly drafts Gina’s *plaçage* contract in a way that will be extremely advantageous to Gina (and will provide a hefty commission for Adoréah as well). Though it is construed as entirely corruptive in the text, she is something of a mentor to Gina, helping her to increase her freedom and giving her necessary instruction in how to achieve financial security through *plaçage*, which was not guaranteed by the system. Her involvement in arranging the rape of her sister is indefensible, but her desire to see her sister established with the wealthy Don Ignatio, rather than the impoverished painter Horace, is rational and supportive in Adoréah’s unemotional, capitalist view of sex. Octavia is also cast in the role of the mentor to younger *quarteronnes*, though her

advice on the benefits of choosing a wealthy protector is scorned by Dahlia. De la Houssaye suggests, though, that Octavia is more successful with other young *quarteronnes* not discussed in the novel, so in initiating them into the business of being a courtesan, she is in a sense reproducing herself by creating other woman who are socially and financially liberated from a life at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Liminal gender, therefore, is destructive to and excluded by Western ideologies but has its own extratraditional rewards.

Liminality and Nation

In the final chapters, I conduct a study of what Nationality means in the novels. It seems natural to reserve this for the last chapters because, as I read it, no character's nationality can be disentangled from gender and race. Like gender and race, nationality is unstable and unfixed. This is partially because it is determined by such destabilized categories of identity and partially because of the unique situation of New Orleans as a city defined by plurality and hybridity. Lacking any strong identification with Americans, white Creoles, or any other of the city's populations, de la Houssaye idealizes a liminal, undefined nationality.

The multiplicity of diasporas within New Orleans are arranged into slippery hierarchies by de la Houssaye according to language, mores, relationship to the metropole, race, religion, education, wealth, and myriad other distinctions. She constantly violates her own systems of arrangement, however: it becomes impossible to actually fix many of the characters as belonging to one single nationality or class. Léontine Percy Castel, the protagonist of *Gina*, is an excellent example of this. Her father is descended from British nobility, her mother is genteelly poor Créole. She grows up in Louisiana and marries a wealthy Canadian, and then gives birth to and rears her

children in Europe before returning to New Orleans. There, her daughter marries a Breton and moves to Europe, while her son has a child with a *quarteronne* who is raised for a time in Louisiana and then sent to Europe where she passes into “white” society.

What, then, is the nationality of this family? What is their place in the social hierarchy? They are not quite American, nor are they European, African, or Canadian (all three being indeterminate labels themselves), either. The only umbrella term which can be used to cover most of them is “Creole,” and yet this is a word which applies to every colony and no colony, every nation and no nation.

“Creole” itself is slippery and liminal, a word which does a better job of explaining what one is *not*—European, Native American, African—than what one *is*. The *quarteronnes* in her novels are the children of other *quarteronnes*, of mulattas, of Creole men, of Cuban men, of Spanish men, and despite all this hybridization, they have the appearance of Western European women. Some of them also meet all the performative requirements of Western European women as well, while the others are performatively hybrid—a little African, a little European, a little Hispanic. The result of this lack of “nationness,” this liminal national status, unavoidable in a place which still identifies itself as *America’s* southernmost *European* and northernmost *Caribbean* city, is constant movement within the text. Belonging nowhere in particular, the *quarteronnes* and their satellite characters can make a home at virtually any point on the Atlantic seaboard.

Ultimately, De la Houssaye sees New Orleans as being overtaken by unworthy, performatively unwhite/unfeminine populations, leaving those who wish to retain their Frenchness only one choice, escape. By the end of the series, therefore, a small colony of expatriates from New Orleans is established in Paris. Here they are able to retain a

liminal status, not quite French, not quite American or Creole, while they wait for New Orleans to evolve into a more liveable, less rigid space. Yet, despite its faults and prejudices, New Orleans remains a sort of *mère-patrie* to which some characters maintain a yearning to return, hoping that it may become the loving, accepting motherland that they are seeking. For the *quarteronnes* and their children, however, this is not to be.

Conclusion

What is the importance of liminality in a postcolonial text? In an ideological system preoccupied with inscribing people into inviolable categories of identity, liminality provides opportunities for movement, for empowerment, and for resistance. In *Poetics of Relation*, Edouard Glissant argues against the myth of the unique root: “Most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around the idea of power—the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root—rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other” (14). Glissant sees the formation of a functional system as hampered by a preoccupation with singularity and purity—the solution lies in accepting (national) identity as springing from a tangle of many “roots.” If *métissage* can be read as the unity of binary identities, then liminality and creolization are the syntheses, the grafting of n -ary¹³ terms of identification into fluid new categories that flow between and over hierarchical structures.

It is not appropriate to valorize de la Houssaye as a radical feminist or postcolonialist author. As we have established, progressiveness in her texts can partially be attributed to a desire to find the largest possible market for her work. Yet, in her effort to be pleasing to the varied diasporas that constituted her potential audience, de la

¹³ In mathematics, a binary relation is a relation between two sets, while an n -ary relation is a relation among n (an unknown and unlimited number) sets.

Houssaye creates hierarchies and then implodes them. She reinforces racial stereotypes and then transgresses them. She reproduces patriarchal regimes and then overthrows them. A text which one might have expected to be another normalizing surveillance of race, gender, and nation contains discourses of resistance.

In a sense, these conflicts mirror a key problem of colonialism in general: in colonizing the Other, the goal is *altericide*, a destruction of otherness and a replication of the self. Yet, if the colonizers are successful in eliminating otherness, they erode the grounds for their superiority and thus the justification for their invasion of other cultures. De la Houssaye is writing from exactly this crisis point, and her characters embody it. The violation of enslaved black women by white males results in the gradual diminishing of visible otherness in the resulting children, which in turn allows ‘black’ women to pass and trespass social boundaries. De la Houssaye deplores the violation, deplores the passing, and deplores the boundaries, all at the same time. As a middle-class white woman, she is divided against herself; hence, her writing takes on a life outside her intentions and ideologies. The inability to define a stance on issues of gender, nation, and race in de la Houssaye makes a “creolized reading” possible—as readers and critics we are invited to *reraconter* (re-narrate) the story of the *quarteronnes* as a text of resistance. I offer my own rereading of these spaces between acceptance and rejection of norms of race, gender, and nation throughout this study in the hope of prompting many more such rereadings of de la Houssaye and other examples of Louisiana’s literatures.

Chapter One

Passing, Ascending, Sliding: The Rise of an “Inter-Race” in Louisiana and *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle Orléans*

In Louisiana, perhaps even more so than in other places, the line between what is history and what is fiction is indistinct. Very often, what is accepted as fact is discovered to be myth, and occasionally, what is believed to be myth is revealed as fact. This is in large part due to a tension between pride and secrecy that characterizes the cultural productions of the region. In her study of literary portrayals of quadroon balls, Monique Guillory, a New Orleans native, writes that “...in New Orleans, ...we prefer things off the record, under the table, and through the grapevine...” (19). When it comes to matters of race, this preference for secrecy spreads far beyond the city limits. This being the case, when one is analyzing a text written in or about Louisiana, it is often necessary to revisit what is known versus what is rumored about the culture, its traditions, and its history.

In the introduction to this work, I made the claim that Sidonie de la Houssaye’s portrayal of quadroons is highly mythologized. In order to better separate her fictions from fact, and to show where they overlap, it is important to review select moments in the history of Louisiana and the Americas which gave rise to the institution of *plaçage*. This will allow me to situate these texts within the broad cultural trends which may have led de la Houssaye to her subject. It will also provide a contrasting view of *plaçage* that is based on studies and documents which are more reliable than the sheaf of notes and clippings allegedly left behind by the narrator’s *grandmère*.

After a review of the pertinent historical information, I will move on to examine how some texts, both historical and literary, have influenced the racial hierarchy of de la Houssaye’s *Quarteronne* series. In terms of literary influence, as mentioned in the

previous chapter, the work of Émile Zola seems very definitely to have had a role in de la Houssaye's portrayals of the human body as a fleshy expression of some essential "racial truth." The connection she draws between key physical features and emotional traits, for instance, aligns very closely with Zola's Naturalist theories.

Though there are some obvious conflicts between Romantic and Naturalist philosophies, de la Houssaye's writing nevertheless reflects the influence of both. Naturalism, with its emphasis on "realism," regards the novel as a sort of petri dish where heredity is an inescapable truth and the author's role is merely to record without embellishment the inevitable, "factual" results of interactions between heredities. Zola's famous Rougon-Macquart series is allegedly an extended experiment of this nature which sees one family member after another fall prey to hereditary "flaws." De la Houssaye's racial taxonomy and the reasoning behind it, however, are more slippery and convoluted than Zola's vision of heredity, and in them we see again the Romantic tendency to rebel against established "truths."

Whereas Zola's system is relatively fixed, with the trajectory of each individual's life written into his physiognomy at birth, the bodies of de la Houssaye's characters are not always so docile. Some who are destined by parentage for a life at the margins of society are unaccountably born with both the desire and the resources to rise to its apex. Others, though born with inherited privilege stamped into their features, are inexorably drawn down from their "rightful" place atop the social hierarchy towards literally and figuratively "darker" society. These movements *à rebours*, against the flow of prevailing social currents, make it something of a challenge map out de la Houssaye's racial hierarchy, a project which will be initiated in this chapter and continued in the next.

A catalyst in these shifts in racial and social is the influence of another, and very different, kind of text: the newspaper. De la Houssaye had a tangled relationship with the “media” of her day, which reveals itself both in and out of her fiction. The novels are, of course, based on newspaper clippings that the author has found. Additionally, each *Quarteronne* novel relies upon the voice of the print media to advance its plot at some point. De la Houssaye imagines the newspapers of her New Orleans devoting themselves to the task of recording every detail of the life of a *quarteronne* from the moment she arrives on the sexual market. Every triumph and every crime, from the square footage of a new palace to the grisly details of the duels she inspires, is made public. The white elite is not exempt from media attention, either. They, too, find that all their comings and goings are duly catalogued, whether they are achieving new career highs or bankrupting themselves to satisfy a mistress’ caprice. The papers are always there, libeling the virtuous Gothe, enlightening a naïve wife as to her husband’s philandering, or being manipulated by Octavia to achieve her revenge.

The effect of this surfeit of awareness is that the newspapers not only record the shifting social/racial status of the characters, they instigate and media-te these shifts. Passing, one type of social/racial shift in the novels, depends heavily on secrecy, for instance. It is impossible to pass when one has become so highly recognizable, even famous, for one’s alterity. Those characters who seek to “pass” must find ways of avoiding or fooling the watchful eye of the media, a project which is not always successful. “Sliding,” another type of movement, in which a character loses social/ground through performative “unwhiteness” is equally affected by public attention. If he or she is not caught in the act of “unwhiteness,” if it remains a secret, then no loss of status occurs. It is the newspapers which signal society to mistrust and scorn these “black

sheep.” There is one additional kind of social/racial travel in the novels which I will discuss. This movement, “ascending,” entails a permanent “upgrade” in racial status. Like “passing,” “ascending” requires a complete repression of the “truth” about one’s racial status. In the case of “ascending,” however, the effort that such a complete repression requires, even the desire for it, is racially “redemptive.” The rejection of “unwhiteness” is so total that all traces of it disappear, and all that is required to be accepted by the elite is their ignorance. Those characters who seek to “ascend,” therefore, will jealously control all knowledge of their lives by making themselves invisible to the public eye. Only by remaining behind the walls of the sacred family domicile or the mother church, as we will see, will this be accomplished.

Louisiana’s Inter-Racial History

Though New Orleans has had a reputation as the Americas’ *ne plus ultra* site for exotic, erotic, and available females for almost three centuries, it began as a city with a severe shortage of women. Scholars such as Kimberly Hanger and Virginia Domínguez have reviewed the population data for the city of New Orleans beginning with its founding in 1718 and shown that the shortage of women in all racial categories, but particularly white European women, was extreme. The city’s original population of 470 was overwhelmingly male except for a handful of European wives who had followed their husbands to the colony. The situation virtually guaranteed that male colonists seeking marriage and/or heterosexual interaction would have to broaden their search criteria to include *any* female, race notwithstanding. Even then, the odds were not in their favor. It is also worth noting that initially, the unmarried European women who came to Louisiana were not the virgin *filles à la cassette*, but women who were celled

from French asylums and jails, and who were apparently thought to be “‘ugly, ignorant, irascible, and promiscuous’” (Martin 61).

As for the regionally-famous *filles à la cassette*, groups of young, middle-class, French virgins with outstanding domestic skills who were hand-selected by the church and sent abroad to populate the colony between 1728 and 1751, there is doubt as to whether they existed at all. No documents show proof of their departure from Europe or arrival in New Orleans, though a historical marker currently standing in Biloxi, Mississippi nevertheless claims to commemorate their arrival in a neighboring area. Like the *quarteronnes*, the myth of the *filles* loomed large in Louisiana’s imagination in the nineteenth century. The prevalence of the *filles* in cultural lore may, in fact, have been a means of disguising the role that women of color played in populating the colonies. White Creole families in Louisiana hurried to claim *filles* as their progenitors despite the fact that even if the *filles* existed, they could hardly have been fertile enough to have brought forth the generations of Louisianians attributed to them. It seems inevitable that many of the families listing *filles* as their matriarchs are actually descended from women of color, local natives, French inmates, or some combination of the three.

The first large group of African slaves to arrive in New Orleans came in 1719 when the city was just a year old. Slaves had arrived in St. Domingue (Haiti) long before then, however, and both rape and concubinage by slave owners had already produced a significant interracial population. The women in this relatively new social category already had a reputation for an extreme beauty “described as resembling [that of] the high-born Hindus of India” (Martin 61). These famed “*sirènes*” were in high demand among the men of New Orleans as either “fancy” slaves designated for sexual service to their owner or, if they were free, mistresses. The hunger for these women was partially

satisfied by a 1782 decree designed to encourage the importation of African slaves from the West Indies which allowed West Indian slaves to be brought into Louisiana duty-free. The practice of importing West Indian slaves into New Orleans for the entertainment of local men, or for any other reason, ended abruptly when the slave revolt in St. Domingue revealed that the island was a nurturing rebellion as well as exotic beauties (Hanger 11).

Those women of mixed racial heritage already living in New Orleans must have found that their sexual currency reached, at this point, a new high. Free women of color could use this commoditization of their alterity to enter into *plaçage* arrangements with white men. These arrangements, famously, involved a contract which obliged a man to provide housing and expenses in exchange for exclusive sexual rights to his new mistress. When the relationship ended, women typically retained the house and possibly additional benefits, depending upon the case. If a slave, a woman of color was sometimes able to parlay sexual availability into manumission or the funds needed to purchase herself as well as preferential treatment. While de la Houssaye's representation of *plaçage* as a system which allowed *quarteronnes* to accumulate vast wealth and extensive property is not supported by historians, many women of color did find benefits in these relationships.

Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* population, therefore, was engendered both locally from first-generation African slaves and abroad from West Indian slaves who had European fathers. This confluence further confuses the tortuous systems of racial classification that were at play in the region. If a woman of color could trace her ancestry back to St. Domingue, it was likely she had mixed racial heritage, though she might be recorded as "black" or "negro" upon her arrival in Louisiana. Similarly, if a white man could trace his ancestry back to colonial Louisiana's earliest days, it was very possible that instead of a *fille*, his female ancestor was also of mixed racial heritage. A child with

two such persons as parents would be categorized as a half-, quarter-, or an eighth-
“black” based on unsafe assumptions. Attempts to quantify and qualify the “purity”¹⁴ of
one’s “blood” were, therefore, not only genetically unsound but fatally doomed to
imprecision. For this reason, many white Creole families clung firmly to the *filles* stories
and disdained to submit the family to rigorous genealogical inquiry. This is also the
reason the terms “race” or “interracial” within this study should be considered to refer to
a fallible cultural system of categorization and not as recognition of a biological basis for
such categorizations. Similarly, use of all terms such as “quarteronne,” “mulatto,” or
“octoroon” should be understood to reflect only the use of these terms in the original
texts and not to imply the validity of mathematical formulations for determining race.
Scholars Martha Hodes and Alecia P. Long have preferred to refer to the “color line” and
to “sex across the color line,” but this study will rely on more standard terminology
simply because within de la Houssaye’s novels, “color” difference exists only in the
abstract: generally the skin color of the heroines and villainesses is the last thing that will
betray their racial status, not the first. The “color line” becomes as indistinguishable as
the “race line,” if not more so.

The growth of Louisiana’s population of *gens de couleur libres* cannot only be
attributed to the benefits it provided for the white male population. Women, too,
benefited from these relationships. Frequently, slave holders who conceived a child with
a slave manumitted both the child and mother. Women who were *placée* had two crucial
freedoms that even wealthy white women often lacked: they were generally allowed to
participate in the selection of a potential partner, and they could become financially
secure and independent. While contracts were not always formalized, the understanding

¹⁴ “purity” being used here in the parlance of the time to refer to “Europeanness.”

was that the children of *plaçage* relationships were also due a certain degree of financial support including the costs of education or job training for sons, and legal records demonstrate the court's support of this entitlement. Inheritances from a white father were also common. Court records show instances of white family members suing (often unsuccessfully) to prevent illegitimate children and mistresses from receiving substantial portions of the estate willed to them by a recently deceased patriarch. As a result of these controversial bequests, laws were eventually passed for the purpose of limiting the amount of money a father could leave to a child who was *coloré*.

Although de la Houssaye's novels consistently refer to the impossibility of interracial marriage in Louisiana, it is important to remember that marriage between whites and *gens de couleur* was not consistently illegal, and there was a chance that a woman of color could be recognized by both the state and the church as the wife of a white man. During the period of Spanish government, it was possible for interracial (racially impure) marriage to take place if the couple received a special dispensation, and dispensations were, in fact, given for white men to marry women of color (Domínguez 25). It is also interesting to note that Spanish governors of the city determined one's racial "purity," as more than just a measure of "Europeanness." They relied on a medieval definition of "impure blood" that singled out infidels, Jews, Moors, heretics, and "convicts of the Inquisition"—categories which were not necessarily visually detectable, scientifically quantifiable, or even likely to be generally accepted as hereditary by eighteenth-century Louisianians (Domínguez 24). This definition of racial "purity" was based on performative or behavioral categories as well as nationality and color.

The legal definition for racial “impurity” was not narrowed to single out persons of African descent until 1865, when Louisiana was well under American control. Similarly, the ban on marriage between whites and people of color was not heavily buttressed until Americans, still concerned that the slave revolt in St. Domingue might prove only the first of many, took control of the colony. Even during Sidonie de la Houssaye’s lifetime, anti-miscegenation laws were briefly set aside during the Reconstruction period. Social pressures, including the very real threat of violence, however, remained a strong deterrent to interracial couples seeking to formalize their union. After this brief period, which lasted from 1870 to 1894,¹⁵ interracial marriage once again became illegal in Louisiana and was not finally legalized until 1972 (Domínguez 54).

An additional condition which may have made *plaçage* relationships attractive to free women of color, even during periods when an interracial marriage was out of the question,¹⁶ was a shortage of free men of color. Hanger reports that while white women in Louisiana were outnumbered by white men at a rate of 115 to 100 around the turn of the nineteenth century, free men of color in New Orleans were outnumbered by free women of color at a rate of nearly two to one. Even if a woman of color preferred the legitimacy of a marriage with a man in the same racial category to the potential social and financial advantages of *plaçage*, she would have had difficulty finding one. Add to this the surfeit of white males available, the social pressure within her own community to move “up” to a partner with lighter skin in order to provide the next generation with greater social currency, and the relative freedom that the *plaçage* relationship offered a

¹⁵ Note that this is the period during which the *Quarteronnes* novels were written.

¹⁶ In Louisiana—the option of traveling outside of the South in order to be married existed, although the marriage would not be recognized when the couple returned.

woman when compared with marriage, and the option of concubinage seems increasingly practical.

If a free woman of color did seek to support herself independently of any male, her options were limited. If she chose to work in a white household, her pay could easily fall short of a living wage. These workers also ran the risk of being raped or molested by a white male employer and a resultant pregnancy would cost her the job and burden her with additional expense. Since the law prevented persons of color from initiating paternity-based suits against white men, a female worker in this position would have little recourse.

Another option for single women was to take religious vows and enter a convent, but this, too, was very difficult for women of color, as Dahlia's story reflects. Interracial religious orders were forbidden by the church until the 1820's. Dahlia's travails may reflect the real-life story of a woman of color named Henriette Delille who refused to enter into a *plaçage* relationship as her family urged her to do. Instead, she sought shelter in the church where she was forced to essentially live unofficially as a nun for almost two decades until a powerful white friend took an interest in her case. Her friend, whose life had been saved by Delille, facilitated the founding of the first religious order for persons of color in New Orleans. Delille was thus finally able to solemnize her relationship with the church in 1842 (Long 86). Since Dahlia's story took place during roughly the same timeframe, her inability to take vows was factually accurate, as were the frustrations of her situation.

The struggle to maintain control over one's sexuality and one's body is a theme that resonates throughout women's literature. For women of color in the colonies, the obstacles to this kind of control were almost insurmountable. The attainment of any

amount of freedom or agency demanded both endurance and resourcefulness from these women. In the absence of other options, *plaçage* became one means of gaining a toe-hold in the society into which women of color had been forcibly transplanted, a society which had little inhabitable space between the categories of “master” and “slave.”

Passing, Ascending, Sliding

A resumé of the history of *plaçage* as such is helpful because this is precisely what de la Houssaye pretends to do in the *Quarteronnes* novels. In the first chapter, I discussed a creative connection between Zola and de la Houssaye. Although her novels are definitely not true Naturalist texts, she is clearly influenced by concepts such as “*race, milieu, and moment*” which have roots in Naturalist theory.¹⁷ According to these theories, the role of the author is to catalogue dispassionately the interaction between heredity and environment. The result of this interaction is almost always, of course, tragic and grotesque. Zola’s *Le Roman expérimental*, in which he develops his theories, was published in 1880, approximately four years before the first *Quarteronne* novel was submitted for publication. It seems possible that de la Houssaye read and was influenced by this treatise. What is almost certain, based upon her previously quoted commentary about Zola’s work, is that she would have been exposed to the expression of these theories in *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) and other novels which showcased the Naturalist’s preoccupation with heritable “racial” traits.

De la Houssaye’s incorporation of naturalist ideas, or at least, her obvious grappling with the influence of “nature” versus “nurture” becomes the basis for her encoding of race. Like Zola, de la Houssaye represents herself as an observer who is

¹⁷ *Race, milieu, and moment* allude to Hippolyte Taine’s naturalist theories on the three principle influences on human character and actions, as expressed in his *History of English Literature*.

publicizing the generally tragic results of three elements--milieu (New Orleans), moment (1820 to 1830), and race (*quarteronnes*)—having been combined. The conceit of having discovered the stories in the form of newspaper clippings and eyewitness accounts, meant to frame the novels as retellings of “historical” supports the idea that de la Houssaye had an interest in “realism.” The grandmother’s narration of the series is another means of protecting the author’s “impartiality.” Because de la Houssaye is merely the organizer of others’ narratives, she maintains a detachment from the events and ideologies in the text while the “grandmother” and the “newspapers” editorialize and report in minute detail even the most shocking subject matter.

One of the strongest commonalities with Zola’s oeuvre is her preoccupation with the idea that physical traits can predict temperament and behavior. Red lips, for instance, are associated with a tendency towards violence and obsession. Thick hair proclaims erotic potential. Light eyes predict a passive, fragile psyche. What is most interesting in de la Houssaye’s work, however, is the way she allocates these telling features and their corresponding temperaments amongst her characters. Red lips, thick hair, and violent obsession are not necessarily associated with *quarteronnes* nor are light eyes, pale skin, and fragility associated exclusively with “entirely white” characters. This, however, brings us to an obvious dilemma of liminal race with which Zola did not have to contend: if certain physical traits can predict temperament/behavior but cannot necessarily predict “race” in terms of “whiteness” or “Africanness” how then is “race” to be determined? Is race a function of genetics? A function of *milieu* or *moment*? Is it fixed or unstable? Is it a measurement of class, morality, color, or purity? As we proceed, we will discover that within the *Quarteronnes* novels, the answer to all of these questions is “yes.”

From the beginning, de la Houssaye establishes her authority, or rather, her grandmother's authority on the subject of *quarteronnes*. She is obviously female, which is understood to give her special insight into the workings of the female psyche. We further learn that she is *Louisianaise*, but respectably removed from the epicenter of the stories' action: "Sur ma paisible habitation, située sur les rives du Mississippi, il m'arrivait rarement des nouvelles de la Nouvelle-Orléans." We learn, too, that she is married, "...c'était d'une oreille inattentive que j'écoutais mon mari lorsqu'il lisait à haute voix ses gazettes favorites" (4). Since we know she is the author's grandmother, we know she is reproductive. Less explicitly, we are given information that allows us to confirm her race: she writes about Hermine Saulvé as an acquaintance and the Ursin Rennes as neighbors and friends, "J'ai particulièrement connu une Mme P.... S....," "L'habitation voisine de la nôtre appartenait à M. Ursin Rennes, et je ne crois pas trop dire en assurant que lui et sa femme étaient, sans contredit, les meilleures créatures que j'eusse jamais rencontrées" (*Octavia* 7). Her physical and social proximity to these affluent, white neighbors serves as adequate evidence of her own affluence and whiteness, given the stratification of Louisiana society. Other early insights provided about the narrator include her literacy, her command of standard European French, her indignation about the behavior of *quarteronnes*, and her disgust (mixed with guilty pleasure) regarding the newspapers' besmirching of the good names of the *quarteronnes'* victims. The "I" of the narrator, the reader can thus assume, is an "I" of whiteness, moral/sexual respectability, relative affluence, and femininity. As this dissertation proceeds, I will examine how these are characteristics that are constitutive of the author's ideal. I will also examine how subtexts in the series valorize certain departures from this ideal.

In the *Quarteronnes* series, race can best be understood as “degree of whiteness” and can best be determined by evaluating an individual’s conformity to the white norm in three categories, each of which incorporates an array of possibilities: heritage, physical traits, and performance/behavior. Each category can be seen as a continuum where the extremes are simply “white” and its opposite, “unwhite”— absolute absence of whiteness. The decision to use the term “unwhite” rather than “black” is deliberate, and based on the narrator’s racial relativism—she is unable to imagine or control what it means to be “black” or “other,” nor does she seem particularly interested in doing so. The characters upon whom she bestows any kind of inner life are always those who meet her criteria for “whiteness.” Unwhite characters are generally reduced to the level mechanistic, often animalistic, collections of familiar misogynistic and/or racist stereotypes. Judith Butler has discussed this tendency to use whiteness as the Western measure of one’s humanity in her work:

When Frantz Fanon claimed that ‘the black is not a man,’ he conducted a critique of humanism that showed that the human in its contemporary articulation is so fully racialized that no black man could qualify as human. In his usage, the formulation was also a critique of masculinity, implying that the black man is effeminized. And the implication of that formulation would be that no one who is not a ‘man’ in the masculine sense is a human, suggesting that both masculinity and racial privilege shore up the notion of the human. His formulation has been extended... to pertain to women of color as well and to call into question the racist frameworks within which the category of the human has been articulated. (*Undoing Gender* 13)

The author’s project, then, involves arbitrating what she believes to be white/human, and labeling everything outside of that as “not (entirely) white/human,” a label which, again, includes an array of possibilities ranging from “almost white/human,” or Bhabha’s “not quite/not white,” to completely “unwhite/inhuman.”

As I have stated elsewhere, what sets de la Houssaye apart from many of her contemporaries is her awareness of, and, in fact, privileging of, the role of performance in race. According to her formulations, persons who appear to be white may reveal through their behavior that they are, in fact, manifestly unwhite and should be excluded from white society.¹⁸ This holds true whether their ancestry is white or unwhite. The reverse is also true, although less common in the novels: a person who is known to have unwhite ancestry but who is white-appearing can demonstrate through morally ideal behavior that they have earned unqualified entry into white society. In short, the hereditary aspect of *race* in “*race, milieu, and moment*” can sometimes be overcome, and *milieu* and *moment* are the testing grounds which separate the “white” from the “unwhite.” Studying who succeeds in maintaining whiteness or overcoming unwhiteness, and what constitutes a failure to do so is perhaps the best way to begin untangling de la Houssaye’s complicated encoding of race.

In the case of Louisiana, a curious contradiction emerges. Legal disputes over race are nearly always *naturalized*. The details of the nature of race are disputed, but some general premises are clearly shared. There is, for one, a shared perception of the social significance of race in Louisiana. There is, in addition, at the very least a shared willingness to argue over the validity of racial classification in terms of the nature of race. To put it differently, there is a willingness to recognize nature as the architect of racial distinctions, and man simply as the foreman who interprets nature’s design. The interpretations may be couched in terms of blood or of genes, of physical appearance or of ancestry. (Domínguez 54; her emphasis)

Domínguez wrote these thoughts on race in Louisiana almost exactly a century after de la Houssaye began to write the *Quarteronnes* novels. The fact these words apply to twentieth century laws as easily as to nineteenth century novels underscores how slow

¹⁸ This ostracism is often temporary for those with the advantage of ancestral “whiteness.”

ideas about “the *nature* of race” have been to change. De la Houssaye does naturalize race, yet, as I have discussed, she also critically investigates “the architecture” of racial distinctions. This “architecture” is remodeled to suit the needs of her story and, perhaps, to a certain extent, her personal ideology. Although her system of racial classification is expanded beyond the duality of “black versus white,” no racial taxonomy can ever be flexible enough to eliminate the liminal spaces between categories or the possibility of categorical shifts. In life, as in the novels, movement is often the solution to finding oneself placed into an ill-fitting category. In life, too, we see that movement happens in many directions, a tendency which also applies to the novels’ characters, some of whom rise, and some of whom fall.

While there are typical examples of “passing” in the novels, in which the subaltern is able to use similarity to slip in amongst the ranks of the elite and share in their privileges, there are other kinds of movement as well. Passing, I would argue, often implies temporary “success,” and is therefore inadequate to describe permanent transitions. The person who is “passing” does so without the permission of the elite. There is always the danger of being caught and sent back to where one “belongs.” Many stories of “passing” are cautionary rather than affirming, teaching the elite to guard their racial “borders” more carefully. Simultaneously, the subaltern, hearing about the punishment which results from detection, is taught the price of hubris. Naturally, these stories represent the elite as predisposed to discover the “truth” of race because of their role as the arbiters of race.

A separate, more permanent term than passing is needed for cases such as Gothe, her children, or Dahlia’s children in the final novels of the series. Rather than “passing” for white, they are accepted into white society *with the consent* of certain members of that

society. They are sponsored, so to speak. Their shift between the categories of “unwhite” and “white” is permanent. With each successive generation, children will be even further removed from the old category. They are not in transition, nor are they passing; they have “arrived.” Gothe and her children have *ascended* much in the same way that, in religious contexts, the pure soul ascends to heaven after proving itself on the terrestrial plane.

Finally, as in the case of Pierre Saulvé in *Violetta* or Alfred D. in *Octavia*, there is a need to establish a term for the degradation of racial status. I liken this loss of social status to a downward “slide” from one’s default category or position. Unlike “ascending,” however, “sliding” is not necessarily permanent. Like “passing” it connotes movement to a place where one does not “belong.” A return to one’s “natural” position is both possible and desirable according to author’s organization, or re-organization, of race.

To use a psychoanalytic analogy, the different means of categorical shifts correspond to the components of the personality. Sliding, motivated as it is by basic drives such as sexuality, corresponds to the “id.” Ascending, which is motivated by a desire to comply with whiteness because it represents the moral ideal, would obviously correspond to the “superego.” Passing implies an awareness of the realities of the system: ‘perhaps the system cannot be changed within my lifetime, but there are practical means through which I can renegotiate my place within it in order to fulfill my needs.’ The pragmatism of passing links it to the “ego.” This section is intended to show how each of these modalities are at work within the novels and, more importantly, to examine how and why they succeed and fail as “[articulations of] alternative, minority versions” of norms that “sustain” and “enable” the characters (*Undoing Gender* 3).

The most classic example of passing in the text is Octavia's success in Europe: "Pendant toute une année, ils avaient voyagé en Europe et Octavia déclarait que cette année avait été, sans contredit, le plus heureux temps de sa vie, car partout Alfred l'avait présentée comme sa femme, et quels succès elle avait obtenus dans la société européenne!" (*Octavia* 45). In Europe, Octavia is able to penetrate forbidden milieus, to observe and enjoy the benefits of membership in an idealized, privileged group. Although illusory, this time in Europe is Octavia's happiest, presumably because it provides her with a sense of belonging, of experiencing what Butler refers to as a "liveable life."

There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms. Indeed if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred. (*Undoing Gender* 3)

Octavia's passing in Europe is indeed an escape from the label of *la quarteronne* and all of the social boundaries that come with it. All labels are limiting, and while some, like "Madame" or "la quarteronne" are objectively less limiting than others, such as "slave," their limitations are nevertheless chafing. Since the system shows no signs of adapting to meet Octavia's needs, she herself adapts.

Unfortunately, Octavia's belonging is only skin-deep, and she must constantly work to maintain it. Her success also depends heavily on Alfred's participation in her passing. He presents her as his wife for his own amusement and "cette... circonstance seule suffisait pour faire écouter avec une foi implicite les mensonges qu'elle racontait avec une grâce et une candeur inimitables" (*Octavia* 45). This sentence is full of the

contradictions implicit in this passing: Octavia's whiteness is a "lie" and the fact that she lies is proof of her "unwhiteness." Yet Alfred, too, lies, and his "whiteness" is well-established. At the same time, the narrator establishes that Octavia's "lies" are told with grace and candor, both of which are positive, and therefore "white" traits. "Candor" in particular is interesting, because if she possesses candor, then is she lying after all or is she so convincing because she really can "be white," if only temporarily? If the authors of the racial hierarchy cannot detect Octavia and Alfred's masquerade, it is because they are participants in it. Marjorie Garber's assertion that the act of passing can "uncover as it covers" and "[reveal] the masquerade that is already in place" is perhaps the best explanation of these contradictions (*Vested Interests* 282).

Fortunately for Octavia, her passing in Europe goes undetected. Back in New Orleans, however, where the slipperiness of racial status is literally publicized and anxiety over categorical shifts demands hypervigilance, passing is more difficult. Always panicked at the idea of a revolt by the subaltern, the elite has developed measures designed specifically to preclude passing. In *Violetta*, we learn that there is jealousy in white society over the popularity of the quadroom balls:

Fatigués de toujours entendre parler des bals de quarteronnes, les jeunes gens avaient décidé de donner une fête à leurs soeurs et à leurs fiancées...Une ou deux fois en semblables circonstances, il avait été découvert que, profitant de l'incognito du masque, plusieurs quarteronnes avaient eu l'audace de s'introduire, sous le patronage d'individus soi-disant respectables, dans les bals où se trouvaient les femmes et les filles de ces hommes qui n'avaient pas rougi de mettre ces saintes du logis en contact avec les créatures vicieuses et dégradées qu'ils avaient choisies pour maîtresses. (*Violetta* 60)

The ball, then, is designed to *pass* for a quadroon ball or even to *surpass* one. As a masquerade, it is designed around the idea of *passing* in general, yet its organizers are terrified that a *quarteronne* will try to *pass* through its doors.

...des mesures sérieuses avaient été prises pour empêcher ces abus de confiance de se renouveler. Chaque billet d'invitation portait, écrit de la main du président du club, le nom de la personne à qui il avait été envoyé et ce billet devait être présenté en entrant à un individu chargé de les recevoir tous. Une autre précaution, inspirée par l'impudence des quarteronnes, était celle-ci: toute personne portant un masque était obligée de se démasquer et de laisser examiner ses traits par la personne chargée de cette mesure. (*Violetta* 60)

The legibility of race is the key to this security system. It assumes first that possession of an invitation confirms the race of its holder and second that a mask is the only means by which the truth of one's "race" could be concealed. The illegibility of a *quarteronne's* race, however, is such that her ability to pass defies an inspection of her facial features. It is Violetta, perhaps the whitest-appearing of the *quarteronnes*, who is most determined to test these security measures. It is thus that she becomes an example of failed passing in the novels. Though the "whiteness" of her appearance is flawless and she has a white escort to complete her disguise, she is denied entrance: "...l'ancien commis de Pierre, qui était chargé de recevoir les invités et du premier coup il reconnut Violetta sous son déguisement. Inutile donc de dire qu'elle fut mise à la porte... au milieu des rires et des insultes..." (*Violetta* 61). The sanctity of the ball is preserved because Violetta, with the help of the media, has achieved a level of notoriety that makes her readily identifiable as "*Violetta la quarteronne*." The security measure which truly trumps Violetta is not so much the guardian at the door, but the public reports detailing every aspect of her appearance and behavior that have made her so well-known.

Octavia, Violetta, Adoréah, and Althéa¹⁹ all find that their ability to pass has been hampered by the very public personae constructed for them by newspapers. Knowledge of them, of their beauty, of their actions, and especially their race, has been media-ated by the papers and distributed not only locally but worldwide. The eye of white society constantly follows and catalogues their activities for voyeuristic pleasure, but this also serves to prevent *quarteronnes* from slipping into places where they do not belong. This mediation of the *quarteronnes*' lives is a key plot element in the series. The narrator herself comes to "know" the *quarteronnes* through newspapers; thus, her authority both comes from the media and is expressed in it. Without the dissemination of knowledge about *quarteronnes* in Italian newspapers, Percy Castel could never have developed the fetish that was his downfall when his family returned to New Orleans in *Gina*. Without the timely arrival of European newspapers proclaiming Octavia's renewed social success and happiness abroad, Alfred D. might not have dared to relax his defenses and thus become vulnerable to her plans for revenge. Without reading newspaper reports of her husband's infidelities with Violetta, Hermine Saulvé might have unwittingly signed the disastrous mortgage on her home which would have left her family not only hungry but homeless. Considering the power of newspapers in the novels, is it any wonder that Dahlia weeps at the idea of how the arrest of Don Trocadero would result in her name appearing in print? Or that Adoréah charges into the newspaper office and savagely whips a reporter who has made too free with her name?

Newspapers, as figured by de la Houssaye, are essentially the concretization of a knowing, white, male gaze. It fetishizes and subjectivates its object, the *quarteronne*

¹⁹ Of the three, only Gothe, who is known in the papers only as Althéa *la quarteronne*, is able to separate herself completely from her public persona. This is accomplished both by forever dropping the hated name Althéa and by receding into the home where she can no longer be seen and tracked.

body. Controlling the public image of the *quarteronne* is a means of controlling her body and keeping her dependent on and loyal to white “protectors.” It seems likely that there is a certain autobiographical quality to the characters’ stormy relationship with the media. Undoubtedly, de la Houssaye felt that the conceit of journalism would help to justify her text as an objective study rather than a production of the author’s imagination and would thereby reduce the amount of scandal caused by her discussion of incest, adultery, murder, interracial sexuality, passing, and tres-passing of every kind. As Zola did before her, however, she discovered that controversy could not be avoided through a profession of scholarly or didactic intent, and that, moreover, the scandal itself would play out in the newspapers.²⁰ While Dr. Perret, in his research, failed to turn up any evidence of newspaper articles either lauding or vilifying *quarteronnes*, he did, ironically, find articles and editorials criticizing de la Houssaye rather vigorously. Like the *quarteronnes* of her imagination, she perhaps hoped that a degree of celebrity would enhance her reputation and commercial success. Instead, she found that a surfeit of public attention had the potential to limit her influence and success as a professional author by reinforcing social barriers of gender and class designed to keep women such as herself “in their place.” This place, clearly, was the quiet country home where she, and her uncomfortable, challenging racial tableaux, were expected to remain, out of sight and out of mind.

De la Houssaye expressed frustration with these limitations in her correspondence, and perhaps a resistance to them takes form in the novels. Even some of the least upstanding *quarteronnes* are able to seize control of their own stories, some by

²⁰ De la Houssaye’s comment about Zola’s work being published without protest (quoted in the introduction) ignores the outcry that greeted his work and his struggles against censorship.

passing out of the scope of the white male gaze completely and traveling to places where their reputations have not preceded them. Octavia's and Violetta's escapes are good examples of this kind of elusive maneuver. In *Gina*, however, Jeannette's bold and successful attempt at passing is one of series' most bizarre and profound statements about the possibility of changing categories, and, indeed, weakening those categories.

Jeannette has effortlessly been mistaken for white since early childhood, but her obsession with the Percy diamonds pushes her to test the limits of passing. In order to satisfy her desire for these powerful "family jewels," she carefully sculpts a false face and body that she may wear over her own, learns to modify her voice and movements, and even appropriates the clothing she will need piece by piece from its rightful owner. Young, beautiful, healthy, illegitimate, unwhite, voluptuous, promiscuous, Creole Jeannette successfully impersonates the old, hideous, disabled, titled, white, asexual, English aristocrat Lady Judith. Jeannette is able to pass, undetected, for her "other" in every conceivable category of identity, and, in so doing, to enact a terrible revenge on two "upper-class" white enemies. Jeannette's passing is cast as an outrageous transgression by the narrator, but it is nevertheless, and, I would argue, very tellingly, a complete success.

Prior to this success, Jeannette was also the dupe of another character's similarly masterful effort to pass for something very "other." A glittering party which she has thrown to show off her new palace is crashed by the ghost of her childhood nemesis Pa Jean. Pa Jean was an elderly slave of the Castel family who took great pleasure in taunting Jeannette about her "unwhite" heritage. When Jeannette reached adulthood and became wealthy, she avenged these torments by purchasing Pa Jean and having him whipped to death. Knowing that nothing would horrify her more than the reappearance

of her tormentor/victim, Horace Delmond disguises himself as Pa Jean in order to spoil her gala. Like Jeannette's performance of Lady Judith, Horace's involves the sculpting of prosthetic features and a flawless imitation of Pa Jean's speech and mannerisms. Young, white, privileged, living Horace successfully "devolves" into old, black, enslaved, dead Pa Jean in order to punish his enemy.

This "passing" obviously resembles what is known as "blackface," in which a member of the elite performs a grotesque imitation of the subaltern.²¹ This type of passing, if it can be called passing, is an open secret having more to do with entertainment at the expense of the subaltern than with affirming her or him. The transparency of the performer's put-on "unwhiteness" fools no one, which is not the case in Horace's "passing." All of the guests at the party, white and unwhite, are convinced by the performance, although most do not understand its significance to Jeannette. Horace's deliberate sacrifice of his privileged racial status, however, is voluntary and extremely temporary. The temporal quality of his passing is shared by true "blackface," for it is unfathomable to arbiters of the norm that anyone would willingly sacrifice the privilege of whiteness or masculinity on a permanent basis.

Other characters, such as Percy Castel or Pierre Saulvé, lose racial status in a deeper and more enduring way. These characters "slide" down into depths of "unwhiteness," a process which cannot be reversed as easily as "passing." Those who "slide" are inevitably wealthy, heterosexual, white men—traditionally occupants of the most privileged spot in a Western social hierarchy, and who, therefore, have the farthest to fall.

²¹ Or, perhaps more correctly, enacts a collection of stereotypes that he and his audience have decided are representative of the subaltern.

De la Houssaye, however, does not particularly privilege men, an idea to which I will return in my discussion of gender. The apex from which white men fall in these novels, then, is one they shared with white women—the most “human” or even “superhuman” of all groups. Sliding, then, is moving away from the humanizing, “purifying” influence of white wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and fiancées and towards the unwholesome influence of the *quarteronnes*. As this happens, the character throws off every ethical constraint that has been imposed upon him by white society: he lies, he steals, he cheats, and most especially, he becomes cruel to white women. All the while, the newspapers watch and record these changes. In short order, his physical appearance begins to morph as well. When the character was introduced, his appearance was unremarkably white, now he begins to be described with a dark face, red lips, wild eyes, or other signs of “unwhiteness.”

Finally, the wife, mother, sister or fiancée can no longer deny what is happening to this man. She despairs but always hopes that one day he will see the error of his ways. He will return to her and be reinstated to his proper place at her side. Regaining one’s humanity and reassuming one’s social status can only be done through cleansing, redemptive submission to white women. The “id” is kept in check by the “superego.” One thing only seems to prompt these “degraded” men to repent, however: an imminent death. When the dying son or husband finally returns home to his *sainte de logis*, he generally lives only long enough to beg for, and receive, her forgiveness. This pattern underscores de la Houssaye’s lack of sympathy for these profligate characters. She will allow them to be buried as “white” men, but she will not allow them any further opportunities to err at the expense of “white” women. The fall from grace is inevitably fatal.

If passing and sliding are inherently centered around and arbitrated by the male gaze of the “public eye,” “ascending” is inherently arbitrated by females. Since their husbands and sons have exclusive rights to control the proliferation and success of *quarteronnes*, white women are left to bemoan the tragic results. But because charity and compassion are hallmarks of “whiteness,” these women do not arbitrarily reject their sisters based on unwhiteness. Léontine and Alice, in fact, plead their case before the reader:

‘Alice’, s’écria Léontine, ‘vous comprenez donc pourquoi, l’autre jour, je plaignais ces malheureuses quarteronnes? Elles ont un coeur comme nous et Dieu, qui les a marquées au front en naissant, Dieu permet qu’elles rencontrent l’homme qu’elles doivent aimer... Mais c’est un blanc et la loi défend à la quarteronne de songer à prendre un blanc pour époux. Dites, que lui reste-t-il à faire? Fouler aux pieds tous les instincts de pudeur et de piété et devenir la maîtresse de celui qu’elle aime?... Ou lui faudra-t-il, pour demeurer pure et vertueuse, épouser un homme de sa race?...’
‘Horreur!’ s’écria Alice. ‘Ah! Léontine, je dis comme vous: si quelques-unes de ces quarteronnes méritent le mépris du public par leur conduite scandaleuse, avouons qu’il y en a parmi elles qui sont dignes de pitié’ (*Gina I* 67).

The “whiteness” of *saintes de logis* can only be enhanced by acts of condescension towards those who have a less advantageous position in the social hierarchy, or, in fact, no position at all. The narrator thus gives us stories of *quarteronnes* who are born “deserving” of whiteness, and who earn the aid of white women in leaving their unwhiteness behind. Examples of these “deserving” *quarteronnes* are Dahlia, Gothe, and Gina.

I would argue that Dahlia or Gothe might be described as “transracial” or “racially dysphoric” because much like a transgendered/ gender-dysphoric person, they

live with the conviction that “who they are” does not match the labels attached to the body they inhabit. Their race is perhaps less “illegible” than “miswritten.” It is not that they *try* to “pass;” they pass quite unintentionally. Instead, their dilemma is how to *remain* in the category in which they “belong.” The process of “ascending” involves a full-time immersion in “white” society. Cohabitation and reproduction with a white man is the first step in racial reassignment. This cohabitation must be an absolute last resort, and more importantly, it must involve virtually no benefit for the “ascending” woman other than the possibility of ascension. The love of a white man must suffice for her happiness: she must reject any offers of contracts, property, or expensive gifts. She will not, after all, need dresses or jewels, because once she enters his home and becomes the mother of his child, she will almost never leave. This serves to purify her in two ways: she is sanctified by maternity and she is hidden from the public eye. As soon as her name ceases to be mentioned in the daily news, the interpellation of *la quarteronne* begins to fade away.

Because the relationship with her white lover can never be legitimated in Louisiana, however, it is insufficiently “white” for the purposes of “ascending.” What completes the category shift is the permission or forgiveness of those whose place they seek to share—white women. In Dahlia’s case she receives this only shortly before her death when Camille comes to assure the dying mother that her children will be raised as both “white” and legitimate in France. Gina and Gothe, however, are welcomed into the fold by Léontine whose wealth and power bring about a much happier result—both eventually finalize the process of ascension by marrying white men. In Gina’s case this marriage is not even to the white man with whom she began her transition, but as I have stated, the role of males in “ascension” is secondary. Both Gina and Gothe also have the

joy of seeing their children accepted not only as “white” but as “European” and “noble” as well. Truly, they have risen to the absolute apex of society in de la Houssaye’s opinion. If passing is an articulation of a new norm, ascending is a strict adherence to a very old one. Both, however, aim at creating a place for oneself in the world, of turning alienation into a “liveable life.”

In the next chapter, I will focus less on the movements to and from racial categories than on the categories themselves. As I have already discussed, characters in the novels can embody more than one “racial truth.” Europeans prove themselves to be “unwhite,” and slaves act with “nobility” and honor. These contradictions call into question how “true” race can be identified, and whether it exists at all. The result of this confusion is reorganization of the social hierarchy that reflects de la Houssaye’s beliefs about race, gender, and nation. From *saintes de logis* to dark-skinned slaves drawn as little more than automatons, characters crowd the liminal space between “black” and “white” in de la Houssaye’s racial taxonomy.

Chapter Two

De la Houssaye's Racial Taxonomy

The project of this chapter will be to map out and discuss de la Houssaye's racial taxonomy. This is done not to support the validity of racial taxonomies in general, but rather to show how the messiness and break-downs in the author's taxonomy are its central virtue. In the novels' contradictions, in the confusion over how *race*, milieu, moment, desire, performance, subjectivity and appearances all come together to create the system of "race," de la Houssaye comes closest to becoming the realist she purports to be. When, by contrast, she is at her most certain, when she interjects "ce fait est historique,"²² or presents something as a universal truth, her readers must be at their most critical.

As we review how race is described, decided, and enacted in the novels, we will see some very familiar Western stereotypes about the "other" but also some important departures from them. Some of these departures are deliberate but can be attributed less to complete rejection of these stereotypes than to a qualification of them. De la Houssaye, is willing, for instance, to allow that "unwhiteness" can be "overcome," but only in order to promote the supreme importance of the mother in the redemption of society. Other departures from old formulas of race occur more spontaneously. Through glaring contradictions of her rules about the nature of the "other," the author destabilizes her own racial hierarchy in places. These losses of narrative control allow characters

²² These interjections, which are supposed to strengthen the plausibility of de la Houssaye's story, weaken it critically. According to her introduction, *everything* in the novels should be historic and has been taken from eyewitness accounts in newspapers and correspondence. Occasionally, however, the author breaks through the narrator's voice to report that "this part *actually* took place" and reminds the reader how fictional the surrounding storyline is.

with a dangerous disrespect for social strictures not merely to “ascend” to a privileged place in the author’s hierarchy, but to escape from it altogether.

“Mighty white of you”

In the Southern United States and perhaps elsewhere, there is an expression, still in use, which inadvertently acknowledges the performative nature of race. When one person exhibits kindness towards another, often in the form of a favor, the recipient may say: “Thanks. That’s mighty *white* of you.” This is one of those expressions not generally used in “mixed company,” as its implication—that kindness is exclusive to those who are white—is obviously racist. Still, the sense of this phrase goes far in explaining what the word “white” means in de la Houssaye’s lexicon. It represents, for her, an array of virtues including beauty, honor, charity, and chastity among others.

There is, however, extreme potential for corruption inherent in whiteness. Introduction of the smallest amount of alterity nullifies its absoluteness. The list of characters whose birth, appearance and performance all qualify them as “white” is therefore very limited. Still, these characters are the yardstick against which all others are judged, and so it is appropriate to begin with them. Those belonging to this category can be divided into two subcategories: the “always already whites,” among whom we may count our author and narrator, and the “become whites.” While the application of these categories is helpful for reducing the complex issue of race into more manageable subtopics, they are not, of course, fixed. The possibility of movement is essential to the argument that it is possible for a character to “ascend” or “become white” as I argued in the previous chapter.

The key qualification which serves to establish one’s credentials as being “always already white,” deals with the circumstances of one’s birth, specifically, the place of

one's origin. The most indisputable evidence of whiteness is a strong familial connection to a place that the author associates with indisputable whiteness—typically Northern Europe, but Canada is also acceptable. Presumably, the author feels that to be born “Creole” comes with a higher risk of corruption by unwhite populations, whether genetically or performatively. Many of her idealized white characters, therefore, are emigrés or first-generation Louisianians. After the narrator, the first “always already white” character in the series is Mme Rennes, the mother of Charles Rennes, whose story constitutes the introduction to *Octavia*. We learn that she and her husband “étaient Français, mais habitaient la Louisiane depuis leur enfance” (7). Léontine Castel, the most outstanding example of the “always already white” character, is the daughter of “le troisième fils du duc de Linleigh, un des hommes les plus riches et les plus influents des Iles Britanniques” (*Gina* 2). Although male “always already white” characters are rare, there are a few examples. Leontine's husband Hamilton Castel, an unassailably “white” character, was born to an extremely wealthy family in a Canadian château, “Sept Tours.” Another example, Léontine's son-in-law, the stalwart Yvon de Kernokey is conceived in France by a Breton *comte*.

Even if she is Creole, a person can still be considered to be “always already white” if she has always been sufficiently insulated from the corruptive influences of urban life. The narrator, for instance, is a “petite fermière campagnarde” who is well protected from urban debauches (*Octavia* 4). Angèle, who becomes the wife of Judge Alfred D. and displaces Octavia, enters the marriage unaware of her cousin and future husband's famous relationship with a *quarteronne*, because for most of its duration, “la jeune fille était...en pension dans un couvent du Canada où sa mère était élevée et où elle avait voulu faire élever sa fille” (47). Hermine Saulvé, whose husband becomes

Violetta's protector, seemingly spent her maidenhood enclosed in a room with her mother: "Pierre avait épousé Hermine Jourdan, qui ne lui avait porté pour tout dot que sa suave beauté et ses vertus angéliques...Pierre...avait été chercher Hermine dans la modeste chambre où, aux côtés de sa mère, elle gagnait sa vie à la couture..." (1). Hermine demonstrates that even if one is born and raised within the city limits, it is possible for a good mother to guard her child from the corruptive effects of New Orleans.

If the circumstances of one's birth include known elements of unwhiteness, as in an ancestor who is a woman of color, it is still possible to "become white." There are several markers which signal those rare *quarteronnes* who have the potential for whiteness. The most obvious, perhaps is physical appearance. Although all of the *quarteronnes* appear to be "white," not all resemble the "always already white." These women have a uniquely "angelic" appearance typified by a beauty which is modest rather than *éblouissante*. De la Houssaye gives us relatively few descriptions of the "always already white," but those she does give are relatively consistent:

...Marianne étaient une des plus charmantes créatures que je connaisse. Elle avait de beaux yeux bleus remplis d'expression, des yeux qui parlaient du ciel, des dents magnifiques, et une chevelure!... On en parlait partout de ces cheveux d'un blond d'or sur lesquels on eut dit que se reposaient les rayons du soleil. (*Violetta* 47)

The principal physical characteristics of the "always already white" woman include hair which is light in color and silky in texture; a complexion which is pale and prone to blushes; eyes that are usually light in color and always 'filled with modesty;' and teeth that are straight and white.

The *quarteronnes* who "become white" are more painstakingly described and are similar in appearance to the "always already white," although they are more likely to be

extremely beautiful than “always already white” women. This beauty, which attracts propositions rather than proposals, is their cross to bear. Dahlia, for instance is described thusly:

Sa démarche, entièrement dépourvue du balancement habituel aux quarteronnes, des mouvements impudiques qu’elles donnent à leurs hanches, avait cependant une grâce onduleuse qui attirait et charmait le regard. Chacun de ses mouvements étaient une grâce. Ses pieds et ses mains, comme son corps, étaient des chefs-d’oeuvre. Certes, sa beauté ne pouvaient se comparer avec celle d’Adoréah, pas même à celle de Violetta, et cependant quelle différence entre notre Dahlia et ces deux cousines! Le teint pur et frais de notre héroïne se colorait souvent d’une pudique rougeur; ses grands yeux gris, où se cachait son âme tout entière, brillaient de pureté, de modestie et de timidité, s’enflammaient facilement et ne pouvaient cacher les sentiments qui agitaient ce coeur d’enfant. Ses dents, petites et nacrées, semblaient un double rang de perles et ses long cheveux châains, toujours bouclés, comme au temps de l’enfance, se relevaient aujourd’hui en une longue torsade qui, s’enroulaient autour du front de la jeune fille, lui formant une couronne naturelle. (*Dahlia* III 145)

Again we see descriptions of light eyes, beautiful hair and teeth, and evidence of modesty transmitted by the face. White beauty is legible and transparent, open rather than mysterious. It invokes images of angels and saints rather than goddesses or sorceresses. The movement of the body is another important sign. It can be attractively graceful, even undulating, but must lack the overtly sexual sway which advertises a *quarteronne*’s erotic availability. In the above passage, it is notably the quality of Dahlia’s movement that first separates her from other quarteronnes, not her eyes or hair. Movement cannot precisely be considered a “physical attribute”; it is itself in something of a liminal category. It is worth considering whether movement is strictly performative, in which case Dahlia has made a choice to walk in a “morally upright” way. If it is inherited, as the author seems to believe, Dahlia’s movements are a testimony to the mysterious

genetic twist which allowed her to escape the unwhite influence of her grandmother's genes.

Similarly, manner of dress is not usually considered an innate characteristic, but the good taste which drives "white" women to select only modest clothing and to prefer minimal or no jewelry clearly is, in the author's estimation. Dahlia, even as a small child, worked to turn the rags her grandmother gave her into neat, respectable dresses. Ostentatious clothing and jewelry even "frightens" her: "Dahlia s'habillait toujours avec élégance, mais avec la plus grande simplicité. Les couleurs voyantes, les bijoux somptueux l'effrayaient..." (*Violetta* 20). Dahlia prefers her only adornment to be white dahlias, and takes care to cover the diamond ring that Valery has given her with a glove. Her affection for flowers in general is a throwback to romantic associations between purity and nature; that she prefers them to be white only strengthens the point.

Dahlia's ability to make flowers grow against all odds can also be viewed as symbolic of her potential for maternity, fertility and caretaking. This is perhaps the single most important quality of all "white" women: an attachment to home and family constitutes the her *raison d'être*. In *Violetta* Hermine leaves her mother only to become a mother: "Tout entière à ses devoirs d'épouse et de mère, Hermine fuyait le monde, et quoiqu'ayant sa loge au théâtre, quoiqu'étant invitée partout, dans les bals, dans les soirées, les grands dîners, on la voyait rarement dans le monde" (*Violetta* 1). Mme Rennes is also a dedicated domestic: "la femme... étaient bien certainement la meilleure des femmes de ménage. Avec cela, elle était bonne, généreuse et toujours prête à rendre service" (*Violetta* 7). Whether she is "becoming" or is "always already" white, these women exist primarily within the home, engaged largely in private, heterosexual, reproductive, family-centered life.

Dahlia, avec son exquise délicatesse, fuyait les fêtes du demimonde...Gothe était toujours l'amie la plus chère de Dahlia. Comme elle, elle était mère: le petit Hamilton avait quelques mois de plus que Val et les deux jeunes mères aimaient à se raconter mutuellement les jolies petites choses faites par leurs fils. Près de ces enfants chéris et de leurs pères, les deux charmantes créatures, pleines de foi dans l'avenir, se trouvaient suprêmement heureuses.
(*Dahlia* III 320-321)

Of course, in order to form a dynasty, one must reproduce. Within the scope of the text, however, reproduction is strictly limited to women who can lay claim to "whiteness."

Pregnancy becomes a sort of reward for deserving women. Both Dahlia and Gothe become pregnant almost immediately after they are forced by circumstance into the arms of their lovers. Through motherhood, they are finally totally cleansed of their unwhiteness, becoming what de la Houssaye repeatedly refers to as a "sainte du logis."

These *saintes du logis* must be frugal yet charitable, trusting, affectionate, obedient, chaste, dignified, and innocent. They readily forgive their husbands and lovers for all indiscretions and cruelties inspired by the erotic "voudou" of the *quarteronnes*. They will sacrifice everything for the welfare of their families, and in several cases, they are called upon to do so. Such an absolute commitment to family life means that any disruption to the family is a lethal blow. In fact, the fatal flaw of the "white" characters is their high mortality rate: they are too good for such a cruel world. While the unwhite *quarteronnes* escape from every threat to their well-being unscathed, they leave a path strewn with the fragile bodies of white women. Charles Rennes self-destruction kills his mother the instant she hears about it: "Mort!...mais qui est mort! Est-ce mon fils?...Alors, avec un cri terrible un cri qui retentit dans toute la maison, la malheureuse mère retomba sur ses oreillers: elle était morte" (*Octavia* 41). In the same novel, we see that Angèle, too, cannot survive the loss of a child. After Octavia kidnaps her infant

daughter, "...brisée par le chagrin et la maladie, Angèle mourut après bien des mois de cruelles souffrances" (74).

In *Gina*, the entire Castel family, all "white" except for Percy, are cursed to lives which are exemplary but short because of hereditary tuberculosis. In the case of Alice, consumption begins to take hold because she cannot marry the only man that she loves.²³ Like the loss of a child, love which cannot lead to an honorable marriage is a fatal blow. In *Dahlia*, both the heroine and her mother are doomed by a fatal fragility which is aggravated by this kind of unhappiness: "Célina, comme un lys frappé par l'orage, courbait sa tête affaiblie et semblait n'avoir plus la force de la relever... Hélas! Hélas! Deux mois après le départ du capitaine, Mme Dalveras... donna le jour à une petite fille et mourut en la mettant au monde" (*Dahlia I* 6). Although Célina is eventually married to Dahlia's father, the shame she feels because of the rape that began their relationship is fatal. Dahlia's death from shame is predicted in terms which echo the floral analogy in the description of Célina's death:

'Monsieur Ashton,' répondit le médecin, cet ange a tout sacrifié pour sauver votre vie... tout, même ce qu'une femme a de plus cher, de plus sacré; c'est à vous maintenant de veiller sur elle... [Elle] est menacée d'une maladie de coeur d'un caractère tout particulier et qui provient, je le suppose, de sa grande sensibilité; tant qu'elle sera heureuse, elle vivra... Viennent le chagrin et la souffrance, comme un lys battu par l'orage, vous la verrez s'affaïsser, languir quelques mois peut-être... et mourir!' (*Dahlia III* 318)

²³ Alice loves Marc Stanheld, a Canadian man who is a fugitive from justice. Marc's younger sister, a "coquette," elopes with a young Cuban man named Pietro Henriquez. (Note the typical confusion of Italian and Spanish names.) The family forgives her, and when rumors spread that she is being maltreated, Marc goes to her apartments to check on her and discovers his sister, newly a mother, being attacked: "il aperçut sa soeur, couchée à côté d'un enfant de trois jours et à demi étouffée sous le poids du genou que l'infâme Pietro tenait appuyé sur sa poitrine. Le misérable...frappait à coups redoublés ce pauvre petit corps qui se débattait inutilement entre ses mains" (*Gina I* 74). In a rage, Marc kills Pietro and is arrested and convicted of murder. He receives the death sentence and is awaiting his turn at the scaffold when Alice and her mother leave for Louisiana. He eventually escapes with Hamilton's help, but by that point, Alice is already consumptive and his fugitive status is an obvious obstacle to their marriage.

Part of whiteness is an inability to sustain any intrusion of otherness and still remain white. The fragility of these characters' bodies is a reflection of this untenable purity. The risks associated with sex and desire in the unstable social hierarchies of New Orleans, risks that childlike innocence and naïveté leave one singularly unprepared for, are in the end too much for many "white" bodies to bear.

The final version of whiteness in de la Houssaye's taxonomy is strictly performative and confers a much smaller racial/social "boost" than "becoming white." Characters such as Matte (Gina's mother), Pa Jean, Nicolas Monier, and the aptly named Jean LeBon are examples of those who are unwhite by birth and unwhite in appearance yet who confirm to the moral ideals that typify whiteness. Particularly important is their desire to create a reproductive family unit. All of these characters have minor roles in the novels, but each serves a purpose. Though historically New Orleans had a large population of free people of color with a flourishing culture, there is no reflection of this community in the novels.

The virtuous LeBon and Monier are two of only three²⁴ *quarterons* in the novels who are not the offspring of the main characters, and both are poor and uneducated menial laborers. The third is Jules Verdou, Célina's first beau. He is a very light-skinned *homme de couleur libre* shopkeeper who courted Célina prior to her kidnapping. We learn that after she is kidnapped he sends her a harsh letter accusing her of infidelity. This letter initiates Célina's physical decline. When a pregnant Célina returns to New Orleans, she actually sees Verdou in the streets and he publicly and cruelly accuses her again. This time, the verbal attack causes her to fall into a coma. She awakes only to

²⁴ We do learn of the existence of a third, Celima's beau prior to her kidnapping by Don José Dalveras. His name was Jules Verdou and he was a white-appearing shopkeeper. After her kidnapping, he writes

give birth to Dahlia and dies immediately thereafter. The existence of these *quarterons* serves to remind both Dahlia and the reader that there *is* one socially and legally legitimate choice of partner for *quarteronnes*. Their undesirability, however, whether on the grounds of lack of education, reduced social “standing,” or cruelty, reminds the reader of the gap between “possibility” and “desirability.” Even Léontine and Alice, as we saw in the previous chapter, acknowledge the “horror” of marriage to a person who will link a *quarteronne* so definitively to the “unwhite” and forever fix her in a liminal social space.

Even the lowliest and most ignorant slave may have the ennobling instinct to create and protect a family. Pa Jean’s role is that of a sort of “noble savage,” scrambling to purchase his young wife and new son from a cruel owner. He also serves as Jeannette/Adoréah’s racial conscience, constantly reminding her of the unwhiteness hidden behind her appearance and education, and it is for this reason that she eventually has him whipped to death. This acknowledgement and reinforcement of the social/racial hierarchy is further proof of his worthiness. Matte, who is Léontine’s *soeur de lait* and Jeannette and Gothe’s (much older) half-sister, serves as a counterpoint to Jeannette/Adoréah and Gina by demonstrating the joys and recompenses of faithful servitude. She is extremely grateful for any acknowledgement from her mistress and never expects or demands more from life than an “unwhite” person can or should. Although she shared her mother’s breast with Léontine, she never dares to think that this makes them equal. Jeannette, on the other hand, has loudly proclaimed her superiority to others, including “white” women, from childhood. Matte’s humility is rewarded by small social/racial “gains” when Léontine manumits her and Hamilton arranges a semi-legitimate church marriage with her Italian suitor.

Matte's husband, Giulio, and Dahlia's father, José Dalveras, both of whom are performatively "white" are excellent examples of the slipperiness of de la Housaye's hierarchies. As an Italian and a Mexican, respectively, they are both considered white by the government. They are ineligible, therefore, to contract marriage with women of color like Célima and Matte in Louisiana. Still, I have excluded them from the taxonomy until now because the de la Houssaye does *not* seem to consider Spanish, Italian, Brazilian, or Cuban men "white." If, in addition, they are Jewish, they are doubly demonized. These men are "unwhite" in every sense—libidinous, murderous, and mercenary by nature, dark and coarse in appearance, and lacking in pedigree. The only exceptions to this rule are Giulio and José, but it is only a partial exception despite their "white" interest in marriage. José, of course, once "purchased" and raped the very young Célima, and he goes on to be a somewhat indifferent father who is more apt to send gaudy presents to Dahlia than to visit. Giulio, who "venait d'une terre où les coeurs comme le climat sont également brûlants" is also determined that "par mariage ou sans mariage, Matte serait à lui" (*Gina* I 68-69). It is only Matte's "Oh! jamais! jamais!" that deters him from conferring the title of "*la quarteronne*" upon her (*Gina* I 69).

Finally there is Virginie LeBon²⁵ who best fits under the heading of performatively "white," but who is something of a category unto herself. Virginie is a victim of "slipping," but her loss of racial/social status occurs because she *is* virtuous, rather than because she is not. Like her husband Jean and Nicolas Monier, she is a free person of color. While their physical unwhiteness and lack of "culture" makes them ineligible to "become white," however, Virginie had that rare potential. She is in most

²⁵ The Lebons are one example of symbolically named characters in the series. Others include Dahlia, the delicate flower; Léontine, the fiercely protective mother; Don Inigo Iniquez, the iniquitous Jew, and so on.

respects Dahlia's older double. Like Dahlia, she is a *quarteronne* whose skin color, features, and mannerisms are white-appearing. Like Dahlia, she grows up and is well-educated in a convent. Like Dahlia, she finds that once outside of the convent, there is "no place for [her] life" (*Undoing Gender* 2). Like Dahlia she finds herself in the company of immoral *quarteronnes* in whom she does not recognize herself. Finally, like Dahlia she quickly falls in love with a young white bachelor, Edwin.

Virginie naïvely anticipates that her beau will marry her, and when, like Valery Ashton, he refuses, she determines, as Dahlia did, to save her virtue by marrying a free man of color, her cousin Jean: "je voulais mettre un obstacle insurmontable entre Edwin et moi...je voulais que Jean me sauvât de moi-même" (*Dahlia* III 276). Here the similarity ends, however, for Edwin's life is not suddenly endangered, and the wedding to Jean actually takes place. In order to become worthy of her, Jean undertakes his own intellectual and cultural education, but although his wife appreciates his efforts and his goodness, she does not love him in the way that she loved Edwin.

The strangest part of Virginie's story is that despite her untainted morality, she and Jean are denied a privilege that even Pa Jean is granted, reproduction: "Je suis heureuse et rien ne manquerait à mon bonheur si Dieu m'avait donné des enfants..." (*Dahlia* III 276). She has sacrificed her whiteness/fertility through her efforts to preserve it. In a further ironic twist, Virginie is a renowned midwife. Though she can never have children of any color, she brings children of every color into the world. With the unhappy Virginie serving as an example of the rewards of chastity, it is unsurprising that Dahlia chooses to take her chances with Valery. What is surprising is that the author, though explicitly decrying miscegenation elsewhere in the novels, fails to reward the one racially homogenous couple in her tale with that ultimate prize—legacy.

“Aussi noir que l’as de pique”

“Black as an ace of spades” is a comparison used several times by the narrator to describe a character who is clearly unwhite in appearance. The expression, she alleges, is one she has borrowed from the uncouth Violetta. Both women, it would seem, feel the need to reassert their own “whiteness” compulsively. Violetta’s use of it, however, is made to seem somewhat ironic, a case of the ‘pot calling the kettle black.’ Just as de la Houssaye creates a roster of characters who embody and enact what it means to be “white,” and who, if whiteness is a measure of humanity, are superhuman, she also creates a roster of characters whose lack of “whiteness” in appearance and behavior qualifies them as subhuman. Between these two extremes, we find some liminal personae, such those who are “born unwhite” and appear unwhite yet are able to perform whiteness at least partially. There are also, as we will see, those who are “born white” and appear white yet utterly fail to comply with de la Houssaye’s guidelines for performative whiteness. Finally there is the dangerous category into which most of the *quarteronnes* fall—those whose birth and behavior are indisputably unwhite, yet whose appearance is so convincingly, seductively “white” that they are able to slip into white society and corrupt it.

At the extreme ends of de la Houssaye’s racial spectrums, there is perhaps the least amount of new information to reveal. Her writing on the topic of race is heavily informed by the familiar Western stereotypes. Goodness is associated with the blonde *chevelure* and the wide, expressive blue eye of the angels that swell the populations of cathedral frescoes. Evil is associated with the dark skin, red lips, and shining, impenetrable black eyes of the devils that lurk in the cautionary tales told to children. Where de la Houssaye identifies no whiteness, she takes the least interest. It is not that

she assumes that the audience already “knows” or “controls” the essence of these stock characters; it is that she assumes the audience can have no real desire to know about them. Or, perhaps, that there is simply very little about them that is worth knowing.

Consider the description of the Saulvé’s slave and coach driver, Josué:

Ce Josué, aussi noir que l’as de pique, pour nous servir de l’expression de Violetta, était une sorte de machine ambulante, un automate qui obéissait à la parole ou au moindre signe de son maître, sans même avoir l’air de remarquer ce qu’il faisait et où il allait. Jamais il ne répondait aux questions qu’on lui adressait. On aurait pu le croire sourd, muet et aveugle. S’il fut étonné de l’apparence de la maison devant laquelle il venait d’arrêter les magnifiques bais de son maître, maître Josué n’en laissait rien paraître. (*Violetta* 14)

As Fanon says, in the Western mind, “the black man is not a man.” Josué, the automaton, is precisely the type of nonentity Fanon is describing. The narrator in no way sees herself implicated in Josué’s reduction to an object. She in no way acknowledges that she requires Josué to be unwhite and inhuman so that she may be white and human. Fanon goes on to say:

...the effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process:
--primarily, economic;
--subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority. (11)

That Josué could be beaten or killed for answering a question inappropriately is not considered. That carefully observing his master’s activities could lead to a suspicion that he is judging them, or even worse, sharing them with others, a suspicion that could mean painful punishment or death, is not of particular interest to the narrator. That a depressed affect is a normal consequence of years of involuntary servitude is ignored. That

apparent blindness, deafness, and dumbness were survival strategies for slaves is an idea that the narrator never appears to consider. Any of these explanations for Josué's muteness would raise questions about an institution of oppression with which the narrator has no quarrel.

The ethics of slavery are never called into question in the novels, despite the fact that they were written more than two decades after its abolition.²⁶ Being a “bad” slave may make a character appear increasingly unwhite, but owning slaves in no way tarnishes a character's whiteness. Although Léontine sets Jeannette, Gothe, and a handful of other slaves free, there is no condemnation of her leaving the rest to end up on the auction block when she leaves New Orleans with her new husband, even when this decision results in Pa Jean's acquisition by Jeannette and his subsequent, horrible death. When Léontine returns from her years abroad, the narrator admiringly reports on her laudable efforts to buy back all of the slaves she can find, and on the undiluted enthusiasm her former slaves have for the prospect of being reunited with their beloved mistress. If anything, the portrayal of slavery is a positive one, so long as the slaves are owned by real “whites.” It is miscegenation that preoccupies de la Houssaye, and by extension her anticipated audience, not abolition.

Two other entirely “unwhite” characters, Man Babette and Aspasia fall less into the category of machine than animal. Unlike Josué, Babette and Aspasia are not lacking in ambition—both are obsessed with collecting and hoarding money. Although having wealth is desirable and socially proper, acquiring it through “ungenteel” labor such as running a boarding house is not. Aspasia, Violetta's aunt and guardian, is described in a

²⁶ De la Houssaye may have felt that precisely because of abolition, the theme of slavery had lost its commercial appeal whereas the theme of miscegenation tapped into the public fascination with and anxiety about the possibilities for sexual interaction between whites and the new population of free people of color

variety of unflattering ways: “une vieille mulâtresse aux traits plein de cupidité,” “une coquine capable de tout,” “maligne comme une vieille guenon.” She earns these labels by adhering to the principles of *plaçage*: she seeks a contract through which the official rights to access her niece’s body will be sold for the highest possible price to the bidder who will provide the lifestyle that Violetta, and Aspasia, desire. Pierre Saulvé grudgingly agrees to the terms Aspasia sets forth and the matter is settled. Aspasia’s role then returns to being that of the mute observer hovering in the background, protecting her financial interests by assuring that Violetta’s extra-curricular affairs remain secret. She exists only as Violetta’s satellite and remains with her and cares for her only because Violetta is her means to an end. The maternal urge, that great purifier, is completely absent. The narrator repeatedly compares *quarteronnes* to hyenas, and a predator is what Aspasia essentially is. Working with the pack she identifies a victim, hunts it down, and then jealously guards her kill. Beyond what is required for these tasks, there is no evidence of intellect or emotion.

Man Babette is similarly animalistic. *Plaçage* represents only a secondary source of income for her, the first being the very profitable boarding house she runs. Nevertheless, when an opportunity arises to sell Célima, her daughter, she takes it. Since Célima, unlike Violetta, will not agree to be placée, rights to her body are contracted without her knowledge or consent. The happy result of this transaction is Dahlia, a second opportunity to enter the *plaçage* market.

Like Aspasia, she is incapable of maternal feeling—a child is a commodity that must be kept alive until it can be sold. The less spent on a child’s upbringing, the greater the profit when she is sold and “man Babette, souvenez-vous-en, vendrait son âme pour de l’or” (*Dahlia* III 245). Babette’s refusal to spend the money she tirelessly acquires on

anything, including herself, is reminiscent of a magpie's compulsion to collect shiny objects which it cannot understand and for which it has no use. De la Houssaye sees her in a more threatening light, however: "On eut dit une tigresse prête à dévorer la pauvre petite gazelle dont elle a fait sa proie. Affolée, éperdue, Dahlia s'arracha des griffes qui la retenait et se mit à courir dans la chambre, poursuivie par l'horrible vieille..." (*Dahlia* III 232). Babette is portrayed more negatively than Aspasia, perhaps because rather than merely encouraging the innate debauchery of a young relative, Babette actively tries to initiate not one, but two pure and resistant children into the illegitimate economy of the *quarteronnes*.

Still less multi-dimensional than Josué, Aspasia, and Babette are the shadowy figures who lurk around the edges of the story, facilitating the downfall of the virtuous: characters such as the "Italian Jew Don Inigo Iniquez," the Jewish usurers who lure Percy Castel into debt, or the various Latin Americans who play villains throughout the novels. Don Trocadero, Dahlia's would-be lover, probably the most carefully described, is still a collection of recycled xenophobic and race-based stereotypes:

La Nouvelle-Orléans, à cette époque, était remplie d'étrangers qui arrivaient de tous les coins du globe: les uns poussés par l'amour des voyages... et d'autres encore, attirés par ce qu'ils avaient entendu dire de la beauté des *quarteronnes*... Parmi ces différents visiteurs se trouvait un Brésilien qu'on disait dix fois millionnaire et dont les excentricités attiraient tous les regards... Depuis trois ans qu'il était à la Nouvelle-Orléans, on ne parlait que de lui, de ses folies et chacun voulait le voir. C'était un homme... très grand, très osseux, brun comme un Indien et ne portant point de barbe; en revanche, il laissait ses cheveux noirs et raides descendre tout droit sur ses épaules. Une expression de dureté, de cruauté même, ajoutait à la laideur de ses traits éclairés par les rayons de deux petits yeux noirs, tout ronds et toujours en mouvement... . (*Dahlia* II 218)

The narrator goes on to describe how Trocadero immerses himself completely in the society of the *quarteronnes* after rapidly tiring of visits to the salons of respectable citizens. The description of how bizarre and ostentatious a single one of his suits is takes nearly half a page: “il se promenait en étalant ses dorures comme un paon étale l’éclat de son plumage” (219). Trocadero is a glittering spectacle, a peacock, who is accepted by society only for the money he spends and the amusement he provides. Like most of the characters who arrive from Latin American countries, he is physically unattractive and unwhite: black hair, beady black eyes, the brown skin of an “Indian,” a tendency to wear bright colors and excessively rich jewelry. Like many of the *quarteronnes*, he has “more money than taste.” As with Babette and Aspasia, excess money or attraction to money signals corrupt character in the novels, and it is often stated or implied that unwhite persons who are wealthy cannot have earned their money through respectable, or even legal, channels. In the case of Don Trocadero, it is later learned that all of the revenue of his mines is being managed for him by an embezzling Frenchman; like Babette, Trocadero is incapable of really “understanding” his money.

What ultimately proves the extent of Trocadero’s unwhiteness is his lack of mastery over himself, or *maîtrise de soi*.²⁷ The unwhite require the control of the white over their native passions, or they are led by them to dishonorable or even criminal deeds. Lefebvre, Trocadero’s Frenchman, warns Dahlia about the strength of Trocadero’s unmastered desire:

Pour l’empêcher de tuer ou d’estropier quelqu’un, je le quitte rarement...et c’est pourquoi il m’amène partout avec lui...Je te le répète, c’est un homme des plus dangereux: il aime rarement, mais, quand cela lui arrive, sa passion devient une véritable folie, il ne se connaît plus et est prêt à

²⁷ *Maîtrise de soi* is commonly held forth as an ideal in 17th century French literature.

tout faire, à recourir jusqu'au crime... je plains de toute mon âme la femme assez malheureuse pour attirer ses regards et exciter ses désirs. (*Dahlia* III 255)

In the same conversation, he also reveals that while in the nearby city of Mobile, Alabama, Trocadero had his two assassins murder the brother of the last girl he desired, and correctly guesses that Valery Ashton is likely to be their next victim. As Lefebvre tells Horace Delmond, “il a, pour lui servir d'instruments de vengeance et de meurtre, ses deux âmes damnées, deux nègres qui le suivent partout lorsqu'il sort en voiture: Diego et Touro. Ceux-là, je les crois capables de tout...si vous êtes l'ami de monsieur Ashton, dites-lui de se méfier de ces nègres” (*Dahlia* III 306).²⁸ The image of the two slaves is that of guard dogs, following mutely behind the carriage, awaiting their master's command. Lefebvre's predictions come true, as the reader expects. While the actions of “white” characters, or even liminal characters, can be influenced by reason, attacks of conscience, or self-sacrifice, the actions of characters such as Babette or Trocadero are more inevitable. They function completely on drives and instincts, returning to the stereotype of the non-man.

In de la Houssaye's logic, skin color, nationality or faith can tell the reader and the other characters in the novel what a person's intent is—taking into account the arcane symbolism of variables such as eye shade, clothing, or body carriage. The narrator does not know, or care, *why* these characters act in the way that they do, but she knows exactly *what* they will do. At the same time, although they are amoral subhumans, they ultimately do far less damage than the (variably) human *quarteronnes*. The legibility of their unwhiteness is precisely what reduces their dangerousness and prevents them from succeeding. Even naïve Dahlia is eventually able to read Babette's and Don Trocadero's

²⁸ Touro's name also has obvious associations with “toro,” suggesting the image of the charging bull.

intentions and to frustrate them, a fact which underscores the intellectual superiority of “whiteness.”

“She can pass”

Those who represent the greatest source of danger are those who are illegible, whose race is undetectable, whose intent cannot be discerned by the white gaze. Octavia, in particular, represents a threat to social order because both her appearance *and* her performance are convincingly white at first glance. Violetta’s danger, on the other hand, is largely that her appearance is so captivatingly white that it effectively distracts the eye from the unwhiteness of her behavior. Octavia and Violetta are the most *unheimlich* characters in the novel, because they call into question what it means to be “white.” If to be white is to be powerful, then why do Octavia and Violetta succeed so completely in destroying their white male lovers? If to be white is to be beautiful, then why do they so easily usurp the position of white women? If to be white is to possess the truth, then why are the white men so thoroughly fooled by the *quarteronnes*’ schemes? The answer, I believe, lies in their liminal status: both unwhite and white, they are unknown and unknowable.

One of the most disconcerting things about Octavia is the fact that the restraint and elegance that make her so attractively “white” are spontaneously engendered. Octavia’s mother is similar to Violetta in that her appearance is completely white, but her behavior marks her as definitively “other:”

La mère de ton Octavia était encore plus belle que sa fille et a fait tourner plus de têtes que tu n’as de cheveux sur la tienne... ce qui ne l’empêchait pas d’être une empoisonneuse de la plus noire espèce. Lucrece Borgia n’était rien en comparaison de cette femme... . (*Octavia* 54)

The idea of the potion or poison is inextricably linked with an exotic, castrating, feminine power, hence the invocation of Lucrezia Borgia, who, as an Italian, represents the “otherized,” not-quite-white to de la Houssaye, Whereas Dahlia has the all-important white female, her great-grandmother. Both of Octavia’s parents are unwhite performatively, and in her father’s case, in appearance. Neither her mother’s failed attempt to poison her lover nor her father’s impassioned murder of her mother would suggest the potential for the kind of criminal genius that Octavia later exhibits. Her revenge is a carefully constructed plan which takes years to formulate and carry out. It requires self-control, an ability to delay gratification, intelligence, and a detailed understanding of the psychology of both her victims and society at large. Yet these are decidedly “white” qualities, even if they are employed towards unwhite ends.

The narrator’s argument throughout the series is that the essence of whiteness is its purity. When a white person commits an “impure” act, as happens several times in the series, the narrator quickly signals that there actually is evidence of hidden unwhiteness in the character: a Spanish grandparent or a disreputable father. This, along with the corruptive influence of the *quarteronnes*, explains his questionable behavior—it is generated in a place of unwhiteness, a point to which I will return shortly. The powers of the unwhite are primitive and animal—brute strength, greed, sexuality. Violetta exemplifies this—she is merely the reef upon which white men dash their moral ships. Like the reef, she simply is what she is. She lacks the ability to make herself more or less dangerous. Whether men are destroyed by her depends more on the man’s availability to destruction than on Violetta’s agency.

While Octavia, however, is attractive enough to pass, she is the least beautiful, desirable, and white-appearing of the *quarteronnes* except for Gina. Her strength,

therefore, does not lie in animal attraction. Octavia's weapons are very human, and therefore white. Yet, if whiteness can be appropriated and used against itself, used *impurely*, its very essence is called into question. Octavia's story destabilizes the narrator's position of superiority. Claiming the exclusive rights to reasoning and social knowing/control are critical components of, and justification for, the oppression of the unwhite (appearing) by the white (appearing). Because Octavia has "white" abilities, because she is nevertheless unwhite, the narrator cannot stop neurotically reinscribing her, over and over, trying unsuccessfully to fix her as either same or other, to erase her both/and-ness. For purposes of comparison, I have charted contradictions in a small sampling of the descriptions of Octavia (all emphasis is mine) in Appendix B.

In appearance, Octavia's skin is olive and brown and yet snow-white. She is much darker than other *quarteronnes*, but no one would ever suspect that she is not white. Her home is decorated with irreproachable taste, her clothing is modest and decent, her jewelry minimal, yet like all *quarteronnes*, she rejects elegance, grace, and simplicity for ostentation and *éclat*. She moves with ideal grace, but her walk instantly signals her public sexuality to anyone who sees her. She adores Alfred, would sacrifice all of her luxury just to be with him, would die for him, and yet he regards her as an object, and he knows her to be a "vile" creature who would quickly abandon him for a richer man. She is a community touchstone for her good judgement, but when Alfred breaks with her, she suddenly devolves into a writhing, foaming, growling animal entity, and then just as quickly, regains her dignity as well as any tragic heroine. These selections are only a portion of the contradictory portrait of Octavia that develops throughout the entire series. The narrator always returns to the same dilemma: Octavia must be and yet cannot be white. She must be and yet cannot be unwhite. The narrator

never masters Octavia, just as Octavia is never mastered by white society or white law.

The ending of her story, we are led to believe, is only the beginning of her existence

outside the circumscribing laws and labels of New Orleans:

Les journaux...pendant bien des semaines s'occupèrent des catastrophes qui venait de frapper la famille D... et toutes dues à la vengeance d'Octavia la quarteronne, qui, en les lisant dans sa retraite lointaine, a dû se glorifier de savoir sa vengeance si complète. En vain chercha-t-on à savoir ce qu'était devenue cette misérable après son départ de la Louisiane...Octavia la quarteronne s'était effacée entièrement, ne laissant derrière elle qu'un souvenir maudit et exécré. (*Octavia* 112-113)

The wording of her send off is significant. The narrator no longer controls the story.

Though omniscient up to this point she can only guess where Octavia has gone, what she

is thinking, and how she is feeling—"She must have gloried in the knowledge... ." As

readers, we are no longer sure of Octavia, if we ever were. We are told that Octavia *la*

quarteronne has erased herself entirely, leaving behind only a bad memory. But is it

Octavia who is erased, or merely the interpellation of "Octavia *la quarteronne*"? Are

the only bad memories which she leaves behind those which linger in the minds of New

Orleans, or are they also her own bad memories, memories of segregation, humiliation,

and a violence towards people of color that finally rebounded onto itself? The author's

taxonomy has broken down, she has failed to find a label or explanation for Octavia, and

thus Octavia escapes her narrative control.

"Once you go black..."

Octavia is not the only character who leaves the narrator struggling with what lies

inside and outside of the boundaries of whiteness, however. Characters such as Judge

Alfred's son Léonce and daughter Mary are born to white parents, and are certainly

white-appearing, but through a gradual process of exposure to unwhiteness both become

“infected” with it. Although Mary and Léonce are extreme examples, they still return us to the importance of the performative in determining one’s race. In Mary’s case, from early infancy, Octavia takes care to erase all trace of whiteness:

A dix ans, l’enfant avait déjà tous les vices des quarteronnes, quoiqu’elle n’en fût point une. Avec un malin plaisir, Octavia s’était pluë à éteindre toutes les lueurs de modestie, de franchise et d’honnêteté qui de temps à autre apparaissaient dans cette âme enfantine... On pouvait facilement deviner de la manière dont Octavia élevait sa fille, qu’elle suivait exactement le plan de conduite qu’elle s’était tracé. C’était un plaisir pour elle d’exciter les passions de ce petit être. Elle avait juré d’en faire une courtisane et elle n’épargnait rien pour en venir à ses fins. (*Octavia* 75)

Although the narrator posits that Mary is following the exact curriculum that Octavia once followed, this cannot be the case. The result of Octavia’s education was the inverse of Mary’s: to make her racial status illegible required the erasure of every overt trace of *unwhiteness*. Whether this is an art in which Octavia was schooled, or whether she was an autodidact is left up to the reader to decide. Her success at seeming white, however, is obvious since she enjoys great success in Parisian society throughout Mary’s childhood. Mary, on the other hand, becomes a courtesan who resembles Violetta much more than Octavia; she is uncontrolled, libidinous, and apparently too unintelligent to recognize her status as a pawn in her “mother’s” game.

Although the potential for corruption inherent in whiteness has been established, it is still interesting to compare Dahlia with Mary. Both are raised in an environment in which there is an absence of white femininity and a corruptive unwhite influence. Dahlia, who has less genetic claim to whiteness, however, instinctively and persistently exhibits performative “whiteness” *despite* the negative influence of Babette, while Mary is easily dissuaded from modesty and honesty.

Léonce D. has still less of an excuse for his fall from whiteness than his sister/lover. Though he is also deprived of a white maternal figure, he does have two white patriarchs, his father and grandfather. Their combined influence, however, is not enough to override the unwhiteness he acquires merely from time spent in the kitchen in the company of the family's slaves:

Gâté par la sévérité de son père et la trop grande indulgence de son grand-père, abandonné le plus souvent aux domestiques, l'enfant avait grandi sans personne à aimer...L'amour d'Angèle aurait sauvé Léonce, mais, privé de son ange gardien, il se laissa facilement prendre aux filets de la sirène qui avait juré sa perte. (*Octavia* 90)

Male characters throughout the series are generally drawn to unwhiteness rather than being repelled. Even two white male parents cannot replace one white mother when it comes to the matter of instilling and protecting whiteness. Throughout the novels, true whiteness for males is only possible through the cleansing love of a white mother.

Pierre Saulvé (Violetta's protector) and Doctor Fleury (Adoréah's protector) are excellent examples of adult male characters who, though presumably white, are inexplicably drawn towards and vulnerable to unwhiteness. Both are socially prominent, respected, wealthy businessmen whose whiteness seems unquestionable until they are overcome, at first sight, by their passions for *quarteronnes*. These staid, middle-aged family men very suddenly turn their backs on their white children and, in Pierre's case, his wife. I have already posited that attachment to a heterosexual, reproductive family unit is proof of whiteness. Detachment from the family unit, therefore, would constitute proof of unwhiteness. The fact that only fathers can, or want to, detach themselves from the family underscores the unwhiteness of males. As if to emphasize that the unwhiteness of these men was always-already present and only temporarily being held at

bay, the narrator retrospectively presents further evidence of their heretofore hidden unwhiteness. In Pierre's case, our first clue is his appearance, "Pierre Saulvé avait quarante-deux ans, mais ses cheveux et sa barbe, d'un noir de jais... ses grands yeux noirs et ses lèvres rouges faisaient de lui un fort joli garçon" (*Violetta* 3). His dark hair, black eyes, and red lips, all suggest a suspiciously carnal nature and even hints at the possibility of genetic unwhiteness. Shortly thereafter, it is indeed revealed that Pierre's forebears had not attained his level of respectability in society:

...Les anciens se souvenaient d'un petit bonhomme en guenilles, une sorte de mendiant qui, une poêle à la main, faisait frire des pommes de terre au coin des rues... il avait finit par ouvrir une espèce de cabaret où il avait fait fortune... Cet homme était marié ou vivait avec une Espagnole qu'un beau jour on trouva assassiné dans son lit. Nécessairement, le mari fut accusé et arrêté, mais il sut prouver un alibi et fut relâché, quoique l'opinion publique fût contre lui...on avait entendu le mari menacer sa femme de la tuer et de plus on le savait excessivement jaloux. Ce cabarater de bas étage se nommait Pierre Saulvé comme notre héros, dont il était le grandpère. (13)

Pierre is a man who has only been passing for being truly "white." His Spanish ancestry, the stain of possible illegitimacy, and his descent from a "criminal type" all predict his availability to corruption. As the narrator says, "bon chien chasse de race." An embarrassing family history is not the only evidence against Pierre: "il était vulgaire de nature, il aimait les grosses plaisanteries, relevait et riait de toutes les incongruités qui se commettaient en sa présence, se servait, même devant les femmes, des mots à double entente..." (*Violetta* 13). The narrator's white gaze is twenty-twenty in hindsight. Doctor Fleury has benefits of birth and education that Pierre lacks, but he too shows telltale signs of unwhite behavior, namely jealousy and temper, and of course the tendency towards obsession that is the hallmark of every *quarteronne*'s victim: "Par

quelle sorcellerie s'est-il laissé subjurer par la sirène qui le tient enchaîné à son char?
Dieu le sait! Il est excessivement jaloux et ne la perd jamais de vue lorsqu'ils sont ensemble" (*Gina* II 88).

Despite their unwhiteness, the two men have in common a chance for redemption that comes to them through the heretofore unappreciated love borne them by their white female relatives. In Hermine's case, Pierre is redeemed not once but three times through the love of Hermine. It is her influence which partially cleanses him of his unwhiteness from the beginning of their marriage, keeping him at home and removed from negative influence. Later, when she discovers that he has been depriving her family the money for even their most basic needs, possibly hastening their son's death, she nevertheless forgives him:

Arrivé à deux pas de sa femme, Pierre lui tendit les bras en silence, et la pauvre mère qui, en cet instant suprême, ne voyait que l'agonie de son enfant, n'entendait que le désir exprimé par cette voix qui s'affaiblissait de plus en plus, se laissa tomber sanglotante dans les bras de son mari.
--Hermine, dit Pierre... en face de ce lit où notre enfant se meurt, je jure de te consacrer ma vie et d'être encore pour toi et mes enfants ce que j'étais autrefois. Que le passé soit oublié! Le veux-tu ma chérie?
--Que le passé soit oublié! répéta-t-elle. (*Violetta* 46)

Despite Pierre's promise to his dying son, he eventually returns to Violetta, a relapse which results in the death of Louis Pain and a duel with his daughter's fiancé in which Pierre is fatally wounded. When Hermine hurries to his side as he lays dying on the field of honor at Bayou St. Jean, she redeems him three more times: she once again forgives him herself, she brings Marie who also forgives him, and she summons a priest so that he may make his confession and receive last rites.

‘...Tout ce que je vous demande, à toi et à Marie, c’est de me répéter que vous me pardonnez tout le mal que je vous ai fait!’ Oh! Comme ce double pardon lui fut vite accordé! Dès que le bon prêtre arriva, Pierre lui-même demanda à être laissé seul avec lui, et au bout de quelques instants on l’entendit dire: ‘Je puis mourir à présent... mon Dieu et Hermine m’ont pardonné!’ (*Violetta* 70)

Thus, Pierre dies in peace, leaving behind Hermine, Marie, and two other daughters to continue the charitable works which he had forbidden so that he could have more money to finance Violetta’s villa in Bay St. Louis.

Doctor Fleury is forgiven with similar alacrity by the daughter, grandson, and critically ill granddaughter whom he ejected from his home at Adoréah’s request:

Madame de Kernokey, de son côté avait obtenu sans difficulté l’interdiction de son père et l’avait ramené dans le vieux home où tout semblait lui rappeler des souvenirs chéris et familiers. Il revenait à la santé, reprenait ses forces, adorait sa fille comme autrefois et ne pouvait se passer d’elle un moment. Cécile partageait cette adoration, il la voulait toujours à ses côtés et l’on eut dit qu’il recouvrait par instant son intelligence et son talent de médecin en le voyant consulter ses livres et chercher des remèdes au mal dont souffrait la chère petite. (*Gina Manuscript* 576)

In Fleury’s case, since he briefly survives his relationship with Adoréah, we can see the changes wrought in the character by the re-inculcation of whiteness. His body is strengthened, his intelligence “returns,” and he once again becomes a compassionate father figure. In every case where a white male character has acted amorally as a result of his desire for a *quarteronne*, he is excused on the grounds of his weakness, his innate moral impotence. It is women, both white and unwhite, who decide the fate of these male characters and who ultimately decide how their race will be inscribed. Though many slide into the indignity of their unwhiteness, a lucky few will be redeemed by their *saintes du logis*.

In the next chapter, we will examine “saintes du logis” and the role of women within the novels further. Just as one must perform in an appropriate way in order to carry the label of “white,” there are requirements which separate true women, or *saintes*, from mere females. The performance of “femininity” and the performance of “whiteness,” as we will see, overlap to the point that gender and race in the novels are almost inextricable from one another.

Chapter Three

“Saintes du logis”: Between Agency and Domesticity

The previous chapter discussed de la Houssaye's repeated use of the phrase “sainte du logis” as a descriptor for performatively white mother-figures. It was noted that while these “domestic saints” conformed to social constructions of ideal feminine behavior, they were not rewarded by particularly happy, or long, lives. Their vulnerability to unhappiness runs counter to promises that the woman who poured her energy into marriage and maternity, who remained safely within the domestic sphere, would be insulated from misery: “ ‘Saint Paul knew what was best for women when he advised them to be domestic,’ said Mrs. Sanford. ‘There is composure at home; there is something sedative in the duties which home involves. It affords security not only from the world, but from delusions and errors of every kind.’” (Welter 3). De la Houssaye, however, disagrees on this point. Though a woman may remain *ignorant* about the dangers of the outside world, her husband's and sons' extra-domestic activities mean that she is by no means *secured* from them. Remaining insulated in the home, in fact, becomes the source of many wives' and mothers' “delusions and errors” rather than the solution to them.

In the *Quarteronnes* novels, the inherent unreliability of men as faithful protectors or dutiful sons means that in order to thrive, or even survive, a woman may need to eliminate certain old “virtues” from her repertoire while cultivating some new ones. On this point, as with other issues regarding gender and sexuality, the novels are full of self-contradictions and inconsistencies. One explanation for the inconsistencies in the author's definition of a woman's role in society is that they are an expression of her own anxiety about her society's ideological constructs. The causes of her anxiety, as discussed

in previous chapters, seem to be warring ideological inclinations. She wants both to advocate on behalf of herself and her female peers²⁹, and to maintain ties to the “decent” and “respectable” social traditions that serve to oppress women.

Much of de la Houssaye’s writing contains progressive beliefs about a (white) woman’s place in the social hierarchy, namely that she envisions her being at least the equal of a (white) man, morally and intellectually. Though she skirts any direct statements to this effect, she gives the impression that (white) women actually deserve to be placed at the top of the social hierarchy, looking down on men for their ethical failings and excessive sexuality. She seems to recognize, however, that these are ideas that are likely to spark public criticism, and her correspondence indicates that she is anxious to avoid this at all costs. Her sense of the unfairness of Zola’s “indecent” being criticized less than her “historically-based” novels may ignore the degree of censorship that he faced, but she is indeed more endangered by criticism than her male colleagues.

As a woman writer, de la Houssaye is struggling not only to maintain a reputation as an author, but as a female. Like her characters, she finds that achieving a “liveable life” in an oppressive social environment is by no means a given. The matter is complicated by the necessity, in her case, of maintaining a “workable career.” Had her novels overtly appeared to advocate the transgression of social norms, she would almost certainly have been suspected of, and probably was suspected of, transgressing them herself. She was always at risk of “knowing too much” about her subject, of being personally implicated by her depictions of interracial desire or promiscuity or even egalitarianism.

²⁹ “Peers” refers mainly to other middle-class white women. De la Houssaye’s dedication to the cause of expanded rights for all women is doubtful due to her obvious racism.

A nineteenth-century woman from a small Louisiana town could not easily maintain a reputation as a *sainte du logis* while frankly discussing sexually-charged topics such as *plaçage* or incestuous orgies, particularly if it was suspected that these were a product of her imagination. Clearly even the defunct grandmother to whom the novels are credited is not adequate insulation from the subject matter, hence the conceit of a collection of newspaper articles. Perret's study of de la Houssaye's papers shows that even with her authorly precautions, she managed to draw a fair amount of negative press the result of which could have been disastrous.

As a widow with very few financial resources and several grandchildren to support, de la Houssaye faced more than just the loss of social capital when she courted controversy. If her novels appeared to be too polemical in nature or too risqué, they would potentially lose their appeal to the average reader, resulting in difficulty finding a publisher or diminished royalties. Moreover, writing was not her sole means of providing for her children and grandchildren. Other ventures, particularly her schools, would almost certainly have been unsuccessful had she earned a reputation as an agitator for controversial causes. In an era that privileged moral rectitude and women who knew their place in the hierarchy, parents would not hesitate to withdraw students from a school run by a notorious woman.

The ease and safety of resorting to stock characters like the virtuous white mother or the promiscuous *quarтерonne*, therefore, often wins out over an interest in social progressivism. De la Houssaye is also not above utter vilification of alterity in the interest of being a "team player," as seen in her portrayal of Jewish characters, for instance. Her attribution of moral and sexual depravity to "unwhite" characters while elevating "white" women as bastions of purity not only aligns with but also has the potential to deepen

social prejudices, particularly because readers were urged to accept the novels as documentary in nature.

This chapter will focus, partially, on reiterations of gender stereotypes in the *Quarteronnes* series, but primarily on analysis of de la Houssaye's ideal woman, who does not, necessarily, conform to patriarchal articulations of perfect femininity. In analyzing de la Houssaye's alternative ideal, we discover where the novels are progressive in their definition of women's roles in society, where they break down social boundaries, and where, on the other hand, they reinforce them or even narrow those roles and boundaries. Where this reinforcing or narrowing is found, I attempt to separate instances of the author's internalization of limiting constructions of gender from the representation of stereotypes made to avoid controversy, preserve "respectability," or even to ensure commercial appeal.

This approach will also provide the foundation upon which the next chapter will build a discussion of alternative expressions of gender and sexuality within the novels. Because "white" women are the most stable characters in the series, the least liminal in terms of gender, sexual, and racial performativity, they are de la Houssaye's "norm" and her ideal. Once the norm is understood, it is possible to identify what, within the author's imaginary, constitutes an "extranormal," deviant, or liminal performance of gender or sexual behavior. Such is the abundance of these abnormal and liminal examples of gender and sexuality that it is very useful to have a touchstone "performance" to facilitate analysis and comparison.

The Cardinal Virtues of Womanhood

The virgin/ whore dichotomy which was imposed upon white and black southern women must have deeply affected their images of themselves and of each other. Since white

women were victims of adulation rather than violence, they often internalized stereotypical forms and attempted in great earnestness to become what they were expected to be—faithful standard-bearers of the patriarchy and its racial constructs. (Gwin 5)

The *Quarteronnes* series is certainly not without paeans to southern womanhood. Foremost among these is the character of Léontine Percy Castel, de la Houssaye's embodiment of the "Lady Bountiful." Throughout the series, Léontine seems to operate as a stand-in for de la Houssaye herself, voicing sentiments that echo the author/narrator's and possessing every characteristic the author privileges. Probably because she represents the author's fantasy self, Léontine escapes the familiar traps of victimization by adulation or violence. Instead, she is the narrator's template for the ideal human, one who transcends all social limitations such as class and gender yet condescends to bestow her literal and figurative bounty on those who cannot. In many ways, Léontine is a very simplified character whose many perfections and endowments diminish her value as a relatable role model for women. Although she is beset by fantastic trials, she is almost never at a loss as to how to overcome them, nor does she ever lack the internal or external resources needed to do so. Nevertheless, Léontine in many ways represents a radical departure from her elder literary sisters, those "standard-bearers" of racial and sexual oppression.

In her much-read essay "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," Barbara Welter synthesized the message of a wealth of nineteenth century texts aimed at influencing the behavior and beliefs of white, middle-class American women:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and her society could be divided into four cardinal virtues- piety, purity, submissiveness, and

domesticity... Without them... all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (Welter 1)

There are characters in the series who conform very closely to this definition of womanhood and are clearly meant to be have their virtuousness admired by the reader. These include the *quarteronnes* Dahlia and Gothe and such doomed white women as Mme. Rennes and Angèle D--, discussed in a previous chapter. A resume of their qualifications as “True Women,” however, will show how traditional “True Womanhood” is not necessarily a desirable goal for the “white” or even “unwhite” women of New Orleans.

The first cardinal virtue to which women should aspire is piety. Dahlia is an excellent example of innate piety:

Tous les dimanches, Petite allait à l'église avec sa grand'mère et, tout naturellement, la piété lui était venue. Sans aucune instruction religieuse, sans connaître l'existence de Dieu, sans avoir appris une seule prière, Petite priait ce Dieu inconnu et élevait sa voix enfantine dans ses peines ou dans ses besoins. (*Dahlia* I 7)

On the other hand, Dahlia's grandmother, Man Babette, “elle qui affectait une religion illimitée, elle qu'on voyait tous les dimanches à l'église, à genoux et les yeux élevés au ciel” will not spare the *piastre* to have Dahlia baptized. A dedication to the rituals of Catholicism, if not to its spiritual tenets, is a trait that Man Babette shares with other *mulâtresses* and *quarteronnes* who have retired from concubinage. Because religion can so easily be counterfeited, it is devalued, for de la Houssaye, as an essential proof of Womanhood itself. This is not to say that all of the positively portrayed characters are not faithful and practicing Catholics. They assuredly are. They tend, however, to demonstrate the depth of their faith through deeds rather than through proximity to the church or repetition of its rituals. We know, for instance, that Gothe prayed devoutly to

be cleansed of her desire for Horace and that Virginie LeBon was revered by society for her good works towards all, “riches comme pauvres, blanches ou de couleur, vertueuses ou pécheresses” (*Dahlia* II 238).

Piety as proof of womanhood is further devalued by negative events that occur in, around, or because of religious institutions. In Dahlia’s case, this includes her rejection by the convent, her humiliation by Madame Frémont, which takes place just in front of the church, and her priest’s failure to provide her with any real assistance as she struggles against the temptation to become Valery’s lover. The ending of her story, with the denial of legitimacy, the loss of her lover, and her subsequent death seems also to de-center piety. While it is both admirable and moving to throw oneself on the mercy of the church or to prayerfully place one’s fate in God’s hands as a response to crises, a positive outcome is not guaranteed. Léontine, as we will see, generally opts to add action to her prayers—apparently ascribing to a version of piety that affirms the tenet “the Lord helps those who help themselves.”

A second cardinal virtue that elevates Woman to her sanctified position is submissiveness. This [is] perhaps the most feminine of virtues. Women were to be passive bystanders, submitting to fate, to duty, to God, and to men... A true woman knew her place, and knew what qualities were wanted in her opposite. Said George Burnap, in *The Sphere and Duties of Woman*: ‘She feels herself weak and timid. She needs a protector. She is in a measure dependent. She asks for wisdom, constancy, firmness, perseveredness, and she is willing to repay it all by the surrender of the full treasure of her affection. (Lavender 3).

Dahlia is not as perfectly submissive as she is pious, but she is still a good example of this virtue. When Valery offers to become her attorney and financial advisor, she submits to his judgement and allows him to protect and control her financial assets though their

mutual sexual attraction is already apparent. When he urges her to become his lover, she resists and demands the legitimacy of marriage briefly, caught in the classic double-bind between purity and submissiveness. Her resistance prompts Val to become both physically forceful and insulting in his frustration, demonstrating the perils of being a noncompliant woman. Nevertheless she perseveres. Just when it seems that her determination to save her virginity has prevailed, however, a near fatal attack on Valery levels her objections. A beloved man's life is infinitely more valuable than her own desire for a respectable, even liveable, life. To fail to submit her desires to his would be obdurate and cruel to the point of masculinity, and would utterly unravel her Womanhood. She flies to Val's side to save his life and effectively ends her own as Dahlia Dalveras. Now she is Dahlia, *la quarteronne*.

Dahlia deepens this submission to the interests of the patriarchy by giving birth to *petit Val*. The implied benefit of such a submission is that it will be repaid with the adoration and indulgence of the man to whom one submits. With this penultimate sacrifice, Dahlia finally seems to have earned her reward. Valery realizes that he does not want his son to be illegitimate. At last, he is motivated to marry Dahlia. Before he can do so, however, he is forced by unusual and unexpected circumstances to marry his sister-in-law. The idea of separation from her lover, and more importantly, of a lifetime of illegitimacy, is fatal for Dahlia. Dutifully, however, she submits one last time and agrees to trust her son to the care of the woman who has usurped her position. Dahlia's death, caused primarily by her abundance of delicacy, obedience, and submission, rehabilitates her Womanhood completely. Though she sacrificed her virginity, she did so to the greater cause of feminine submission, unfortunately she does not survive to enjoy this feminine victory.

Hermine Saulvé, in *Violetta*, is another outstanding example of a wife who cheerfully puts her husband's wishes before her own. While he begs the family to support his expensive mistress, she willingly economizes to feed the family. When he asks her to sign papers that would mortgage her home in order to purchase a second one for Violetta, however, she refuses. Unfortunately, as Dahlia learned, obstinacy inspires a like response in men: Pierre withdraws all financial support in an effort to effectively starve Hermine into submission. The tactic fails for reasons that will be discussed later, and Pierre eventually sees the error of his ways. Twice, Pierre returns to his family, and is very moved by Hermine's forgiveness and gentle submission. Nevertheless, he goes back to Violetta both times, despite his wife's Truer Womanhood. Finally, he is killed in a duel related to his mistress. Once more, a forgiving Hermine submits and showers her husband with tears as he dies in the dirt. His wife is left with four daughters and what capital remains after Violetta's predations, but like Dahlia she will not live long enough to look back with gentle pride upon the outstanding Womanliness of a younger self. As soon as the last of her daughters leaves the home, she dies. Again, the palpable lack of a reward, other than martyrdom, for submissiveness reduces it from a blessing to a liability.

Léontine, unlike Hermine and Dahlia, is too willful to be Truly Womanly in the traditional sense. As a young girl, she is pampered by indulgent parents, "son père lui avait fait donner une brillante éducation et, comme elle était son seul enfant, il ne lui refusait rien" (*Gina* I 4). Perhaps it is her unusual education, or perhaps it is a result of having been spoiled, but once Léontine has decided to in turn educate and pamper her *quarтерonne* goddaughters, no one is able to deter her. Her father, Doctor Renaud, the children's mother, the slave Pa Jean, and Hamilton Castel all express disapproval for her project. Like the children's mother and Pa Jean, the doctor urges her to abandon her

efforts and resign the girls to their proper roles as house slaves, but she refuses outright, “Là vous vous trompez... répondit la jeune fille; oui, ma conduite eut été indigne si, après avoir essayé d’élever ces deux gentilles enfants, je les avais abandonnées à leur sort...le jour où je me marierai, je donnerai la liberté à ma nourrice et ses enfants” (*Gina* I 15).

Years later as a widow and mother of two grown children, she still refuses to submit to pressure from men or, indeed, anyone. She takes Horace to task for causing Gothe to become the mother of illegitimate children. She briskly depresses the pretensions of fortune-hunting suitors. She is even proof against her beloved son’s manipulations: she refuses to allow him to access his trust fund prematurely even before she learns he is spending his allowance in order to entertain not one but two *quarteronne* mistresses. When her daughter’s fiancé is framed for a theft, Léontine is more than equal to the task of facing an aggressive prosecutor during his trial or approaching an official on his behalf. Despite her lack of docility, however, the end of *Gina* finds Léontine alive, fulfilled, and surrounded by a large and adoring family.

A third cardinal virtue, domesticity, here understood to be devotion to the maintenance of a home and the care of a family, is yet another of Dahlia’s virtues. Immediately after making the decision to become Valery’s mistress, she begins to act as a wife ideally would, realigning her life’s purpose to be the satisfaction of his every need and desire. She has already become his nurse, watching over him with “la sollicitude et les tendres soins d’une véritable épouse” (*Dahlia* III 315). Once he is healed, she becomes his helpmate in every other aspect of domestic life. She obsessively prepares the perfect home for him at *Les Dahlias*, hiring the minimum number of servants, “je les préfères européens, avait-elle dit; je les désire intelligents et honnêtes; quant au reste, je le leur enseignerai moi-même,” who can be trained to perform their duties exactly as she likes.

She forgoes hiring a cook, preferring to prepare her ersatz spouse's meals with her own hands, a skill that she acquired while preparing tempting meals for invalids at the convent. Every room is luxuriously yet tastefully furnished, overfurnished, in fact with Victoriana designed to ensure Valery's comfort and contentment.

The nineteenth-century household was cluttered with beautiful, ornate objects—elaborate patterns in cloth covering walls, ornate furniture, pianos, paintings and bric-a-brac. Colors were muted—dark and velvety—all to surround, darken, and deepen the quiet of the home, and to accentuate the softness, submissiveness... of the woman within it, the angel of the house. (Lavender 3)

So successful is Dahlia in creating a comfortable and attractive home that she becomes trapped in its upholstered and accessorized depths. She goes out into the world less and less. Her lavish convent education, her creative talents, all are reserved exclusively for Valery, *petit Val*, and their home. What non-familial relationships and social involvement she was able to maintain prior to accepting the title of *quarteronne* are sublimated by her duties as helpmate and mother. The boundaries of her world shrink to walls of her home and the maintenance of her family. The price of this literal *internalization* of domesticity is clear. If the home and family remain a private, sacrosanct space, all is bliss. If, however, the outside world intrudes, if the domicile is penetrated by tragedy or infidelity, the reason and space for the mother's life is destroyed. Without the possibility of an intact nuclear family, Dahlia dies.

Gothe's sexual surrender and entry into the domestic sphere is even more inevitable than Dahlia's. Gothe does not have the standard choice between dutiful submission and hymenal preservation. Because of her sister's manipulations, the only choice available to her is not "whether," but "to whom" she will submit and sacrifice her chastity. She can be an obedient sister and become the mistress of Don Inigo Iniquez as

Jeannette has arranged, or she can submit to the protection of Horace who offers her a home over which to preside and, eventually, marriage. Probably because the choice is such a non-choice, and her sacrifice so defensible, Gothe's story does not end in tragedy. Horace does marry her, she goes on to have several children, she even moves to Europe, becomes "white," and is still living happily when *Gina* ends.

Gothe's story does not end so much as dissipate. Like Dahlia, she happily disappears into her new home, and readers will only get an occasional peek through the curtains to assure themselves that she is still there, raising her children, still playing the role of the *sainte du logis*. Perhaps the idea of a civilized and civilizing *quarteronne* is so new to the author's audience that it is necessary for these biologically "unwhite" women to prove their mettle as spouses and mothers with complete dedication to the task. Nothing less than a complete cathetic investment in the domestic space is required to exorcise the corruptive influence of their "unwhite blood."

It is also true that Gothe and Dahlia have little choice but to remain in the home, at least while living in New Orleans. Their entry into the private, domestic sphere is made very public. Even as they accede to True Womanhood, they are publicly perceived as falling away from it, "Un journal, en parlant de la maladie de Valery, racontait les soins charmants dont il était l'objet de la part d'une jeune quarteronne, de mademoiselle D. D., et ne manquait pas d'ajouter comme il l'avait fait pour Gothe: 'Encore une étoile qui tombe! Un nouvel ange déchu!'" (*Dahlia* III 313). The injustice of this misapprehension moves the reader while simultaneously demonstrating that the True Woman is not motivated by public validation but by private conviction. However sympathetic this makes Dahlia or Gothe appear, it nevertheless signals the absence of any public life in which the women *can* participate. They are now too private to associate

with other *quarteronnes* and too public too associate with “white” women, with one important exception, Léontine, whose unassailable character allows her to travel into even the most unfeminine of places, including slums, jails, and the sitting rooms of *quarteronnes*.

The *quarteronnes* may yet have something to prove *vis à vis* domesticity, but the dedication of middle-class, genetically “white” women to home and hearth has been so thoroughly established as to permit certain liberties. While Léontine professes to center her life around her children, she is not circumscribed by the walls of her home. At *Sept Tours* she reins more as princess than housekeeper, and when she is in residence at *Les Muriers*, she seems content to leave household chores to her recently re-acquired slaves and other laborers.

Her energies, meanwhile, are generally focused on the charitable projects to which she and her husband have always been dedicated: “Avant de mourir, mon mari fit son testament et me laissa la moitié de sa fortune; en me parlant de ce legs, il me dit: ‘Souviens-toi, chère, que c’est un dépôt que je laisse entre tes mains. Sers-t’en pour adoucir les souffrances de tes semblables’” (*Gina* II 58). Circumstances and her own inclinations conspire to keep Léontine away from home for much of the novel. She and Hamilton leave Louisiana immediately after their wedding and proceed to spend much of their marriage traveling in Europe. The family briefly returns to Canada so that Hamilton can spend his final days at *Sept Tours*, but as soon as he is buried, Léontine and the children continue their extended Grand Tour. Traveling provides her with a territory equal to the scope of her charitable ambitions and an opportunity to fully explore the newfound freedom and independence of widowhood. From Canada to Italy and back to New Orleans, she continues the unofficial adoptions and sponsorships that began with

Jeannette and Gothe, and which will eventually make her the matriarch of a large non-traditional family. Rather than fleeing the world in order to protect her values, she becomes a sort of domestic missionary. She creates homes everywhere, she is everyone's mother, with the power to reproduce herself and her values not in one space, but in many.

This alternative means of reproducing herself brings us to the final cardinal virtue of True Womanhood, and in fact the only one with which Léontine is more compliant than Dahlia or Gothe: sexual purity. Léontine is so sexually pure, in fact, that her purity in and of itself becomes a bold and un-true-womanly expression of her independence. Eventually, the tension between submission to patriarchal will and fierce protection of one's virginity is meant to be resolved through a provisional surrender in the marriage bed. For de la Houssaye, however, sex and independence are mutually exclusive no matter how privileged and legalized the context of the sexual relationship. While Gothe's fecundity, for example, attests to her whole-hearted dedication to conjugal duty, Léontine shows decidedly less dependence on it for fulfillment, a point to which I will return later in this chapter.

The Godmother

From the beginning of *Gina*³⁰, Léontine is remarkable for the things that she is *not*. She is *not*, generally, a good example of three of the four "cardinal virtues" of womanhood which serve to keep women unseen and unheard. Instead, she is an interesting conglomeration of sentimental tropes, practical skills, intelligences, and instincts that make her uniquely qualified to succeed in and even shape her world. *Gina*

³⁰ Despite the title of the novel, it is much more Léontine's story than Gina's. Gina remains a secondary character throughout.

ends with a vision of a utopic community of families that originates with, is cultivated by, and is governed by the values of Léontine. The development of her character, therefore, is key to understanding the qualities that a woman must possess in order to successfully negotiate and overcome patriarchal boundaries and replace them, in short, with a much more liveable matriarchy.

As the daughter of a poor white Creole lady and an English duke's impoverished third son who has come to America and found work at a bank, Leontine's position in the class hierarchy is advantageous but not stratospheric. This becomes truer after her father dies and Léontine and her petulant and pampered mother find that they have been left the family's mansion but not the capital needed to maintain it or their luxurious lifestyle. Léontine pragmatically becomes something of a businesswoman, declining traditional options such as sinking into genteel poverty or making a financially advantageous marriage.

On the suggestion of Doctor Renaud, Léontine persuades her mother to convert their home into two apartments so that they can rent out the unneeded space for income. On her own initiative, she makes arrangements to rent out most of the family slaves, each of whom is uniquely talented in his or her *métiers*, to local businesses which reduces household costs and increases revenue. Madame Percy, her mother, plays the part of the privileged lady horrified at the idea of Léontine soiling her hands in trade, "s'opposât absolument à ce que sa fille travaillât," but her objections are quickly outstripped by her desire for comfort. Both the narrator and Léontine view Mme Percy as a relic, the former with less fondness than the latter. She is the silly, selfish woman who drags her family towards penury with her extravagance, while rejecting as "lower class" such solutions to insolvency as employment or the sale of property.

In these first few pages, several of Léontine's most important qualities are revealed. She is intelligent. She is energetic and adaptive. Most importantly, however, she is not only capable of independence, she shows a strong inclination towards it. There is no articulation of "cardinal virtues" for women in *Les Quarteronnes*, but there is one cardinal sin: dependency, in particular, reliance on men. With the deaths of her father, husband, and son, Léontine increases her freedom and moves closer to her familial utopia. With freedom from the patriarch, however, often comes the loss of his material contributions to the family. This makes financial self-sufficiency critical for the woman who either cannot or does not wish to depend on men.

Financial matters are much more thematic throughout the series than one might expect in novels that are so characterized by sentimentality. De la Houssaye repeatedly underscores the idea that labor does not undermine nobility for women or men, and in many cases is proof of it. In *Violetta*, Hermine Saulvé begins life as a seamstress, and after her husband withdraws his financial support as a punishment for defying his unreasonable demands, she makes ends meet by taking in sewing while her eldest daughter gives music lessons. Her ability to outmaneuver her husband's siege tactics preserves the family's home. Virginie LeBon is a sought-after midwife who, in part due to the knowledge that she could support herself with her education, was able, in her youth, to resist a tempting but damning *plaçage* offer. A young Dahlia exhibits an entrepreneurial spirit as well, converting her talent for cultivating rare and expensive blooms into a source of ready cash. As noted in the introduction, de la Houssaye herself was unable to rely on a husband or sons to provide all of the necessary funds for the household and so worked as the headmistress of her own school, town postmistress, and,

of course, as a writer whose correspondence attests to her determination to publish for profit.

The “unwhite” *quarteronnes* are even more motivated by the acquisition of wealth and are frank about the need to stockpile resources for a future in which they will no longer be able to trade on their erotic appeal to men. In some cases, such as that of Man Babette in *Dahlia*, the impulse to collect and save money becomes pathological. Even as a slave, Babette has a flair for business. Not satisfied to be the mistress of Sir Richard’s³¹ son Gérald, she covertly takes on two other “protectors” and begins to set aside the money she receives from them. When Sir Richard decides to sell her and his illegitimate granddaughter Célima at auction, we learn that Babette has already accumulated almost enough to buy their freedom. Preferring to conserve her savings for other uses, she persuades each of her lovers to donate to the cause of her freedom and is able to raise the money she needs, “Six cents piastres! s’écria-t-elle; Saulvé! Me voilà prête pour la bataille!” (*Dahlia* II 122).

Her freedom purchased, she uses her savings to rent property and set up her first boarding house, which proves a success, and does not return to Gérald at *Les Lilas* until after Sir Richard’s death. Her tenure as the ersatz mistress of the plantation comes to an end as she notices Gérald’s interest waning as he falls in love with an in-law, and so she very practically begins to make arrangements for her future. When he comes to her room to end the affair, he finds her bags packed and her list of demands ready for his review. The “severance package” she negotiates with Gérald Ashton includes ownership of a property she can convert into a large boarding house so that she can leave the unstable concubinage market altogether.

³¹ The owner of *Les Lilas* as well as Babette herself.

There is something like grudging admiration for Babette in the passages regarding her impending sale, or at least an understanding of her desperation to avoid it. The narrator, however, carefully maintains an overall tone of judgmental sarcasm regarding the means of her escape from slavery: “notre petite mulâtresse avait son projet et était bien décider à ne point se laisser vendre à l’encan comme une vache ou une jument, avait-elle dit. ‘Plutôt mourir que de me soumettre à une pareille humiliation!’ ajouta-t-elle” (*Dahlia* II 118-119). There is comprehension that a *person* would rather die than to be sold like a “cow or a mule,” but the brief moment of identification is prefaced with the sneering “notre petite mulâtresse.” The practical initiative that is laudable in Léontine is lamentable in Babette even though Babette faces the horrors of the auction block rather than the sale of a home.

By looking at each separate instance dealing with women and financial independence, or other gender- or race-centered issues that cause narrative conflicts in the series, a trend emerges. Typically, the trend begins with a potentially controversial implication made via the actions of a character. In this case, the author makes the assertion that women are able to take care of themselves, and should always be prepared to do so due to the unreliability of men. She then begins to qualify that assertion. Women can take care of themselves, but they must not involve themselves with men as a means of doing so.

Dahlia, Virginie, and Hermine all work within an economy which is exclusively feminine; they gather flowers to sell to other women, or assist other women to give birth, or take in sewing from other women. Babette obtains her money through sexual involvement with men, a means which is far too likely to draw the crushing force of negative public attention down on women as a group. A private, interfemale labor force

is safer from that negative attention, because it reassures the patriarchy even as it undermines it that men's jobs are safe, that men's lives will not be disrupted, and that women will remain tied to the home. Women can climb to a more secure place in the hierarchy, but they must use the back stairs.

Once the author qualifies an assertion, she often goes on to present an exaggerated scenario in which a character fulfills the most negative stereotypes associated with their race/gender, as if to placate detractors by acknowledging their arguments in advance. De la Houssaye wants to prove that there is honor in being a woman who works for a living and supports herself as the author herself did. In order to do so, however, she must distance characters such as Léontine completely from the taint of sexual availability that lingers around the idea of the wage-earning female. Babette, therefore, is made an example of, used as a foil for a Léontine or a Virginie, made to show that there are "women who work" and then there are *working women*. This pattern of a challenge to the status quo hiding beneath a restatement of, or even an exaggerated affirmation of, existing social hierarchies is one that can be found throughout the series.

Babette's story is not presented in chronological order in the novel. In the Part One of *Dahlia*, we meet middle-aged Babette who sells her daughter, but shows some signs of affection to her granddaughter. In Part Two, we meet young, beautiful, ambitious Babette, a protective mother intelligent enough to be able to buy her freedom and start her own business. It is only in the third part, when Babette is elderly, that she becomes completely animalistic and one-dimensional. The author, perhaps anxious that she has gone too far in her portrayal of a sexually available (unwhite) woman as endowed with agency and intelligence, overcompensates in the final portion of the novel and reduces what was once a somewhat multi-faceted character to a villainous caricature.

Rather than being allowed to enjoy her transition from slave to landlady, Babette is infected by an all-consuming need to gather more and more money after her departure from the plantation. The same woman who was anxious to buy her daughter's freedom, who was so protective of Célima's happiness while at *Les Lilas*, now sells Célima to a stranger for a little gold. By time of Dahlia's birth, Babette has become a compulsive miser, willing to deprive herself and her granddaughter of every comfort in order to add to the cache of money hidden somewhere in her home. Even her business skill is ultimately subsumed by her mania for acquiring money.

When Dahlia returns as a young woman to live with Babette, Babette is immediately determined to sell her virginity. An enormous offer from Don Orlando Trocadero is dangled before her, but Babette now lacks the restraint it takes to keep Dahlia happy and unsuspecting until she can be kidnapped and raped. When Babette learns that Dahlia has some little amount of money that she has not shared, she becomes rabid: “‘tout ce que tu possèdes est à moi!... ah je te tuerai!’ En disant ces paroles, elle s'élança sur la pauvre enfant... Ses doigts crochus s'attachèrent à son bras et ils la secouaient tandis que la vieille furie répétait à tue-tête: 'Je veux ton argent... je le veux! Donne-le-moi... ou je vais te tuer!'" (*Dahlia* III 232) This bizarre attack puts Dahlia on her guard against Babette's nefarious intentions and thus Babette sacrifices a hundred thousand *piastres* in her attempt to get a handful, or, as Octavia warns her, “‘votre avarice vous poussera toujours trop loin et vous fera faire des bêtises. Dans cette circonstance, elle vous a fait tuer la poule aux oeufs d'or.'" (*Dahlia* III 235). The devolution of Babette from independent and intelligent to foolish and addicted is a resounding acknowledgement of the trope that some women, perhaps many, are too morally susceptible to be in contact with the corruptive potential of money. Her example serves,

perhaps too well, to camouflage the subversive potential of stories like Léontine's or Hermine's.

Just as de la Houssaye feels that men cannot, generally³², be relied on as a source of material support, they also prove to be indifferent parents. Women, on the other hand, have both an instinct and a talent for nurture and must be prepared to be solely responsible for the education and rearing of the next generation. This idea hardly seems to be subversive when compared with advocating female financial independence, but it ultimately endangers hegemonic social boundaries in the novels far more.

Though Léontine creates gainful employment, hers is not, ultimately, a particularly demanding job. Her new tenants are a trio of exceptionally wealthy and gracious Canadian émigrés consisting of a mother, her ailing daughter, and an attractive and eligible son who are so pleasant that the two small families begin to live as one. This congenial arrangement gives Léontine the opportunity to renew her efforts in another sphere, maternal nurture. Not only does Mme. Castel arrive with a daughter in the final stages of consumption who rapidly becomes Léontine's patient, but Léontine has two literal "pet" projects, her *quarteronne* godchildren Jeannette and Gothe, "ces deux petites *quarteronnes*" who are "l'amusement continuel, les poupées et surtout les idoles de leur jeune maîtresse" (*Gina* I 18).

Young Léontine instinctively nurtures the two girls in the tradition of a true Lady Bountiful, dispensing largesse and opening doors, though without making any real sacrifices, material or emotional. Gwin calls this a tradition of southern literature, remarking that

³² Though she declares Percy to be incapable of managing the family's fortune, Léontine does eventually allow the heroic Yvon to become her apprentice so that the burden of managing the family's assets can gradually shift to his more trustworthy shoulders while she enjoys more time with her first priority, her family.

White women—fictional or actual, writers or subjects—rarely perceive or acknowledge...the humanity of their black sisters. Most of these white women in life and literature see black women as a color, as servants, as children, as adjuncts, as sexual competition, as dark sides of their sexual selves—as black Other. They beat black women, nurture them, sentimentalize them, despise them—but they seldom see them as individuals with selves commensurate to their own. (Gwin 5)

Gwin's observations, with the exception of beatings, can justly be applied to Léontine or de la Houssaye. The extent to which she recognizes the humanity of the slaves that she rents out to make ends meet or the nurse³³ whose children she appropriates is very questionable, despite her animadversions regarding the *sale* of enslaved “family members.”³⁴ Léontine claims that in making Jeannette and Gothe her “projects” she seeks to pay “une partie de la dette que j’ai contractée envers ma nourrice” (*Gina* I 15). This protestation does not ring true, however, in light of the fact that she continually ignores Angélique’s wishes regarding Jeannette and Gothe’s upbringing.

If she treats her godchildren as inhuman, however, it seems to be less a function of their race than of age. Her affection for and attraction to the children is real and compulsory. Léontine *must* “idolize” them, for in a gynocentric hierarchy that places the mother figure at its apex, the “instinct” to nurture is highly privileged. She does not see Jeannette and Gothe as human, it is true, but as *prehuman* with the potential to become something worthy: “ces deux enfants sont d’une beauté et d’une intelligence extraordinaire...j’espère en faire d’honnêtes femmes et de bonne chrétiennes” (*Gina* I 13). Their race and gender as adults will be a direct reflection on Léontine’s “parenting,” as will their own independence and dedication to matriarchy.

³³ Angélique, mother of Matte, Jeannette, and Gothe, was Léontine’s wet-nurse and nanny.

³⁴ The slaves are indeed sold, however, after Léontine’s marriage and subsequent departure. She also swears never to abandon her godchildren, though she effectively does this as well.

Unfortunately, the girls' future status as "white" women is thrown into doubt when Léontine prematurely abandons her first efforts in the rearing of children. Once married, her imperative is to become a full-fledged mother to her own biological children—nurturing begins at home. Though she manumits the girls and their mother and leaves behind instructions and provisions for their futures, she has no further contact with them for more than two decades.

Despite this maternal lapse, she proves the depth of her instinct to nurture repeatedly through the years. She becomes not only a wife but also a mother to her husband, nursing him when he succumbs to the hereditary tuberculosis that claimed all his siblings. Once widowed, she raises her children single-handedly, assuring that their every need and desire is met, seeing that they are lavishly educated, and introducing them to every pleasure and opportunity that Europe has to offer. Along the way, she provides for at least two foundlings. The first, who is referred to as an adopted son, is Horace Delmond, an artistically-gifted waif rescued by Hamilton from poverty and abuse.³⁵ Another, the improbably named Ernest, is a starving Italian child who joins the family not as a son but as a servile adjunct and playmate for Percy.

When she returns to New Orleans with her grown children, however, she is forced to confront the after-effects of the abandonment of her "[filles] d'adoption" (*Gina* II 25). One of her abandoned goddaughters is now mother to the illegitimate children of the painter Horace Delmond, none other than the Canadian waif and "fils adoptif" whose fate was also unknown to her until her return (*Gina* II 188). The other has taken the town by storm as its most beautiful and infamous *quarteronne* and can already take responsibility

³⁵ Horace is given some material assistance, sent off to school in Europe, and then is not heard from again until Léontine arrives in New Orleans.

for one lover's suicide. Both appear to have slipped forever from the sphere of her influence and into dependency on men.

Léontine has read about the exploits of New Orleans *quarteronnes* in newspapers while abroad, but is shocked to discover that two of them are actually her goddaughters. The shock itself is important, acknowledging as it does a radical shift in their identities, that they were once something other than a *quarteronne*, and what is a *quarteronne*'s other if not "whiteness": "ces *enfants*...je te les ai confiées pures et vertueuses comme les anges...et tu oses me dire qu'elles ont renié la vertu, la foi, la pureté...pour devenir ces maudites, ces infâmes...*créatures*..." (*Gina* II 20, my emphasis). Certainly she considers *quarteronnes* "*êtres*" or "*créatures*" rather than women and only grudgingly admits that they are the same "sex" as she or her daughter. Had she considered Jeannette and Gothe to be merely *êtres*, however, she would have taken their moral downfalls in stride, or at least have had some sense of their inevitability. Moreover, it is unlikely that they would have received the kind of attention that she lavished upon them had she felt they had no future in any "white" society.

There is a clear difference between "nurturing" as one would a child and merely "sheltering" as one might do for a stray animal. This is illustrated by the very divergent ways in Léontine treats Horace and Ernest. Horace as a Canadian, however poor, is filled with potential for "whiteness," as seen in his sensitivity, aesthetic talent, and intelligence.³⁶ Accordingly, he receives an education and the title of "son." Ernest, who is Italian,³⁷ a nationality that is not associated in the author's mind with "whiteness" or even potential for "whiteness," is summarily given kindly treatment and a menial job.

³⁶ All of which are feminine characteristics in de la Houssaye's division of gender, which also explains why Horace receives preferential treatment.

³⁷ The author's association of excessive libido with Spanish and Italian men translates into her perception of them as a less "white" race

While nurture is most important means of realizing human potential, it cannot create potential where there is none, and both Ernest's devalued gender and race make him unsuitable for Léontine's maternal efforts. For Léontine to have "nurtured" Ernest rather than merely aiding him would have been a waste of resources.

Because as a well-traveled woman of the world, she better understands the consequences of abandoning Jeannette and Gothe in Louisiana, Léontine bookends the recriminations she levels at the girls' biological mother with self-recrimination. She does not express regret for having begun to "elevate" them, although Angelique feels they should never have been introduced to "whiteness," but for having failed to see it through: "Tu as raison de m'accuser Mamie, répondit Léontine; j'aurais dû amener mes filleules avec moi" (*Gina* II 28). The influence of the nurturing mother figure can only extend so far in time and space. In failing to keep her *filleules* in contact with "whiteness" over such a protracted period, she left them to absorb every kind of sexual and racial impurity. While the values with which she has inculcated the docile mind of Gothe remain intact³⁸, Jeannette's more perverse nature quickly shrugs off "white" values in the absence of Léontine's corrective oversight. If the girls have become "unwhite," it is because they were abandoned to "unwhiteness," not because they were born to it, an argument that Adoréah/Jeannette is quick to make,

Mais, vous qui m'accusez, qui me reprochez ce que j'ai fait, n'êtes-vous pas en partie la cause du crime que j'ai commis...? ...Ah! Je me souviens de tout, allez... vous nous elevâtes comme vos enfants, vous nous fîtes donner de l'éducation... Vous nous inspirâtes le goût du beau... Tout ce qui était vulgaire était éloigné de nous avec soin... Et, voilà que vous vous mariez... Vous partez... et malgré

³⁸ As discussed in Chapter One, Léontine soon learns that Gothe's illegitimate relationship is justified by her circumstances and will soon be solemnized abroad. This along with the fact that she is an nurturing mother, in short that she has remained "white" after all, redeems her in Léontine's eyes.

nos larmes, notre désespoir... vous nous abandonnez aux soins d'une femme sans education, à l'esprit borné et pour qui l'argent était tout au monde. (*Gina* II 174)

Jeannette could easily produce other examples of “motherless” children whose whiteness, in the absence of nurture, is infiltrated. Two very graphic examples of this phenomenon can be found in Léonce and Mary D--, the sibling lovers in *Octavia* whose father fails so spectacularly to protect them.

Even with a vigilant and nurturing mother, children can be corrupted, particularly male children. Léontine's own son is immune to her civilizing influence and embraces “unwhiteness” both figuratively and literally, “Ah!... dit Léontine en soupirant... Lui, mon enfant, le fils de mon noble Hamilton, a les goûts les plus bas, les plus vulgaires” (*Gina* II 191). This second failure as a mother is Léontine's most humbling moment, the point at which she almost becomes a mere mortal, and yet it is also this crisis that leads to an uncanny testament to a mother's power to instill and buttress “whiteness” through nurture. As her son lies dying from the tubercular infection he caused by his debauchery, she learns the extent of his involvement with *quarteronnes*,

...d'une voix tremblante, il fit à sa mere la confession que le prêtre venait d'entendre. Il parla de l'amour que Gina la quarteronne lui avait inspiré à leur première rencontre; il parla avec enthousiasme de la bonté, du noble désintéressement, du dévouement de la jeune fille... Là il s'arrêta encore et tout-à-coup parla de sa fille, de cette adorable petite creature si semblable à sa mere... (*Gina* II *Manuscript* 596)

Léontine's first grandchild is a *quarteronne*. Not only her first grandchild, but a grandchild who is her double.

C'était l'image de Léontine; plus elle grandissait et plus elle lui ressemblait. Les boucles brunes, les yeux noirs et surtout son teint rosé étaient absolument ceux de sa grandmère. Elle avait ses mouvements, ses manières et on

se demandait avec étonnement comment elle avait pu les adopter... ‘à la Léontine’ disait Percy que ces petites manières amusaient beaucoup. (*Gina II Manuscript 584*)

From the darkest-skinned of the *quarteronnes* and her own performatively “unwhite” son comes a reproduction, a re-presentation, of the most emphatically “white” character in the series. Despite her apparent failures with Percy and Jeannette,³⁹ as manifested in their deathbed repentances, they have been inseminated with her “whiteness,” her virtue, and they carry it and pass it on as if it were a latent gene. Gina receives it in triplicate, via Percy, via Jeannette, and via Matte,⁴⁰ so it is not necessarily surprising that her child acts and speaks “à la Léontine.” This conversion of unrefined elements, of raw potential, into the purity of a “white” and female child can be likened to a sort of alchemy that only the Truest Woman, the Most Nurturing Mother could catalyze.

The child, appropriately named Angèle, increases her symbolic value by growing up to resemble her grandmother in every aspect, even falling in love with a double for her dead husband. Hamilton Delmond⁴¹ is not only the namesake of Hamilton Castel, he resembles him in goodness, courage, and artistic talent. As if to make up for the muted celebration of Hamilton and Léontine’s wedding so many years ago, they marry in “un des mariages les plus beaux de la Saison. Un mariage du grand monde fut célébré à Notre Dame et ceux qui y assistèrent ne se doutaient guère que cette jeune mariée si belle, si modeste, si richement habillée appartenait comme son époux à la race exécrée des quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans” (*Gina II Manuscript 616*). It is not surprising

³⁹ Jeannette is the person responsible for luring Gina away from her grandmother and into a plaçage contract with Percy. Angèle’s birth is thus a direct result of Léontine’s two greatest failures as a mother, Jeannette and Percy.

⁴⁰ Gina’s mother, Matte, was able to marry a legally white (Italian) man in a purely religious ceremony through the intervention of Léontine and Hamilton and so Gina and her (dead) sister “Léo” are legitimate in the eyes of the church.

⁴¹ Gothe’s firstborn. It should be remembered that Hamilton Castel is the series’ original artist. It is from him that Horace, Hamilton Delmond’s father and instructor, learns to paint.

that they are not suspected of being anything other than white. To be married amongst “Society” in Notre Dame de Paris surpasses “passing” or “rising.” It is to have *arrived* at the apex of the societal hierarchy, a synergy made possible through nurture.

With the marriage of Angèle, Léontine becomes the matriarch presiding over two generations of her virtual and virtuous progeny, many of whom are “hers” through nurture rather than genetics. This is an important aspect of Léontine’s utopic community, and it brings us to the one characteristic that de la Houssaye’s ideal woman has in common with her predecessors in the Cult of True Womanhood, sexual purity.

Although *Gina* reveals little about Léontine’s life before the death of her father it mentions that suitors feared that her parents’ extravagance might be heritable, so despite having “phalanges d’adorateurs,” Léontine had received no acceptable offers of marriage prior to her father’s death (*Gina* I 4). During the mourning period after her father’s death, Léontine devotes her time to raising her *filleules* rather than to suitors, effectively becoming a mother before she has any plans to become a wife. Except for an offhand remark that she plans to manumit Jeannette and Gothe when she marries, Léontine seems supremely unconcerned with finding a husband or even a suitor despite being many years older than de la Houssaye was, for instance, when she married.

When the Castels arise, she begins to show interest in the opposite sex, but it is framed as a strangely asexual attraction from the beginning. Alice Castel’s first impression of Léontine is that she eerily resembles her sister, the most recent victim of the family’s tubercular infection: “‘Ne trouves-tu pas, reprit la jeune fille d’une voix basse et tremblante d’émotion, que Léontine Percy ressemble à notre Agnès?’ ‘D’une manière frappante,’ s’écria Mme Castel; ‘j’ai cru pendant un moment avoir retrouvé ma

filles.’ ‘Oh!’ s’écria Alice, ‘comme Hamilton, qui aimait tant Agnès, va aimer Léontine!’” (*Gina* I 40).

In letters to Hamilton, Madame Castel and Alice mention Léontine’s beauty, her goodness, her attentiveness to Alice, and especially the startling resemblance she bears to Agnès, so that he does indeed arrive feeling predisposed to love Léontine. His first sight of her is not an incestuous *coup de foudre*, however. His reaction to the sight of his dead sister’s double is a long silence and a tear in the eye rather than the urge to devour that a *quarteronne* might inspire in a lesser man.

Similarly, Alice’s panegyrics on the subject of Hamilton’s heroism inspire an affection in Léontine even before she meets him. He will, we learn, face any danger, bribe any official, to help a friend in need. Unlike Hamilton, Léontine has no means of creating an accurate visual of the man who is winning her affections *in absentia*. She paints a mental portrait of a classic romantic hero, a powerful figure full of erotic potential,

...grand, d’une taille majestueuse, les épaules larges et rejetées en arrière; brun, avec de grands yeux noirs, étincelants du feu de l’intelligence; une moustache noire et soyeuse, ombrageant deux lèvres d’un rouge de corail, deux lèvres sur lesquelles se joue le plus charmant des sourires... et des dents! Ah! De vraies perles... [les cheveux] noirs, bien entendu, et il les porte un peu longs, rejetés en arrière.
(*Gina* I 59-60)

The description strongly resembles those of “unwhite,” erotically-charged characters such as the *quarteronnes* themselves—a dark complexion, black eyes, abundant and silky

black hair, and red lips open to expose white teeth.⁴² The real Hamilton turns out to be a much less exciting, and much safer, reality.

Léontine very briefly chastises herself for having imagined Hamilton as anything other than the average-sized, blonde, pale, plainly-dressed, and manifestly “white” gentleman who arrives on her doorstep. She acknowledges that this tame exterior matches his virtuous, generous, decidedly “feminine” personality as her imaginings did not. Gone is the seductive, piratical hero and in his place is a more androgynous figure that replaces raw power with a “charme, . . . une grace qui attiraient tous les coeurs vers lui” (*Gina* I 76). Léontine begins to think of Hamilton as an almost seraphic figure. Her body is not drawn to his. Her attraction, rather, is to his goodness, his charity, his nobility, his gravitas: “dans son âme, elle [le] plaçait au-dessus de tous les mortels” (*Gina* I 91). After their first meeting, Hamilton becomes physically invisible. Instead of a man, he is a series of moral attributes, of charitable actions.

Hamilton likewise finds that Léontine is an “ange à ses yeux.” That their attraction is primarily of an angelic, fraternal nature is fortunate. Hamilton has made a vow of chastity to his mother. Sex, in the Castel family, is inextricably bound with death. The children that could result from sexual union would, like Agnès, be sacrificial lambs to the curse of consumption. Excitement, exertion, and emotion, all part and parcel of sexual intercourse, are all potential triggers for the latent infection as well, so that in the act of producing children, parents put themselves at risk.

It is not until Alice makes her dying wish known that Hamilton is released from the vow of celibacy and bound by another. Alice places the burden of replacing herself

⁴² Eyes, lips, and teeth are all heavily laden with erotic symbolism in the series, and merit their own discussion in the next chapter.

and the lost Agnès on his shoulders. He is to marry Agnès's double and produce a daughter who can be named Alice. So, for the sake of two dead sisters and a grieving mother, Hamilton and Léontine marry despite the curse. The ceremony takes place on the heels of Alice's funeral and "leur deuil était trop profond pour permettre aucune démonstration de joie" (*Gina* I 110). The joylessness of the marriage is as attributable to the morbid, incestuous duty that the couple has accepted as it is to their sorrow over the loss of Alice.

As pseudo-siblings, the couple love each other "tendrement" and the marriage has a brief, happy period in which the couple indulge their mutual passion for altruism. Hamilton is Lord Bountiful to Léontine's Lady; in fact, it is his example and his fortune that ultimately give her the power to achieve her heroic potential. True to their promises to Alice, a son is produced, followed quickly by a "nouvelle Alice" (*Gina* I 114). While his daughter/sister is still an infant, however, Hamilton begins to experience the telltale symptoms of tuberculosis. In braving the danger of sex, he has made the ultimate sacrifice. In short order, Léontine is widowed.

The death of her husband-brother signals the end of Léontine's tenure as a sexual creature. Unlike her mother, who mourns only the minimum period before becoming engaged to a wealthy octogenarian, Léontine immediately decides on *repos* over remarriage: "elle jura de porter le deuil de veuve pendant son existence tout entière et elle tint parole" (*Gina* I 116). Though she remains agelessly beautiful until the end of the novel, and maintains her sexual appeal even to men young enough to be her sons, she is never tempted to participate in romantic love or sexual desire again. Hamilton is the only man she will ever meet who will not only permit her efforts at establishing a matriarchal family, but also will support and participate in them. A second attempt at marriage

might, at best, become a distraction from her children or her charity. At worse, a legal connection to a less-perfect partner could instantly result in the loss of all the freedom and power she has attained and reduce her from being a rescuer of the downtrodden and impoverished to being one of their number herself, a risk that is not worth taking.

Hamilton's neutral gender, which makes him such a perfect partner for Léontine who is in the process of redefining "womanhood," is only one of example of performative, liminal gender in the novels. Léontine's family alone contains two examples of indeterminate gender, her "effeminate" son Percy, and the "masculinized" *quarteronne* Jeannette. In the next chapter, I will explore how the confluence of performative gender and performative race creates an astounding array of possibilities for sexual interaction between characters, from the liberating to the profoundly pathological.

Chapter Four

“Ça une lady?”⁴³: Liminal Gender and Sexuality in *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*

From the opening lines of *Octavia*, the first novel in the *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans* series, the texts are sexually charged. Consider the author’s remarkable reaction to the discovery of her grandmother’s manuscripts about the *quarteronnes*:

Je laissai échapper un cri de joie: c’était un trésor que je venais de découvrir. Je m’empressai de jeter pêle-mêle dans la malle le monceau de papiers de toutes espèces que je venais d’en tirer et m’empressai d’emporter dans ma chambre le vieux manuscrit dont la lecture me promettait tant de plaisir. (Octavia 2, my emphasis)

The orgasmic cry, the author’s rush to carry the papers off to her bedroom, and her expectation of “so much pleasure” all anticipate the titillating, voyeuristic tone that characterizes the entire series. As one goes on to discover, there is a great deal of material within her “grandmother’s” research that might serve to pique the interest of readers drawn to the erotic as well as to the exotic. A peek into the private spaces of *les quarteronnes* and their lovers reveals innumerable spectacles of illicit desire, transgressive seductions, and sexual violence ranging from rape to incest.

Fellow author and contemporary Edouard Tinker wrote of the very sexual subject matter that “il est curieux de voir cette femme âgée, très respectable, mère de quatorze enfants [six enfants et huit petits enfants], maîtresse d’école pendant la plus grande partie de sa vie, écrire de pareilles choses” (Perret 202). As Tinker did, a reader can easily find himself bemused about why and how a woman from de la Houssaye’s background came

⁴³ Violetta’s reaction on seeing the bizarre Sarrasine-esque Lady Judith Percy for the first time is “Ça une lady!... c’est un drôle d’échantillon que l’Angleterre nous envoie là!” (*Gina* II 335).

to write about “these kinds of things.” That “tragic quadroon” and travel narratives focused on erotic tourism in New Orleans had created a market for stories about *plaçage* gives us a partial explanation of “why” she would write about *quarteronnes* and their sexual conquests.

In her book *The Great Southern Babylon*, Alicia Long explores sex as an industry in New Orleans from 1865 to 1920. Long believes that the sex industry, in particular the interracial sex industry (or sex across the color line, to use her term) was a financial goldmine for the city and constituted one of the main draws, if not *the* main draw, for adventurous tourists and their money. The Reconstruction period, according to Long, openly brought sex to the forefront of both the American imagination and the New Orleans tourist trade:

[There was] ...a shift toward consumption, gratification, and pleasure' in the lives of average Americans. One result was that the commercialization of sex, previously an underground, illicit phenomenon, moved somewhat into the open as entrepreneurs created institutions that encouraged erotic encounters... yet as much as New Orleans was like the rest of the nation, the commercialization of sex in New Orleans also had distinctive characteristics and outcomes...its complex racial history—especially the prevalence of sex across the color line...set it apart from the rest of the country. (4)

This distinctive quality made New Orleans something of a niche market in the cultural imagination, and authors like de la Houssaye certainly capitalized on that fact. The *Quarteronne* novels have been interpreted in different ways by different readers, but it would be naive for anyone to forget that their author's clearly-stated interest in commercial success excludes them from the category of *l'art pour l'art*.

Particularly for a female author, however, an obvious problem arises. How can she write about a subject when knowledge of it is forbidden to her by social convention?

The reality of writing for, about, and from within a repressive society provides insight into “how” de la Houssaye writes about sex. To discuss the *verboten* without becoming *verboten*, she employs a well-tried strategy: she leads the reader to believe that she has brought the “distasteful” subject of interracial sex to the reader’s attention only so that author and reader may mutually decry it. With this conceit in place, she and her readers are free to enjoy lurid details while maintaining crucial moral distance. Inevitably, however, the mask of the moralizing historian slips. In her choices of outrages to dwell upon and relationships to sanctify, we catch a glimpse of the author’s anxieties and fascinations.

Sexual Positions

What would it mean...to consider the assumption of sexual positions, the disjunctive ordering of the human as “masculine” or “feminine” as taking place not only through a heterosexualizing symbolic with its taboo on homosexuality, but through a complex set of racial injunctions which operate in part through the taboo on miscegenation. Further, how might we understand homosexuality and miscegenation to converge at and as the constitutive outside of a normative heterosexuality that is at once the regulation of a racially pure reproduction?
(*Bodies That Matter* 167)

Just as Butler suggests, in the *Quarteronnes* novels, a character’s racial status is determined by her gender/sexuality and her gender/sexuality is determined by her racial status. For instance, if a character is a nurturing mother, the clearest proof of “femininity,”⁴⁴ she is also “white” in the performative sense and is worthy of the social privileges of “whites.” While it is true that de la Houssaye reworks the category of “humanity” to align with her conception of “morality” and “femininity” rather than

⁴⁴ “femininity” refers to *de la Houssaye’s* revised definition of “femininity” or womanhood as explained in the previous chapter. This is important because it necessarily affects how I use terms such as “transgendered,” which refers here to a character who is between the *author’s* understanding of woman/feminine and man/unfeminine.

“power” and “masculinity,” it remains a relatively narrow construction of personhood. Few can attain or maintain a position at the apex of de la Houssaye’s hierarchy.

The rigidity of de la Houssaye’s definition of humanity/whiteness/femininity means that characters who deviate in some measure from the author’s ideals are the rule rather than the exception. Because race, gender, and sexuality are so mutually determinative in the novels, these deviations result in a destabilization of not only one’s racial status, but also one’s gender status and sexuality. In the case of race, the slippage between body and performance creates an array of possibilities between the poles of “white” appearing/performing and “unwhite” appearing/performing. This is equally true of gender and sexuality in the novels, and most characters are revealed to be somewhere between the binaries of feminine/unfeminine and reproductive/queer.

Just as I have used the purposefully vague term “unwhite” rather than “black” or “nonwhite” to denote racial alterity, I will use the term “unfeminine” rather than “masculine” in my discussion of gender. In Chapter One, I posited that the author’s tendency is to control and define only her privileged categories of identity. In terms of race, this meant that her version of “whiteness” was the only well-defined racial status. The further a character is from “whiteness,” the less insight the narrator can provide as to their internal workings and the less information we have about them. In terms of gender, we find that the author is most interested in the exposition of characters she considers “feminine.” The thoughts and motivations of these women are completely available to the reader. Male characters, however, tend to be much more opaque, and the further they are from “femininity,” the more incomprehensible they become. This more nebulous conception of gender difference is too unwieldy to be forced into the traditional male/female binary. I will therefore continue the practice of signaling the *presence* of

alterity using “unfeminine” rather than referring to an encapsulation of difference that is absent from the text.

The application of the traditional, or even non-traditional, vocabulary for sexual orientation is similarly problematic. This arises from the fact that the privileged sexual orientation in the novels is actually the *absence* of a sexual orientation. The characters who achieve the most successful, liveable lives are those who have the least interest in heterosexual relationships. This brings us to a central paradox in the text: reproduction is redemptive, but sex is restrictive and corruptive. There are two means through which this conflict is resolved. The first is to simply restrict the duration of one’s sexually reproductive phase as much as possible. This is generally facilitated by the untimely death of one of the partners in the relationship soon after the birth of a child or two. If a woman is too attracted to the opposite sex and too invested in sexual reproduction, she runs the risk of disappearing forever into the marriage bed. If this happens, she will at best cease to exist outside of the home and at worst will cease to exist at all. A second means of avoiding the pitfalls of sexuality is to reproduce asexually, as Léontine does through her adoptions and sponsorships.

Both means of satisfying the reproductive requirements of whiteness/femininity tend to devalue the standard conception of heterosexuality, and make “reproductive” a better way of defining de la Houssaye’s sexual norm than “heterosexual.” Any desire for sex that cannot be framed as “reproductive” is a proof of alterity, of “queerness,” including sex between partners of different genders. Because “queer” denotes delimited and extra-normal sexuality without insisting on the standard binary of heterosexual/homosexual, it will be my preferred term for sexual orientations that do not conform with de la Houssaye’s “reproductive” norm. Another reason for rejecting the

term “homosexual” as a descriptor of alterity is that we will see some instances in which a homosexual relationship serves to insulate characters from the dangers of non-reproductive heterosexual sex and is therefore positive and protective. Homosexual relationships can also serve as a demonstration of a character’s privileging of “affinity” an attraction to sameness that connotes nobility in the texts.

Unfeminine and queer characters may be excluded from de la Houssaye’s domestic hagiography, but a lack of interest in morality or maternity is not always the liability that the author would have it be. There are ‘enabled violators,’ characters who succeed precisely because they have rejected the privileging of a singular, fixed gender or sexual preference. Other unfeminine or queer characters eventually internalize either the author’s or more patriarchal norms and attempt, too late, to bring their bodies and desires into compliance with them. This attempt at integration of sexual pluralities, however, leads in more than one case to dis-integration of the body. The author/narrator’s attitude towards these liminal characters is easily as variable as it is towards those whose race she is unable to fix, if not more so. In *Gina*, for example, she lauds the domestic, nurturing, “feminine” nature of Hamilton Castel, while criticizing the flamboyant, libidinous, weak, “feminine” nature of his son Percy. Both characters, however, are killed off, a useful final solution for characters who slip out of the narrator’s control. In this section, we will examine these and other examples of liminal gender and sexuality and explore how alterity and affinity advance a character’s projects in some cases and destroy them in others.

In Search of (a) Safe Sex

The instability of unfeminine characters make women the only really “safe,” knowable quantity in the novel. Therefore, if there is anything approaching “safe sex” in

the *Quarteronnes* novels, it occurs exclusively in relationships between two feminine characters. Although the author does not intend these relationships to be read as sexual, they reach levels of emotional and physical intimacy typically reserved for lovers. Alice and Léontine, for example, experience something like a *coup de foudre* upon meeting each other and that first impression ripens into a mutual passion:

...l'amitié de Léontine et d'Alice ne fit que s'augmenter de jour en jour. Vivant sous le même toit, toujours ensemble, elles ne pouvaient manquer de s'attacher l'une à l'autre. Leurs goûts étaient les mêmes et chacune découvrait journallement chez l'autre de nouvelles vertus qui la lui rendaient plus chère encore. (*Gina* I 58)

Et si Mme Castel aimait Léontine, que dirons-nous de la tendre amitié que cette dernière avait su inspirer à Alice? Léontine était devenue la soeur, l'amie de coeur de la jeune malade. En se réveillant le matin, sa première pensée était pour elle, et Dieu sait ce qu'elle serait devenue si Léontine était restée une seule journée éloignée d'elle! (*Gina* I 71)

The relationship between the two teenaged girls, which often includes time spent together “raising” Jeannette and Gothe to become “white” women like their ersatz mothers, creates a little matriarchal family. None of the four girls have fathers, yet there is no sense that a father-figure is missing from the picture. In fact, once Hamilton Castel, a possible patriarch, does arrive on the scene, he only serves as an interruption to the ersatz family. The only point on which Hamilton and his future wife do not agree is Léontine’s “adoption” and education of the young *quarteronnes*. For this reason, the intimacy between Alice and Léontine remains greater than that between Hamilton and Léontine until Alice dies.

When Gothe reaches her teen years, she replicates with Dahlia the relationship she once witnessed between Léontine and Alice. Like Léontine and Alice, Gothe and

Dahlia are very emotionally intimate, but they also share a great deal of physical intimacy from the moment that they meet:

Lorsque les deux jeunes filles se trouvèrent seules dans la chambre de Dahlia, celle-ci prit entre ses mains celles de sa nouvelle amie et, la regardant un moment en silence: 'Oh! que vous êtes belle, Althéa,' dit-elle, 'et que je vous aime!' 'Dahlia,' répondit la blonde jeune fille en embrassant sa compagne, 'ne m'appellez pas Althéa... Je suis Althéa pour les étrangers... mais pour ceux que j'aime, pour vous, mon amie, je suis Gothe.' (*Dahlia* III 153)

When Dahlia is verbally attacked by Mme Frémont and learns that she is a *quarteronne*, it is only Gothe who can comfort her with tender embraces:

'Oh!' s'écria Gothe au bout d'un moment, 'ma pauvre chérie! Parle-moi! Ne reste pas ainsi froide et immobile... parle-moi, par pitié!' ... Et, tout en parlant, elle caressait doucement les mains glacées de la pauvre désolée et, les portant à ses lèvres, cherchait à les réchauffait de ses baisers. (*Dahlia* III 159)

Dahlia, too, provides physical comfort for Gothe. On the night of Jeannette's first failed attempt to have her sister drugged and raped, it is Dahlia's presence in Gothe's bed that ruins the plan. It is on this same night that Gothe tries to make Dahlia understand how doomed her aspirations of becoming Valery's wife are:

'Oh! Que tu es cruelle, Gothe!' s'écria Dahlia.
'Non, mon ange! Je dis la vérité, voilà tout! Dieu sait ce que je donnerais pour pouvoir arracher de ton coeur la flèche empoisonnée qui vient d'y pénétrer! Je voudrais te guérir de ce fatal amour, parce que je t'aime, Dahlia!' (*Dahlia* III 210)

The intimacy between the two girls protects them from heterosexual risks on two levels. First, Gothe is protected from being physically violated and imprisoned by the man she hates. Second, Gothe protects Dahlia from being taken advantage of physically and emotionally by the man that Dahlia *loves*. Because of this night spent together, both girls

avoid for a little longer the shameful appellation of “*la quarteronne*” as well as potential physical damage.

Unfortunately, when that night ends, the girls separate. Without each other’s protection for even a day, Gothe becomes the mistress of a white man and Dahlia soon follows in her footsteps. Even then, their intimacy continues to be a refuge for them. When Dahlia hears about Gothe’s flight from Don Inigo’s clutches into Horace’s arms, she is uncertain about how it will affect their relationship. Nevertheless, she hurries to her friend’s side:

En voyant son amie, [Gothé] lui tendit les bras sans rien dire. Dahlia se laissa tomber à genoux à ses côtés et, l’enlaçant de ses bras: ‘Merci, ma chérie!’ dit-elle; ‘Merci de m’avoir appelée!’
‘Pourquoi n’es-tu pas venue plus tôt?’ demanda Gothe en pressant de ses lèvres le front charmant incliné vers elle.
(*Dahlia* III 252)

Now that both girls are isolated from “white” society by their perceived immorality and isolated from “unwhite” society because of their innate morality, they become a class unto themselves. Together they share the burden of their shameful ostracism as well as the experience of running households and becoming mothers. What finally separates them is Dahlia’s death from a literally and figuratively broken heart, which, despite all of her warnings and pleadings, Gothe is unable to prevent.

While the passionate embraces between Gothe and Dahlia obviously have a component of mutual physical pleasure, they cannot be considered “queer” within the framework of the novels. This is partially because the author cannot seem to imagine “white” women being interested in sex, particularly not with each other. What de la Houssaye would identify as “queer,” as deviating from the ideal, are the more dangerous physical connections between the girls and their male lovers. The author was certainly

not alone in her thinking. Physical caresses or even cohabitation between women was happily condoned by nineteenth century society as harmless even as the slightest unchaperoned physical contact between unmarried women and the opposite sex was forbidden. Like de la Houssaye's inter-female workforce, physical intimacy between women took advantage of a blind spot in patriarchal society's "knowing" gaze in order to subvert its misogynist traditions subtly.

In life, as well as in the novels, there were multiple reasons why this sort of intense inter-female relationship could be such a safe and desirable form of intimacy for women. Not only does the marriage bed have a tendency to ensnare women and dissolve their agency, but it also leads inevitably to childbirth. Asexual reproduction is framed as safe due to the fact that it protects a woman's access to social power, but access to power is meaningless if one does not survive to take advantage of it.

Asexual reproduction's most important advantage for women is its physical safety. Pregnancy and childbirth have always been and continue to be dangerous and uncertain processes for women. The women in de la Houssaye's family were not strangers to the risks of biological reproduction. The author's mother, also married at the age of thirteen, had twelve children, some of whom were born after de la Houssaye had started her own large family:

The couple's first child was born February 1, 1836, when the author was a few months past her fifteenth birthday... The second child... was born on December 10, 1837...Between 1838 and 1842 Sidonie bore two children who did not survive their childhood... A daughter, Lilia Maria, was born about 1843 and died in 1875. Madame's last child, Ludovic... was born on November 22, 1845 and lived until 1913. (Perret 27-28)

While the author was fortunate enough to survive at least six pregnancies and live into old age, her daughter was not so lucky: “Sidonie’s only surviving daughter, Lilia, married John Tarlton. She was about sixteen... [Lilia] died on March 23, 1875. She left eight children ranging from about fifteen down to two years” (Perret 32). A sixteen-year marriage which resulted in eight children obviously means that Lilia was almost constantly pregnant from the age of sixteen until her premature death at thirty-two. No reason is given for her death, but it seems reasonable to assume that the physical demands of at least eight pregnancies and births played a role.

The physical risk to mothers is significant, but childbirth can lead to other kinds of trauma as well. Infant mortality rates were still very high during the nineteenth century, but it does not follow that the frequency of these losses made them any easier for the survivors. In the *Quarteronnes* series, the author’s great affection for children is clearly seen in her detailed and tender portrayals of young Dahlia, Gothe, and Angèle.⁴⁵ She also very convincingly describes the anguish of a mother over the death of a child. Such deaths occur several times within the novels. Mme Castel (Léontine’s mother-in-law) loses five children to tuberculosis during her lifetime. Gothe is still mourning the loss of a young child when Léontine re-enters her life. In Dahlia, the Ashton family is beset with dying mothers, dying infants, and survivors going mad with grief.

During the author’s own life, de la Houssaye lost several brothers and sisters during her childhood. She also lost the majority of her own children, mostly as infants. It can reasonably be inferred that de la Houssaye had experienced a great amount of suffering as a result of all losses in her family, particularly because she felt so strongly

⁴⁵ Writing for and about children made up a significant portion of de la Houssaye’s oeuvre. She also wrote affectionately about her children and grandchildren in her correspondence, according to Perret.

about children in general. The eight children she “inherited,” however,⁴⁶ came to her with a better chance of survival than her own newborns. All were past the fragile first two years of life. A mother who is able to adopt or sponsor children who have already survived the most dangerous phase of life, protects herself from some of the emotional as well as physical risks of heterosexual reproduction. Léontine, who adopts Gothe, Jeannette,⁴⁷ Horace, and Ernest as sturdy young children has a much happier life than Lena Ashton who, out of desolation, follows her two infants to the grave.

Léontine does, of course, have two biological children who survive into adulthood and the process does not impair her agency, although her son’s fatal flaws will eventually grieve her terribly. Gothe has several children who go on to become very socially successful adults although raising them costs her a place in the world outside the home. What makes these two biologically reproductive families more successful, more *survivable* than others in the novels? I would argue that the relative success of Gothe and Horace’s and Hamilton and Léontine’s marriages springs from the fact that they are not, in fact, “heterosexual” relationships at all.

I have previously discussed Hamilton Castel’s “feminine” nature. He is generous, sensitive, nurturing, and most importantly, chaste. Horace Delmond, who is his protégé, resembles him in all of these respects. Both men, like the women they marry, have resisted entering into reproductive relationships out of some more noble impulse. Hamilton has sworn not to pass on his hereditary disease and Horace knows that he does not yet have the money to relocate to Europe where he can legally marry Gothe. Only

⁴⁶ Perret notes that she called her deceased daughter’s children “her *children*” rather than her *grandchildren*, erasing the generational separation.

⁴⁷ Léontine does take an interest in Jeannette and Gothe beginning immediately after their births, but the infants’ physical dependency on their own mother for nourishment, etc, must have precluded any kind of real “adoption” of the girls until they were older. Certainly there is no real discussion of the girls’ relationship with Léontine until they are school-aged.

deus ex machina interventions, Alice's dying wish and Ignatio's attempted rape, force them to become fathers and husbands. Just as resistance to sexual involvement fully "whitens" a *quarteronne*, it fully "feminizes" Horace and Hamilton, elevating them to a more privileged place in de la Houssaye's hierarchy. The relationships between the men and their wives are therefore very homogenous in terms of race and gender, which are of course inseparable qualities. This makes intimacy with Horace and Hamilton safer than with unfeminine males, if not as safe as with feminine females.⁴⁸

"Trop Femme"⁴⁹

We can contrast either of these two fully "feminine" men with those characters in the novels who have male bodies, but whose gender is a combination of both "unfeminine" and "feminine." Occupation of this liminal space, as we will see, has violently negative side effects for such men. The male body, ultimately, is almost too impure a vessel for de la Houssaye's brand of "femininity." It is built, apparently, to contain alterity: in its natural state, it can sustain unwhiteness/unfemininity with no adverse effects. Don Trocadero or Don Inigo Iniquez, for example, have no physical or moral crises as a result of their violent, uncontrolled behavior. Neither does the pragmatic American or English tourist who persuades an innocent "white" Creole husband or son to provide a guided tour of the quadroon balls. The truly doomed men are those who have had their bodies "retrained" and "feminized" through the efforts of a loving mother or wife. These men who have experienced "salvation" from their natural state but who fall from grace via association with *quarteronnes* are the ones who will be

⁴⁸ While "feminine females" may seem redundant, I will later discuss of "unfeminine females" and other persons with liminal gender status.

⁴⁹ This is taken from a passage which reveals that despite her "unfeminine" nature, Jeannette is nevertheless "trop femme pour consentir à cacher sa beauté derrière un morceau de soie ou de velours" at her masquerade (*Gina* II 236)

destroyed. Like Adam expelled from the garden of Eden, they suddenly become aware for the first time of the advantages of “femininity” and “whiteness” that they have forever left behind, and this “knowledge” of themselves is fatal.

One of these unfortunate males is Léontine and Hamilton’s own son, Percy. As a young boy, Percy is prankish and naughty but he shows true “feminine” promise in his charitable impulses. According to his mother, who has worked diligently to “elevate” Percy to her social level: “personne n’a le coeur aussi sensible que mon fils: je crois qu’il pleurerait en voyant souffrir une mouche et qu’il essaierait de la soulager” (*Gina* II 45). It is, in fact, Percy who brings home one of the children, Ernest, that Léontine will sponsor. As he grows older, however, he begins to change. He becomes excessively interested in his toilette and craves constant amusement. His interest in lower-class women is marked, and Léontine must extract him from more than one awkward situation involving female servants.

When the family moves back to New Orleans, the problem comes to a head. He immediately takes an inappropriate interest in one of the household servants, Gina: “ce n’était pas chose facile de se débarrasser de maître Percy....il allait l’embrasser malgré elle (*Gina* II 114). The first lover he takes is the modest, “feminine” Gina, in whom he finds a kind of loving mother figure. With her, he creates a home and family. He loves his mistress and adores their baby as a properly “feminine” father should. Gina attempts, repeatedly, to save Percy from his baser inclinations by keeping him in the home, but he cannot resist the appeal of the bacchanals and orgies to which he has a standing invitation.

The second lover Percy takes, Violetta, appeals to his “unfeminine” side. “Qui se ressemble s’assemble, dit le proverbe: voilà pourquoi Percy, dès qu’il la connût,

recherche la société de la folle Violetta” (*Gina* II 298). Both share an excessive interest in their toilettes, are physically delicate, waste enormous amounts of money, pout when they are denied the slightest indulgence, and are driven purely by desire. All of these shortcomings, while traditionally laid at the door of women, underscore their very uncontrolled, selfish, “unfeminine” nature in de la Houssaye’s opinion. The two also share a passion for the *bamboula*, a dance whose overt mimicry of sexual intercourse makes it a frequent topic of fascinated murmurs in Louisiana literature from the period.⁵⁰ Though de la Houssaye represents the erotic dance as being necessarily the purview of “unwhite” women, Percy is an eager participant. In Violetta and Percy’s *bamboula*, their bodies merge both physically and symbolically into one, underscoring the strange mélange of shared gender and body:

Les danseurs commencent doucement par une sorte de balancement ou plutôt tressaillement de tout leur corps; peu à peu, ils s’animent, se poursuivent, s’atteignent, se saisissent, s’éloignent encore l’un de l’autre; enfin le cavalier atteint sa danseuse et l’enveloppe d’une dernière étreinte, et alors elle se laisse tomber dans ses bras haletante, frémissante, vaincue... Et tout cela se fait avec une grâce, un passion, une volupté qui font tressaillir le plus calme. Chaque mouvement du danseur exprime le désir, un désir modéré aux premières passes, mais qui s’accroît de minute en minute et qui finit par atteindre le délire de la passion sans bornes et sans honte, lorsque la danseuse se débat dans ses bras dans une sorte de convulsion qui fait monter la rougeur au front des moins timides. (*Violetta* 23)

As in the famous tale of the Red Shoes, Percy eventually dances himself into the grave. His body, which has been imprinted by both training and heritage with his parents’ “femininity” cannot survive the predations of his “unfeminine” inclinations. The more

⁵⁰ Tinker, for example, also reveals a fascination with the *bamboula* in *Toucoutou*

Gina and his mother plead with him to act like “himself,” the more he flees the safety of the hearth and seeks out the “otherness” that exacerbates his physical weakness.

Another character doomed by liminal gender is Charles Rennes. Charles, who is raised in the country, shows every sign of being the perfect son. His sole interest in life is his family, as is appropriate for a noble and “feminine” man:

...ses goûts étaient des plus simples et jamais encore il n'avait connu l'ambition. De plus il aimait tendrement ses parents et se disait que sa présence leur était absolument nécessaire aux jours de leur vieillesse; aussi n'hésita-t-il pas à déclarer que son choix était tout fait, qu'il restera près d'eux et consacrerait sa vie au soin de leur bonheur.
(*Octavia* 8)

Charles has also never given his parents reason to be concerned that he has excessive interest in the opposite sex. Quite the opposite, in fact:

le jeune homme était d'une timidité au-dessus de toute expression. Il était invité partout, mais, au grand regret de sa mère, il refusait toutes les invitations. En présence d'une femme, il perdait toute présence d'esprit et, brûlant de honte et de confusion, ne pouvait trouver un mot à lui adresser. Cette timidité du pauvre Charley était une source d'amusement pour les jeunes filles de notre paroisse, mais de désolation pour Mme Rennes, qui eut tout donné pour voir son fils marié.
'Oui!,' disait-elle, 'je serais si heureuse si je pouvais embrasser mes petits-enfants avant de mourir.' (*Octavia* 9)

If Charles, like Léontine, shows no great inclination towards romance, he does have a similar investment in relationships with members of his own sex, and proves himself to be a very loyal friend: “lorsqu'il réussissait à vaincre cette timidité et à accorder son affection à un ami, il la donnait sans réserve et était prêt à tout faire pour cet ami” (*Octavia* 13). No one is more surprised than Charles himself at his reaction to his first sight of Adoréah. The young man who “jamais...n'avait recherché la société des femmes” who “...les fuyait au contraire,” is instantly infected with an incurable desire to

possess the young woman. He forgets everything about his former life, his reason for being in New Orleans, and the good friend sitting beside him: “Il lui semblait qu’une nouvelle vie venait de lui être donnée et il se demandait avec étonnement d’où lui arrivaient ces sensations étrangères qui faisaient battre son coeur et lui causaient une surprise dont il ne pouvait se rendre compte” (*Octavia* 20). He not only forgets his friend, he soon begins to suspect that he is competition and distances himself from Henri’s “civilizing” influence and timely warnings, yet another major sin against “femininity.”

In short order, Charles commits many more crimes against friends and families, culminating in mortgaging his father’s plantation in order to purchase the infamous Marie Antoinette necklace⁵¹ for Adoréah. Charles does not return to his “feminine” roots until the moment that he is shocked into the realization that Adoréah will never accept him as a lover. His “unfemininity” is far too great by that point, however, for him to redeem himself and regain his innocence or honor: “...il était perdu à jamais!...le misérable jeune homme... regarda du nouveau autour de lui et, apercevant son pistolet qu’il avait posé sur la cheminée avant de sortir, il s’en saisit et en appuyant le canon sur sa tempe il tira la détente et tomba mort sur le plancher” (*Octavia* 39).

⁵¹ Prior the French Revolution, French queen Marie-Antoinette was involved in a scandal involving an extremely expensive diamond necklace. The jewelers who created the necklace believed that the queen had agreed to purchase it and handed it over to the Cardinal of Rohan who claimed to act as her intermediary. The Cardinal then handed it over to the Comtesse de la Motte who most historians agree now orchestrated the entire affair. The Comtesses’s husband then left for England, apparently with the necklace. When the jewelers did not receive payment they contacted the queen who denied having the necklace as well as having agreed to purchase it. Both Rohan, though he himself was a dupe, and the comtesse were eventually arrested (Rohan was eventually cleared and de la Motte was imprisoned but later escaped and wrote a tell-all book defending herself and accusing the queen). The outcome of the scandal was that the public began to believe that Marie-Antoinette had planned the entire drama in order to discredit Rohan. This negative publicity helped to swell the resentment against the French monarchy which led, ultimately, to the Revolution and the guillotining of the king and queen. "Affair of the diamond necklace." [Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia](#). 5 Apr 2006, 09:33 UTC. 6 Apr 2006, 23:40

“White” Creole men like Charles and Percy are figured as the most domesticated and “civilized” of all males in New Orleans. Certainly they are more nurturing and loving, more “feminine” than the phlegmatic British or libidinous Spaniards. Yet white Creoles are inevitably the men who are the most wildly attracted to *quarteronnes*. This may be due in part to “affinity.” Like a white Creole man, a *quarteronne* contains the potential for both “whiteness” and “unwhiteness.” A Creole man has the benefit of inheriting the powerful literal and figurative “whiteness” that can only come from a mother, but, like his father’s, it is contained in a corruptible male body. The *quarteronne* has a similar challenge. She inherits the greater stability of a female body, but her “whiteness” is of the weaker variety that comes from a father. This similarity in their liminal racial/gender status gives relationships an element of the homogeneity that explains so many of the attractions in the novels.

Men are not, however, the only ones who can find themselves confused by and attracted to strange blends of sameness and otherness. Charles’s persecutor seduces at least one other innocent white Creole with her mixture of feminine appeal and unfeminine magnetism. When Léontine’s daughter Alice,⁵² first encounters Jeannette/Adoréah, she is intensely attracted to her:

la jeune fille jeta un cri étouffé en élevant ses mains en
signe de surprise...Là, à deux pas d’elle, elle apercevait une
femme si divinement belle qu’elle se crut d’abord le jouet
d’un songe... Et, comme pour ajouter encore à sa surprise,
l’étrangère, d’un mouvement spontané, l’attira à elle,
l’entoura de ses bras, couvrit son visage de baisers
passionnés... . (*Gina* II 169)

⁵² Alice Castel is named after her aunt Alice Castel, Hamilton’s deceased sister, mentioned earlier in the chapter.

Léontine interrupts the encounter and sends Jeannette away after a furious argument. As soon as she has rid her home of Jeannette's corruptive presence, she hurries to find her daughter in order to assess the damage caused by the encounter. As she fears, she finds Alice in a very excited state: "ses traits étaient enflammés et ses yeux brillaient comme des escarboucles" (*Gina* II 181). With difficulty, she persuades Alice that Jeannette is a dangerous person despite the appeal of her very feminine appearance and mannerism. Alice cannot, in fact, be fully convinced that the visitor was not at all the "white" woman she appeared to be until she hears the story of Charles Rennes. She is so shocked by the news that she cries out in horror and her mother must comfort her: "Ma pauvre enfant! dit Léontine en caressant le front de sa fille, tu peux à peine réaliser qu'une personne de ton sexe ait pu commettre une action aussi vile, aussi cruelle que celle que je viens de te raconter...mais hélas!" (*Gina* II 184). Up until this moment, Alice has believed that femaleness and "femininity" were equivalent. That such an apparently "feminine" woman is capable of such "unfeminine" ambition and machination forces Alice to redraw the boundaries of gender to include previously unimaginable possibilities.

Like Percy and Charles, Jeannette and Octavia are excellent examples of the type of liminal gender for which Alice is so unprepared. Both have an exceedingly "feminine" appearance that distracts from the fluctuations of gender that characterize their bodies and minds. The result, for females, of having liminal gender can be more positive. Even if they have no place in de la Houssaye's gynocentric hierarchy, they can be much more successful in a patriarchal system than the average "white" woman. And, as I have already discussed, if neither system is adequate for her needs, as in Octavia's case, the unfeminine/feminine female is free to opt out of both and create her own.

Jeannette is not only beautiful in a feminine way, she also has several positive attributes that de la Houssaye presents as “feminine.” She is highly intelligent, she is creative, she is controlled, and, interestingly, she has little or no romantic interest in the opposite sex. Her “lover” is her senior by more than half a century. He provides her with financial security, not passion, but this is more than enough to satisfy her expectations for the relationship. Unlike Violetta, for instance, she has no intention of pursuing men for pleasure in addition to business:

Voilà près de dix ans que je suis la maîtresse du docteur Fleury... je jure que je lui ai toujours été fidèle, que je ne l'ai jamais trahi, même par la pensée. En échange de ce qu'il a fait pour moi, j'ai essayé de le rendre heureux... Il a quatre-vingt-cinq ans et... ce pauvre ami est bien vieux, bien faible et n'a certainement pas de longs jours à passer sur la terre. Lorsque sa mort m'aura rendue libre, je jure de changer de conduite (*Gina* II 255)

For her aging lover, if not for his family, she can be nurturing and loyal. She even possesses the “feminine” qualities of generosity and affection for members of her sex, particularly Gothe: “Pauvre Jeannette! Parmi ses vices, elle a su conserver une vertu destinée à lui faire pardonner bien des fautes: son coeur est grand et généreux et mieux que personne je le sais; je n'ai jamais le temps d'exprimer un désir avec elle et, si je l'écoutais, elle n'achèterait rien pour elle sans me présenter le pareil” (*Dahlia* III 164). Interspersed with these moral victories, however, are some decidedly “unfeminine” behaviors.

Perhaps because she has no emotional investment in sex, she betrays her sister by selling her to Don Inigo. She ejects Doctor Fleury's daughter and grandchildren from her house. She very successfully sets Percy Castel up to destroy himself financially and

physically. She is even comfortable with physical violence, particularly with the whip, the weapon that is perhaps most emblematic of white/patriarchal power:

...Crépon était à la tête du journal le plus en vogue de la Nouvelle-Orléans. ...Un beau soir...maître Crépon se trouva insulté par [Adoréah] et pour se venger, raconta tous les incidents [d'un] souper, les grossissant même et achevant son article par '....il nous fallut emporter la belle Adoréah et la faire mettre au lit. La moderne Messaline était ivre-morte de luxure et de champagne.' C'était faux... (*Gina II* 107)

The aging Doctor Fleury plans to demand satisfaction for the "calomnie," but Adoréah dissuades him,

...déclarant que comme l'insulte s'adressait à elle, c'était à elle à la venger. Elle fit l'acquisition d'une baleine (un fouet fait de bandes de peau de boeuf tressées), mit un pistolet à sa ceinture et se rendit au bureau du journal. Là, en présence de tous les employés et de la foule que le bruit des coups et cris ne manqua point d'attirer, elle roua de coups de baleine le malheureux journaliste, le menaçant de recommencer le lendemain s'il ne démentait pas immédiatement ses infâmes calomnies... tous, d'un commun accord, s'amusèrent à représenter Adoréah la quarteronne comme une nouvelle Jeanne d'Arc, une amazone des plus dangereuses. (*Gina II* 107-108)

Having renounced all of Léontine's teachings regarding "feminine" comportment, Jeannette/Adoréah lives a relatively happy life. She clearly maintains a great deal of control over her environment, and is able to satisfy all of her needs and the needs of those for whom she cares. As long as Jeannette maintains her "Amazonian" disdain for traditional family life, she is safe. It is only when she, like Percy or Charles, begins to realize that in de la Houssaye's imaginary, "whiteness" will always induce feelings of shame and longing for the hearth, no matter how repressed or rejected it has been. Jeannette's downfall is a burgeoning desire to have children, a desire that she feels can only be accomplished through the theft of the Percy family jewels:

S'ils étaient à moi! Ah! J'en briserais toutes le montures et remplirais un sac... Et ce sac? Ah! Il renfermait tout pour moi! Le bonheur, la fortune, les honneurs, une grande réputation!... Et sa voix s'imprégnait d'émotion. Je me marierais avec un homme que j'aimerais... et... Oh! Espérance sublime! Dieu m'enverrait peut-être un enfant! Un enfant beau comme ceux de ma soeur!' Et, malgré elle, les larmes ruisselaient sur son visage. 'Oh! Pour être mère! Pour sentir sur mon visage les caresses d'un enfant, ses lèvres sur mes lèvres, je sacrifierais tout!...' Comme nous le voyons, cette Adoréah était un étrange composé de sentiments infâmes mêlés aux plus saintes, aux plus pures aspirations. (*Gina* II 343)

As with Charles and Percy, there is no happy ending for the “unwhite” sheep of the family, even if they ultimately return to the fold. Jeannette’s reward for this upwelling of “femininity” is insanity and then death. Her obsession with the jewels grows until she does indeed steal them through the elaborate plot described in Chapter Three. By the time her crime is discovered and the jewels are reclaimed, their symbolic value to her has grown so great that she goes mad over her loss, her anticipated freedom, and the children she is dreaming of. In her madness she becomes so agitated that she causes her own death from an aneurysm.

Octavia, on the other hand, fares better. Unlike Charles, Percy, or Jeannette, she lacks any sort of internal conflict caused by the residual training of a “feminine” mother. She also lacks a father with any trace of “whiteness” or “femininity,” so all evidence of “femininity” in her personality is the result of spontaneous generation, her own efforts at shaping a liveable “self,” or a combination of the two. In addition to her appearance, she possesses several other key “feminine” qualities, many of which I have previously mentioned, such as her grace, good taste, and her friendship towards other women in her social class. She is also highly intelligent and a faithful *placée* to Alfred D.

Her “unfeminine” qualities do not prevent her from enjoying her “feminine” advantages as they do Jeannette, however. Octavia’s excessive passion for Alfred does not kill her when the affair ends; it empowers her. Her anger and aggression towards him do not blunt her intelligence; they sharpen it. Her tenure as the “mother” of Alfred’s daughter does not cause her to develop the weakness that comes from shame and self-loathing, nor does it enclose her in a home or even limit her to a single continent. After Alfred, she takes other lovers “dont...elle changeait tous les mois,” and rejects many more, including “des milords anglais...; un prince russe...; un duc italien.... [et] un vicomte français” (*Octavia* 65, 75). There is nothing to suggest that Octavia takes no pleasure in their company. We do know, however, that she appears to remain fully in control of her emotions as well as her partners. Don Miguel, for instance, disapproves of taking young Mary to scandalous *fêtes*, but he “n’osait s’opposer à ce que voulait sa maîtresse” (*Octavia* 76).

Léontine proved that women could subtly rewrite the definition of “femininity” in order to balance agency and maternity. Octavia, on the other hand, explodes the old and revised definitions of “femininity” and calls into question some key concepts that both definitions share: that for women, “maternity” is a necessary condition for happiness and sex and desire are only necessary evils which must sometimes be endured in order to achieve maternity. While there is nothing to admire in Octavia’s deliberate exposure of children to molestation and incest, once again the ultimate success of her plan cannot be denied. Octavia should not succeed, according to the author’s rules and regulations for gender or even humanity. Dahlia, on the other hand, should. And in a series of this length, one might expect to see at least one fully-realized male character, whether saint or sinner, who achieves his ambitions or even survives for more than a few chapters.

Readers, are, however, surprised on all three counts. Gender is such a complicated matter in the texts that the author herself cannot always make it do what it “should.” In many cases, as we are about to discover, her attempts to force bodies and desires to obey her interdiction on sexuality go even more badly awry than in the examples we have already seen.

Peeping Toms and Kissing Cousins

There is an old arcade game in which a player is handed a mallet and placed in front of a cabinet whose top is full of dark holes. Out of one of these holes, a small mechanical target will suddenly erupt, and the player must strike it with the mallet to send it back down into the darkness and gain a point. No sooner is the target struck, however, than another erupts in a new location, and then another, faster and faster. Soon, the player is frantically striking out all over the board in a generally futile effort to clear the playing surface of targets.

Nothing resembles de la Houssaye’s efforts to control and suppress sexual desire in her texts so much as this “redemption”⁵³ game. The central sexual problematic in the series is that the author forecloses the possibility of “white” persons participating in erotic⁵⁴ interchange. If the “white” male population of New Orleans had been able to uphold this tenet, however, there would be no subject matter for these novels. The author’s response to this dilemma, that “white men” are almost never “white” men, does not satisfactorily resolve the issue. While “white”/ “feminine” women and men do not participate in non-reproductive sexual intercourse, they prove to have ample libidinal

⁵³ “Redemption games are typically arcade games of skill that reward the player proportionally to [his] score in the game” They have earned this appellation from the fact that players generally earn a number of tickets based on their score, and the tickets can then be redeemed for a prize. “Redemption game.” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 21 Dec 2005, 03:29 UTC. 20 Jan 2006, 11:13 pm.

⁵⁴ Erotic (pleasure-based) here serves as the antithesis of “reproductive” (familial duty-based).

energy that they express in less obvious ways. The *Quarteronne* novels, in fact, provide adequate material for a separate, in-depth psychoanalytic study of these repressed drives and their relationship to colonial discourse.⁵⁵ This thesis, focusing as it does on issues of liminality, will necessarily limit itself to a briefer discussion of two undefined and hidden spaces in which sexual exchange takes place in the novels.

De la Houssaye has taken on overtly sexual subject matter. Neither she nor society, however, permits her to “know about” sex. To take pleasure in sex is even more *verboten*. The same problem holds true for characters who are in some sense representative of the author,⁵⁶ such as Dahlia or Gothe: they were born into a world defined by a particular system of sexual exchange. They must, nevertheless, avoid a corruptive “knowing” of, or participation in, sex in any of its non-reproductive forms. Yet how can a person avoid participating in a system that they cannot recognize? De la Houssaye and her protagonists, do, of course, “know” about, and participate in, erotic interchange. They use this knowledge not to avoid the unavoidable, their sexual selves, but to avoid the *appearance* of having sexual selves. Disavowal of desire, however, does not cause the *dissolution* of desire, and so they must find private, undetectable, liminal outlets for it. To this end, the characters, and the author, have perfected various means of “triangulating” their desire so as to disguise unseemly desires for bodies both “white” and “unwhite,” both “feminine” and “unfeminine.” Scopophilia and incest/familialization⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See, for instance, Bhabha’s “The Other Question” in *The Location of Culture* in which he examines the fetishistic nature of master-slave relations and how this may have shaped cultural productions surrounding the antebellum South.

⁵⁶ In that they are “white,” “feminine,” mothers.

⁵⁷ Familialization refers to a common trope in sentimental literature whereby characters seek out those who are their literal or figurative kin. Julie Shaffer defines it thusly: “One type of familialization...is, simply, characters’ desire to see others, related to them or not, as family. Tanner claims this urge comprises ‘the acme of Enlightenment thought,’ based as it is on ‘an attempt to realize a dream of total harmony in which all the oppositional elements in human relationships ... have been eliminated’ so that the entire world might provide a supportive web of relationships” (Shaffer).

are two of the primary ways in which this obtaining and disguising of pleasure is accomplished in and through the texts.

Scopophilia is at the very heart of the *Quarteronnes* novels. It can be found in both their form and function: respectively, a compilation of *eye*-witness accounts and a window helping readers to *see* into a dark period in Louisiana's past. The author makes no attempt to hide the "*plaisir*" that she gains from seeing the lives of the *quarteronnes* played out before her. Nor does the grandmother/narrator deny that she has given into the voyeuristic⁵⁸ pleasure that newspapers provide her:

...je repoussais la lecture des journaux; il me semblait que je n'avais point le droit de me mêler des affaires des autres... Mais je dois avouer à ma honte que mon indifférence ne fut pas de longue durée et que, peu à peu, j'écoutai, d'abord avec un léger intérêt et bientôt avec avidité... ce qui, comme un seul point, attirait l'attention du public: les belles quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans.
(*Octavia* 4)

Even the reader is implicated as *voyeur*, for we, like the author and like the narrator, are avidly reading the lurid stories of the *quarteronnes*. Early readers of de la Houssaye even experienced "seeing" the *quarteronnes* through the same medium as the author and narrator: through their regular appearance in francophone newspapers.⁵⁹

The constant visual tracking of the *quarteronnes* in their houses, in the streets, and even abroad is also, as I discussed in Chapter One, a favorite pastime of the "white" characters. Léontine, via the ever-present newspapers, tracks the comings and goings on

⁵⁸ I employ "voyeuristic" in a larger sense here. Technically, the narrator's initial exposure to *quarteronnes* is aural rather than visual because her husband reads the newspaper out loud to her. I would argue, however, that the source of her pleasure is the same as if she were reading them, and she personally goes on to collect and to transmit the articles and stories in a visual format (as texts). Moreover, I tend to believe that the presence of the husband is expressly used here as yet another layer of "camouflage," adding tacit white male approval to the pretense of historicity.

⁵⁹ The *Quarteronnes* novels first appeared serially in *Le Méchasébé*, a French-language newspaper in Louisiana.

Royal Street from an ocean away during the years that she is raising her children in Europe. There is no justification for this attention other than the pleasure it gives her: there is no husband to monitor, her son is still safely beneath her wing, and she has no reason to believe that her *filleules* are anywhere other than safely ensconced with a tutor. Tracking the *quarteronnes* is merely the continuation of the erotically-charged fascination with watching and controlling the body of the “other” that began when Léontine was herself a very young woman; a time when her home was “mon royaume et mes esclaves [étaient] mes sujets” and the *filleules* were the “idoles de Léontine” (*Gina I* 13, 18).

For other, less “white” characters, the scopophilic monitoring of *quarteronnes* is intensified. After the author/narrator herself, Charles Rennes is next to fall prey to an uncontrollable need to gaze upon these “Circée[s],”

Il m’est impossible de donner une idée de l’extase qui, de plus en plus, s’emparait de ses sens... Un seul moment a tout changé, tout métamorphosé dans l’âme du jeune anachorète: il a vu Adoréah, et son admiration se montre dans les regards brûlants qu’il attache sur la jeune enchanteresse; il se sent la proie d’une étrange fascination; quelque chose, que j’appellerai un cyclone de passion... brûle ses yeux et le fait trembler malgré lui... Plus il la regarde et plus il sent que ses regards ne peuvent la quitter.
(*Octavia* 16)

Charles’s gaze takes on almost tangible dimensions: it attaches, it burns him, and it attempts to burn its object. He cannot control its direction and duration. He is doubly imprisoned when Adoréah returns his gaze with her own, “Son âme s’élançait vers la nouvelle Circée dont l’étrange magnétisme, en s’échappant de ses longs yeux noirs, descend jusqu’à lui pour en faire son esclave” (*Octavia* 16). Her gaze, too, has almost physical properties although she is only *looking* at Charles and not yet *seeing* him as he sees her. The effect that the contact of their gazes has on Charles vividly recalls Plato’s

theory about the nature of vision. In his theory of “extramission,” the eye actively “sends out” rays of light towards its object, which in turn emanates its own light back towards the seer. Vision, therefore, is an almost violent collision of opposing energies and thus, perhaps, its mysterious properties of “magnetism” and “attachment.”

Part of the physical shock that Charles experiences during this episode is shared by the reader, and perhaps the author as well. Although we are all expecting to enjoy an unrestricted view of the *quarteronnes*, we are not, perhaps, prepared to be *looked at by them*. We are caught in the act of looking at Adoréah, and reminded that the gaze can go both ways: we know what she wants from us/Charles, but she is unexpectedly very aware of what *we* want, of our desire to watch her. She wields this power very consciously, “si nous nous en souvenons, la jeune quarteronne, pour appeler sur elle l’attention de la foule, était entrée au théâtre une demi-heure après le commencement de l’opéra; avec la même intention, probablement, elle sortit avant la fin du dernier acte, et ceci avec un tapage qui fit de nouveau *tourner vers elle toutes les lorgnettes et tous les regards*” (Octavia 20, my emphasis). In short order, our object, the very object that these texts were ostensibly created in order to limit or control, is controlling us: we know that she is *trying* to make us look, but we cannot stop ourselves from looking.

Charles is even less capable of resisting Adoréah’s visual power than the rest of the crowd. If the diffused power of her gaze can control an entire room, its focused energy is certainly more than any single person can overcome. His definitive fall occurs not in the theatre, however, but in the jewelry shop in a moment in which the triangulation of desire happens on a very conscious, and therefore not strictly Freudian, level. For Charles, attaching his burning gaze to Adoréah is an obvious substitute for

attaching his burning *loins* to her. Adoréah has other goals in mind: Marie Antoinette's necklace.

la jeune quarteronne attachait un regard de convoitise sur le magnifique bijou... 'Oui,' dit-elle, 'je veux ce collier, et avec moi vouloir est toujours pouvoir... Je jure de me parer de ce collier au bal...' ...Tout en parlant, Adoréah attachait sur Charles ses grands yeux noirs remplis d'une audace qui, en toute autre circonstance aurait appelé la rougeur au front du jeune homme. Elle prononça le mot *bal* avec une certaine emphase que comprit notre héros, malgré sa modestie habituelle... (*Octavia* 27).

She attaches her gaze first to the thing that has inspired her desire, the necklace, which she cannot have, and next to the object that has some value as a "placeholder," Charles. Because she wants the necklace, she begins to want Charles. Charles, meanwhile, performs the operation in reverse. He desperately wants Adoréah, and once he sees that the necklace is the means to have her, he begins to want it desperately as well: "... il me faut ce collier, il me le faut, à n'importe quel prix!... Me faudra-t-il donc appeler Satan à mon aide?..." (*Octavia* 34). All of this drama, again, is unfolding, and continues to unfold, in the theatre of the eye. Once Charles receives the coveted invitation to visit her at home, she continues to exploit the power of *his* gaze: "elle continua son oeuvre de tentation: mettant sous les yeux de sa victime des tableaux représentant des scènes d'amour et de volupté" (*Octavia* 30).

In the end, Charles, like the author and her readers, will find that the voyeuristic pleasure he receives from Jeannette/Adoréah is the only pleasure he can take from her without her consent. When he attempts to advance from a gaze to a consummation, he is violently repulsed. While the reader has seen what her intentions are, Charles realizes that he has been so busy gazing upon Jeannette that he has never really *seen* her until now. On the other hand, she has seen Charles with the absolute clarity required to obtain

the necklace, “l’objet de tous ses désirs.” Once she has it, she focuses her gaze upon it and will not look at Charles again: “elle faisait scintiller à la lueur des bougies qui couvraient la table le magnifique bijou... concentrant toute son attention à ce jeu et ne regardant même pas le malheureux qui la contemplait avec stupeur” (*Octavia* 37).

The non-*affaire* between Charles and Jeannette/Adoréah’s contains many of the elements associated with “normal” sexual intercourse: foreplay, penetration, and climax. All of this, however, takes place at *eye-level*. Instead of actual sex, Charles is treated to “*tableaux*.” These tableaux could be merely risqué drawings, but perhaps Jeannette is treating him to the same type of erotic *tableaux vivants* being shown to the reader. In this opening representation of not-quite-sex, de la Houssaye stays “bodily” on the safe side of the bedroom door even as her thoughts, and her readers’, are being drawn into much darker territory by the next section of the novel.

As *Octavia* proceeds, another outlet for unsanctioned desire comes to the fore: incest. In this novel, we see two levels of incestuous desire. The first level is the socially-sanctioned endogamous desire for a partner with kinship ties. As a result of this need for kinship, there are several consanguineous marriages and affairs in the novels *Gina* and *Dahlia*. The family trees of the Castels and, in particular, the Ashtons become extremely convoluted because of the innate affection between cousins or even “adoptive” siblings.⁶⁰ Incestuous attraction in this sense is grounded in the trope of “affinity,” or the attraction of like to like, an idea drawn from works of “sentimental” fiction⁶¹ and embraced by de la Houssaye.

⁶⁰ See Appendices B & C, explanations of the Ashton and Castel lineages.

⁶¹ There is an interesting and direct connection between affinity, sentimental literature, and incest in the *Quarteronnes*. For example, Mary plagiarizes from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (which also privileges the search for kinship) as a key part of her campaign to seduce her brother.

For de la Houssaye, these relationships have value beyond their reinforcing of family ties. Intra-family relationships, within the scope of this series, are characterized by the ostensible “nobility” of the partners’ sentiments for each other. For the most part, they begin out of a mutual cherishing of “family values” rather than from strong sexual attraction. Where this attraction does exist, as in the case of Valery and Dahlia, the author hurries to refigure it as “affection” and “respect” once the couple becomes reproductive. The central value of this system of kinship for de la Houssaye is that it frees women from the sexual demands of husbands or lovers and allows them to focus their energies on maternity, charity, or other more “productive” activities.

The search for “affinity” literally and figuratively gives birth to the second, and infinitely more taboo,⁶² level of incest in *Octavia*. The D— family begins as a perfect de la Houssaye romance: two cousins in love. A young bachelor, Alfred D— meets his Uncle’s daughter for the first time. His cousin, Angèle, has been living in a convent since her childhood and so she, unlike her father, has no idea that Alfred has spent the last few years living and traveling with Octavia, *la quarteronne*. From the moment he meets Angèle, Alfred begins to compare her with his mistress: “Angèle était en tout l’opposée d’Octavia, et ce contraste fut probablement ce qui attira vers la naïve enfant le coeur de ce jeune roué” (*Octavia* 48). Alfred rapidly decides that he is at last ready to reject alterity in favor of affinity, and he breaks off his relationship with Octavia and marries Angèle. The couple has two children, one of whom, Félicie, is kidnapped as an infant and raised by Octavia as her own.

⁶² I refer here to the nineteenth century Western version of the incest taboo, forbidding sexual union between parent and child, siblings, as well as, typically, collateral relatives such as an aunt or uncle and their niece or nephew.

As I have recounted elsewhere in greater detail, Octavia carefully fosters an incestuous relationship between Félicie, whom she has rechristened “Mary,” and her brother Léonce: “...Mary vous aime, Léonce, et elle a refusé une offre aussi avantageuse, car elle est bien décidée à n’appartenir qu’à vous seul. Je vous la garde, mon ami! Elle deviendra votre maîtresse comme autrefois *sa mère fut celle de votre père*” (*Octavia* 91, my emphasis). Léonce, oblivious to any hidden meaning in these words, hurries to raise the money Octavia is demanding for her “daughter” and his growing desire for Mary culminates in a *plaçage* contract. In a theatrical climax worthy of *Oedipus Rex*, the relationship is consummated just as Mary/Félicie’s true identity is revealed to her father. To spare the family further shame, Alfred kills her and then himself. Léonce, having learned that his lover is his sister and then witnessed the murder-suicide, loses his mind.

In her lament over Mary and Léonce’s incestuous relationship, de la Houssaye wonders whether it was not partially inspired by a need for a feeling of kinship, a comfort absent from both children’s lives until now⁶³:

L’amour d’Angèle aurait sauvé Léonce, mais, privé de son ange gardien, il se laissa facilement prendre aux filets de la sirène qui avait juré sa perte, et l’affection simulée qu’elle lui témoignait fut certainement une des causes de la perte du jeune homme... Léonce aimait Mary de toutes les forces de son âme et n’était vraiment heureux que près d’elle; mais, à quatorze ans, peut-on ressentir de l’amour? *N’était-ce pas plutôt la nature qui élevait sa voix dans le coeur de l’enfant et qui l’entraînait vers cette soeur dont il ne soupçonnait pas l’existence?* (*Octavia* 90, my emphasis)⁶⁴.

It is interesting that de la Houssaye sees the role that “affinity” has played in the destruction of Léonce and Félicie, but nevertheless continues to privilege endogamous

⁶³ Octavia does not “raise” Mary as her child so much as train her as an apprentice.

⁶⁴ De la Houssaye reports that Léonce’s father was too strict and his grandfather too lenient. Octavia, on the other hand, treats him with a sort of “maternal” affection. This, of course, further confuses his feelings for Mary— if Octavia is his pseudo-mother, then Mary is like his pseudo-sister in addition to being his *actual* sister.

desire. If the desire for affinity can result in tragedies like that which occurs in the D— family, is its status as the “safest” form of desire not called into question? One can also point to the fact that it is Alfred’s decision to *end* his exogamous relationship with Octavia that catalyzes all of his troubles. Instead of being redeemed by entry into a reproductive relationship with a member of his literal and figurative clan, he is destroyed by it. Again we find ourselves at the point where the author is violating her own tenets.

As the series continues, de la Houssaye continually unites consanguineous and otherwise-related characters romantically, and for the most part, happily. Dahlia and Valery are related by blood as are other couples in the Ashton family including Gerald II and Camille and Valery III and Hélène II. Gothe and Horace, Percy and Gina, and Hamilton II and Angèle are all related through “adoption.” Other characters share a more ineffable but nonetheless striking degree of relationship, most notably Hamilton I and Léontine, his wife and the *doppelgänger* of his deceased sister. Not all of these couplings are joyful testimonies to the benefits of endogamy, as we saw in the case of Angèle and Alfred D—. This is partially because while endogamous sex is “safer,” and therefore the most permissible form of sexual relationship, the author is unprepared to admit any sexual⁶⁵ relationship into the category of “completely safe” for women.

De la Houssaye is also apparently torn between two conceptions of the family: the first, as the locus of the only form of “pure” love and the second, as a source of untenable patriarchal demands. Alfred D— drives his son into Octavia’s clutches. Sir Richard Ashton forces his son Gerald I into a marriage with a social peer that is devoid of sexual attraction but is by no means portrayed as positive. Gerald I, in turn, prevents

⁶⁵ “Sexual” here refers simply to the fact that the couple is *known* to have had intercourse because they have had biological children and should not be construed to be synonymous with “erotic.” There is certainly room to *suspect* erotic relationships between characters such as Léontine and Alice I, but the author obviously does not provide any confirmation of them.

Valery II from marrying a cousin for whom he has developed a *tendre*.⁶⁶ The narrator represents this as harsh, but since it results in the relationship with Dahlia which is at the heart of her story, she does not dwell on this injustice. When, however, in a strange twist Gerald I later forces Valery II to marry the same cousin he was once refused, and thereby destroy his hopes of marrying Dahlia, the narrator is extremely indignant on behalf of the *quarteronne* and her would-be husband. This story in particular seems to contradict her preference for a “brotherly” affection over a romantic one, for Valery II expressly states that he can *only* love Camille as a brother would, and their marriage ultimately does not have the value for him that his relationship with Dahlia did. Affinity, it would seem, does not exist *a priori* between all family members, and feelings of “kinship” between fathers and their children are particularly rare.

Where affinity does not exist, it cannot be forced, although it does sometimes occur between parties who do not initially seem to be related in a literal or figurative sense. Valery’s attraction to Dahlia falls into this category, for he initially thinks of her as his “other.” It is some time before he realizes not only that she is his cousin but also that she is very much a “white” woman. Percy, too, is slow to discover that in fixing his interest upon Gina, he has not rebelled against his mother’s moral code as completely as he intended. While it seems at first that Percy is lowering himself in entering into a relationship with a family servant and *quarteronne*, it soon becomes obvious that Gina is not only his moral equal, she is his moral superior. The affinity that draws them together echoes a sibling relationship less than that of a mother and son: “Percy n’était véritablement heureux que près d’elle... Cet grand enfant gâté n’avait jamais su agir par

⁶⁶ Gerald I forces the cousin, his daughter Camille, to marry Valery I’s brother Gerald II instead. Camille is distraught at first, but eventually grows fond of Gerald II.

lui-même et Gina savait...l'habiller et l'entourer de tous les soins nécessaires... Elle était si bonne, si attentive, la chère petite Gina" (*Gina* II 297). As this more maternal affinity develops, the sexual aspect of their relationship diminishes until Percy ultimately turns to Violetta for erotic stimulation. While this abandonment is painful for Gina, this complete abdication of sexuality and attendant separation from Percy is what ultimately leads her to a life of legitimacy in France.

If endogamous relationships are the "safest" way to have sex, France, as Gina, Gothe, Horace, and others discover, is the safest *place* to have sex. Once characters have migrated to Europe, the tragic failings of spouses and lovers abruptly cease. While in New Orleans, the majority of the families within the novel are limited to no more than two children⁶⁷. Once in France, however, Gothe and Horace rapidly increase their brood, Gina has additional children, and it seems likely that Hamilton II and Angèle are preparing to give Léontine her first great-grandchildren.

What is the explanation for this sudden relinquishing of the author's control over the sexual lives of her characters? I would argue that in France, the characters have all been delivered into the bosom of an enormous extended clan. Once safely ensconced in this extended family, the matriarchy of the *mère-patrie*, they are no longer at risk of exposure to "true" unwhiteness or unfemininity. If affinity between family members cannot be assumed to exist, affinity between compatriots can, at least within the utopia that de la Houssaye imagines France to be. The disastrous nature of relationships which occur between persons of different national origins, Sir Richard and Lady Inez for instance, tends to support this theory. All of the sites of difference that have been

⁶⁷ Alice and Yvon are an exception: they have six children, but only after returning from an extended stay in France. They also hurry to take all six children to France where they will grow up and be educated.

discussed up until this point including race, gender, and sexuality, are constituents, for de la Houssaye, of archetypal “national” identities. A difference in nation, therefore, signals perhaps the largest disparity between any two characters. A discussion of what these national archetypes are, and indeed, what “nationality” means in the author’s rendering of New Orleans, will be the project of the next chapter.

Chapter Five

No-place: Liminality and Nation in *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle Orléans*

In the second part of *Dahlia*, Gerald Ashton decides to send his mistress Babette away from *Les Lilas* so that he may live there with his great love and future wife, Pauline. Babette takes this dismissal in stride, but permits herself a petty revenge: she reveals to him that he was neither her great love nor her only lover. She heightens his discomfiture by calling into question the paternity of “their” daughter⁶⁸ Célima with a rather colorful metaphor, saying “...après tout, celle qui met le pied dans un nid de fourmis serait bien embarrassée de reconnaître celle qui l’a piquée” (*Dahlia* II 200). For an interracial child in Louisiana, the analogy of the ant’s nest applies to more than the matter of Célima’s paternity. What will her “racial” status be? As the daughter of an aristocrat and a former slave, to what “class” does she belong? With an English *cum* Louisianian father and a mother who has ties to at least three continents, Europe, Africa, and North America, what “nationality” is Célima?

Célima is not, of course, the only character in the series who is at a loss to define her national status. In *Les Quarteronnes*, most of the characters who inhabit Louisiana for any length of time share a sense of placelessness, as, it can be argued, does the author herself. Louisiana in the nineteenth century is a region where the people arriving, be it with or without their consent, are from at least four continents; they then go on to blend with the remnants of multiple displaced native cultures. How can one say with certainty which nation or nations amongst this swarm leaves its mark on any given inhabitant?

⁶⁸ Elsewhere in the text, it is made clear that Babette wonders about Célima’s paternity merely for effect. Gerald is the father of the child.

How, when, and why does any given Louisianian lay claim to one or more nations while simultaneously rejecting others?

In arguments related to the structuring of race and gender in *Les Quarteronnes*, I began to explore what various “nationalities” meant to Sidonie de la Houssaye. Italians, Spaniards, Cubans, Mexicans, and Brazilians are treated, for instance, as citizens of a single Latin⁶⁹ meta-nation. English, Irish, and Anglophone American characters are similarly performatively unified. This cultural homogenization suggests that neither she, nor her editors or publishers, were particularly concerned about accuracy where these nations and cultures were concerned. The author’s inattention to detail is evidence of her devaluing of the distinctions between cultures and of the cultures themselves. In *Orientalism*, Edouard Said determined that for Europeans, their cultural exotic and erotic Other is located in the Near East which, as he points out, is geographically adjacent to them (Said 1). For Americans, he explains, the term Oriental is more likely to “be associated very differently with the Far East (China and Japan, mainly)” (1). This may be true of present-day Americans, but I would argue that de la Houssaye, like Europeans of her century, projected her fantasies of alterity onto cultures that were much more geographically proximal than China or Japan.

Her “Orient,” her places of “romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” are found directly North and South of her own little corner of the world (Said 1). If Europe had lingering memories of Mongolian or Muslim invaders, Francophone Louisiana had very fresh memories of invasion and re-colonization by Spain, England, and the United States. In grouping all “Latin” characters

⁶⁹ For lack of an adequately inclusive term, I will use “Latin” to refer to a group which consists of all native speakers of Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian in Europe and the New World. Although it, too, is a romance language, native French speakers are *not* included in this group because for de la Houssaye, they do not *all* share the strong passions that characterize her depiction of “Latin” characters .

together as lustful, ostentatious, and violent and all Anglophone characters as cold, controlling, and inhumane, de la Houssaye effectively sections off two massive zones of alterity. These zones are mirrored in the geography of Europe and the United States. Louisiana, like France, is physically as well as culturally situated by de la Houssaye between what she imagines to be the dangerous extremes of Anglophone tyranny and “Latin” incontinence. As we will see, de la Houssaye treats her version of an Orient in much the same way that Nerval or Flaubert treated theirs: actual cultural similarities and differences between peoples are authoritatively overwritten by fantastic projections.

One of the most obvious of these cultural generalizations is that all “Latin” characters are members of a sort of “Society of the Burning Soul”: Sir Richard’s Spanish bride “avait l’âme brûlante d’une Espagnole” while the Italian “Giulio venait d’une terre où les coeurs comme le climat sont également brûlants” (*Dahlia II Manuscript 137, Gina I 68*). The uncontrolled desires of Don José Dalveras, who is Mexican, Don Trocadero, who is Brazilian, Don Ignatio Iniquez, who is Italian, and Octavia, who is half-Spanish, make kidnappers of all four characters. These nations also give rise to all of the Jewish usurer characters who appear throughout the series. Their overweening desires (for money) bring about the financial downfalls of several of the *quarteronnes*’ lovers. Jewish characters, all of whom reside in New Orleans, are always referred to as “the Italian Jew Don –” or “the Spanish Jew Don –.” This double labeling, I would argue, is meant to signal their doubled alterity in the narrator’s eyes.

These “Latin” characters are also united by various linguistic misapprehensions on the part of the author who has created a meta-language for her Latin meta-nation. The frequency and pervasiveness of these small errors make it obvious that de la Houssaye was not conversant in Spanish, Italian, or Portuguese. Nor was she particularly

familiar with the cultural conventions of any of the nations where these languages are spoken. All male characters are “Dons” or “Signors” regardless of nationality just as all female characters are “Signoritas.” Males in this category are also frequently referred to as *hidalgos*. The term, a shortening of the Spanish designation “figo de algo” or “son of gentry,” is by no means reserved by the author for genteel, or even Spanish, characters. The Italian article “il” is used interchangeably, and often bafflingly, with the Spanish article “el.” In some cases, as in the name of the vessel “El Signor Sponti,” the linguistic confusion completely disguises the ship’s “nationality.” De la Houssaye proves capable of not only confusing languages but of erasing them completely: Don Orlando Trocadero, who is Brazilian, speaks only Spanish, which has, unbeknownst to anyone but the author, replaced Portuguese as his country’s mother tongue.

If the “Latin” characters can be grouped according to the uncontrolled fire of their emotions, the English, Irish, and Anglophone American characters are characterized by their “flegme” and “froideur.” While control over one’s passions, particularly sexual, is privileged by the author, too great a degree of control over one’s sentiments is always a negative. An excellent example of where de la Houssaye draws this line is seen in the story of Pierre Saulvé’s first visit to a quadrone ball in *Violetta*. Pierre visits the ball in the company of a business acquaintance, an American named James Nelson. While Pierre instantly becomes “l’esclave” of Violetta, “L’Américain était venu au bal des quarteronnes pour s’amuser et il s’amusait... pas comme Pierre par exemple. Son flegme américain était sa sauve-garde contre les avances et les oeillades des demoiselles Rosalba, Zulma, Justina, Alexandra, que sais-je...” (*Violetta* 5). While his phlegm saves Mr. Nelson from seduction, a positive, it also renders him insensitive to Pierre’s moral crisis:

‘Oh! Mon Dieu!’ se dit-il, ‘pourquoi l’ai-je mené dans ce trou infernal? S’il arrivait malheur à cette famille, je ne m’en consolerais jamais.’ Mais, au bout d’un instant, revenant à son flegme américain, il haussa les épaules en se disant: ‘Tant pis pour lui, après tout. Il est d’âge à savoir se conduire et à ne pas se laisser prendre comme un imbécile dans la toile de cette petite araignée verte.’”
(*Violetta* 5)

Mr. Nelson, who is unaware that hidden within Pierre’s family tree there is a hot-blooded Spaniard, unreasonably expects reasonable behavior from him.

Still more indifferent to various miseries of the human condition is Sir Richard Ashton, the English baronet who is Valery II’s grandfather and Dahlia’s great-grandfather. Sir Richard’s interest in control extends well beyond his own body and mind. While his reign over his children is oppressive, his treatment of the slaves at *Les Lilas* makes his medieval cruelty a neighborhood legend:

Chaque faute était punie d’une manière particulière et ni larmes ni prières ne pouvaient obtenir grâce devant le coeur de rocher de Sir Richard Ashton...Dans une sombre prison situé au bout de l’habitation...se trouvait... le fouet... il y avait encore le carcan, collier de fer dont les quatre branches empêchaient la malheureuse victime de se coucher et enfin le masque de fer qui enveloppait le visage et qu’il fallait ouvrir pour permettre au pauvre martyr de manger. Nous qui connaissons l’humanité des créoles devons bien supposer que l’Anglais, Sir Richard Ashton, était universellement détesté par tous les habitants de la Pointe-Coupée. Les femmes surtout le regardaient avec horreur et l’évitaient comme on évite une bête fauve...
(*Dahlia II Manuscript* 95-96).⁷⁰

Other British characters are less removed from “humanity” than Sir Richard, but none are particularly compassionate. The Irish Brigitte Mahaulen⁷¹ happily rents her newborn daughter, “sa grosse Kate,” to Octavia to mask the theft of “la petite Félicie” (*Octavia*

⁷⁰ “Le masque de fer” is an obvious homage to Dumas, a favorite of de la Houssaye.

⁷¹ Another example of de la Houssaye’s uncertain command of foreign names. This is evidently a gallicized version of “Bridget Mulholland.”

73). Even as infants the Irish lack the delicacy of Creoles. In *Gina*, Lady Judith is not only physically malformed, she is exceedingly rude, selfish, and imperious. Her pragmatic nephew Léandre comes to Louisiana with her in order to formalize an engagement with Alice Castel. He has no compunction about enjoying Violetta's charms, however, while he is waiting to propose.

De la Houssaye's use of English in the texts is frequent and much more correct than her Spanish, but again she projects grotesque and sweeping generalizations onto the characters. The "fieriness" of Latin cultures or the "coldness" of the English are certainly old stereotypes that she has received and repeated rather than inventing, but as with the "Latin" characters she adds some of her own bizarre flourishes to them. One example that showcases a double misunderstanding of English language and culture takes place in *Violetta*. Violetta is at Pierre's store and desires a length of a particular shade of green velvet. A clerk explains that they no longer have any in stock. Violetta makes a scene and demands the help of a different clerk. This new clerk, whom she lives to taunt, asks her, in English, which shade of green she would like. She responds, in English, "*just one shade greener than yourself*" (*Violetta* 33). De la Houssaye translates for her readers and then explains, "Si la phrase n'a aucune signification, l'anglaise au contraire contient une mortelle injure: le mot *green*, adapté au mot homme, *a green man*, signifie tout bonnement un imbécile" (*Violetta* 33). The clerk, enraged, insults Violetta in return and summarily loses his job. Most English speakers recognize that "green," employing the metaphor of green wood, can be used to describe an individual who is young, inexperienced, or naïve. It would be rare, however, to find an Anglophone, even in the nineteenth century, who would be "mortally insulted" by this epithet or who would feel much more than confusion if called "a green man." Violetta's use of the phrase "one

shade greener...” is so lacking in context as to imply more that the clerk is looking nauseated than that he is inexperienced, let alone an imbecile. De la Houssaye’s confidence in offering this misguided lesson in Anglophone language and culture, however, is so absolute that a non-Anglophone could easily be convinced of her expertise. One wonders if more than one Anglophone in turn-of-the-century Louisiana did not inexplicably have “Hé, *green man!*” shouted at him as a direct result of this novel.

If de la Houssaye can be castigated for her universally unflattering portrayals of non-Francophones, she cannot, surprisingly, be accused of indiscriminately valorizing the French, or French Creole, people of the world. The defining quality of French characters, in fact, is not their perfection but their absence from the novels. A theory regarding the reason for this underpopulation of the metropole will be offered later in this chapter. There are a very few French-French people living in de la Houssaye’s Louisiana, such as Benoît the gardener, Charles Rennes’s parents, Dahlia’s servants, or Don Trocadero’s translator, but they are all minor figures in the series. In de la Houssaye’s France, there is almost no native population to speak of. In *Gina*, we see some Parisian street urchins amongst whom is Ernest, one of Léontine’s protégés. In the final pages of the same novel there are also Gina’s voiceless French husband and Angèle’s crowd of nameless, faceless wedding guests. In *Octavia*, Alfred remembers meeting only one French person on his travels, and he is a rather mysterious figure:

Alfred se souvint d’une remarque qu’il avait entendu faire à Paris par un vieux musicien qu’il rencontrait quelquefois au jardin des Tuileries. Le vieux bonhomme regardait attentivement les femmes qui passaient devant lui et, à la manière dont elles portaient leur châle, il devinait leur station dans la société. C’était quelque chose de difficile à expliquer, c’était peut-être un instinct, mais un instinct qui ne trompait jamais. (*Octavia* 48)

An all-seeing eye where “true” race/class is concerned is certainly the type of gift one would expect to find in an inhabitant of the longed-for, idealized *mère-patrie*. Octavia’s social success on that same visit, and that of all the future *quarteronnes émigrés*, however, points to the fact that the infallible “shawl test” is sadly unknown to the rest of Paris. With omniscience ruled out, readers find themselves largely without examples of what constitutes French French-ness. Without the complication of actual French-French voices to contradict her expertise, de la Houssaye is free to tailor her own version of French-ness which is closely tied to her other performative ideals, “whiteness” and “femininity.”

There is one exception to this marked vagueness on the subject of France and the French, and that is de la Houssaye’s fascination with Bretagne. She seems to consider the region a nation within a nation. In *Gina*, there are several encomia celebrating Breton nobility, Breton scenery, Breton values, even Breton music. When Alice meets Yvon she immediately identifies his name as Breton and begins singing the praises of his homeland: “Oh! Cet heureux temps que j’ai passé en Bretagne! Jamais il ne s’effacera de ma mémoire!...et, comme j’ai pleuré quand il me fallut quitter cette terre de héros et de vrais patriotes!” (*Gina* II 156). She then goes on to expound at length on her grief over the assassination of the Duc de Berry.⁷² Finally her mother interrupts her and Alice concludes,

pardonne-moi si j’ai été trop loin: je ne voulais parler que des nobles Bretons, de ces hommes si différents des autres Français! Et... mon enthousiasme, mon admiration m’ont emportée...tenez, M. de Kernokey, quand vous viendrez nous voir, je vous montrerai les points de vue que j’ai copiés dans ces admirables campagnes bretonnes... et je

⁷² The Breton Duc, a retired Army commander for Louis XVIII, was assassinated in Paris in 1820 by a fanatical Bonapartiste named Louis Pierre Louvel.

vous chanterai toutes sortes de chants bretons!... (*Gina II*
156)

In an article entitled “Migration and the Nation: *The View from Paris*,” Leslie Page Moch provides some insight into why de la Houssaye had such a particular interest in this region. Moch reports that “since the 1840s, Brittany had been seen as the home for the romantic figures and picturesque sights... This view changed when Breton became an attractive spot for tourism and when Bretons began to come to Paris in large numbers” (Moch 5). The result of this migration of Bretons to Paris, according to Moch, was that Bretons began to be lampooned as uneducated and “utterly simple-minded” (6). This portrayal of Bretons eventually became so firmly entrenched in French culture by the cartoon character of a Breton servant called Bécassine that the word “bécasse” or “woodcock” became a term for a “stupid woman” (6).

It is likely that de la Houssaye was initially attracted to Bretagne by its romantic reputation. The fact that the region had subsequently become a target of mockery, if this fact was known to her, would almost certainly have provoked sympathy in an author who, as we will see later in this chapter, knew the pain of public humiliation. This would explain why she goes to such pains to characterize the region so positively. Bretagne’s situation can also be seen as a kind of metaphor for Francophone Louisiana’s or even the author’s own search for a place: it is a region trapped between two widespread cultures and languages, either of which has the potential to overwrite its own culture and language.⁷³ This too might have contributed to her strong feelings of identification with Bretons.

⁷³ Breton has a regional language that has evolved from Celtic.

The Creole French of Louisiana are a more knowable group than their European kin. One would expect to find that the French Creole population of New Orleans and their ancestors abroad would occupy a privileged zone of “humanity” that lies somewhere between the her poles of desire and repression, but this is only partially true. In a series written about *quarteronnes*, as one would anticipate, many of the French Creole inhabitants of de la Houssaye’s Louisiana are racially non-white. Because of their parentage, most are also performatively “unwhite” in ways that I have discussed in previous chapters. This “unwhiteness” disqualifies them from French-ness and bars the possibility of assimilation into French society.

Of those French Creole characters who are “racially white,” many fail performatively to live up to their inherent “potential.” Pierre Saulvé and Charles Rennes, for example, resemble “Latin” characters in the uncontrolled strength of their sexual desires. In more than one instance, Creole characters are moved to violence in the heat of passion, as in a rare instance of non-sexual battery of women in the series. This takes place just prior to the “green man” incident when Violetta insults the first clerk who approaches her. When this man, “un jeune créole, appartenant à l’une des meilleures familles de la Nouvelle-Orléans” tries to placate her, he is told ““Paix to la gueule, toi, sacrée saloperie qué to yé”” (*Violetta* 32). His response is violent: “A cette insulte, le jeune homme (lui-même en 1885 m’a raconté cette scène), rouge de colère, allait s’élancer sur elle et lui infliger probablement la correction qu’elle méritait, lorsqu’un de ses amis le prit par le bras et l’entraîna hors du magasin en lui disant: ‘Battre une femme! Emile! Oh! Tu n’y songes pas!’” (*Violetta* 32).⁷⁴ It is interesting to note that despite all

⁷⁴ Note the date, 1885: this is a clear example of the author’s voice overriding the narrator’s. De la Houssaye’s grandmother must have died long before 1885.

of their monstrous passions and cruelty, it is not a Spaniard⁷⁵ or an Englishman who raises his hand to a woman, but a person from the author's own community.

In the second part of *Dahlia*, de la Houssaye goes so far as to extend membership in the burning heart "Society" to French Creole men, referring to "l'âme brûlante des créoles." The taint of excess passion is perhaps why the narrator seems to distance herself somewhat from the French Creoles as a group in this portion of the text. Instead of 'nous, les créoles,' we see "*nous qui connaissons l'humanité des créoles*" and the comment that Sir Richard's punishments revolted "l'âme de *nos créoles*" (*Dahlia* II 95-96, my emphasis). 'We who know...' and 'our Creoles' imply proximity and identification with Creoles as a group, perhaps, but they do not imply membership in it. As many Orientalists have demonstrated, one may claim knowledge of or even affection for a culture without having any real respect for it or, indeed, desire to be a part of it.

Other Creole characters fall short of de la Houssaye's ideals in ways that align more with the English model of inhumanity. One of the markers of the English characters is that they are almost all in some way members of the aristocracy, a point upon which I will elaborate shortly. Because of their own "elevated" social status, they are very class-conscious. Léontine's father is disowned by his family for marrying a French Creole commoner, Lord Léandre scoffs at the eligible daughters shoved at him by eager New Orleanian mothers, and Valery II is horrified at the idea of the grandson of a baronet marrying a *quarteronne*. The most extreme example of snobbery is Lady Judith's, as prominent New Orleans citizen M. Rache discovers when he is hired to remount her jewels. He incites her wrath by not only referring to her as "Madame" (she

⁷⁵ This does not include the fight to the death between Octavia's mother and father which occurs prior to the timeframe of the series.

has never married) but by politely wondering whether she has the quantity of stones needed for one of her designs:

Tante Judith n'aimait pas la familiarité, et celle de ce bijoutier agaçait on ne peut plus son orgueil britannique... 'Sachez, Rash, que je suis lady Judith Percy de Linleigh et que je suis milady pour vous... Vous êtes, vraiment, Rash, un insolent idiot!' criait la vieille; 'oser me parler ainsi! À moi, lady Arabella Sophie Judith Percy! À la soeur du noble duc de Linleigh! À la descendante d'aïeux qui remontent aux croisades!' (*Gina* II 329)

The French Creole citizens of New Orleans share this extreme class-consciousness along with the racial prejudice that the narrator frequently bemoans. But because most of the French Creoles in New Orleans "high society" are, like the unfortunate M. Rache, mere *haute bourgeoisie*, they are cast as somewhat ridiculous on two grounds. The first is that they, unlike Léontine, for instance, are too prosaic to recognize and value performative nobility. When Giulio Lorenzo, an impoverished laborer, declares to Hamilton Castel that if God will recognize his marriage with Matte he needs no other approval, Hamilton lavishly praises the nobility of his attitude: "'Ah! La réponse de cet homme du peuple, de cet être sans éducation, a été sublime'" (*Gina* I 86). Jeannette, true to a more commonly accepted measure of social worth, does not share Hamilton's admiration for Giulio. Though she is aware of her own lack of social status, she considers him an unworthy match for a *quarteronne*: "'épouser un homme du peuple comme Giulio! Grand Dieu! y penser seulement me donne la chair de poule! Ah! Mille fois mieux mourir!'" (*Gina* I 94). Léontine is taken aback by her fledgling's attitude: clearly the child *has* developed an inflated opinion of her own worth, just as so many people warned she would.

Later in *Gina*, we discover that the white French Creole citizens of New Orleans largely share Jeannette's opinion of those who work for a living even if they are only removed from the working class by a generation or two themselves. In order to unite star-crossed lovers, Léontine must twice break down social barriers erected by her pretentious neighbors. The first instance occurs when a childhood friend's son, Charles Bailly, wishes to marry a wealthy Creole girl. Mme Rache recounts the story to Léontine prefacing it with "nous avons eu une sorte de scandale dans la haute société." Mme Rache prononça ces derniers mots avec une sorte de fierté qui eut bien certainement fort amusé Percy s'il avait été présent à la visite" (*Gina* II 40). A difference in the couple's financial situations, however, means that Charles' proposal is viewed as presumptuous. He is summarily rejected by the girl's mother, much to the amusement of "high society." He is told that unless he can match the amount of the girl's large dowry, he is doomed to disappointment. Horrified by this injustice, Léontine hurries to provide Charles with the needed funds, and the couple marries.

In the second instance, it is her future son-in-law who is being snubbed. Yvon de Kernokey, an employee at the Rache jewelry shop, is sent by his mother to a ball *Chez Rache* where she hopes he will be able to speak with Léontine, her best friend from childhood. Léontine, who possesses a princess-and-the-pea-like sensitivity to nobility, immediately notices the young stranger. She contrasts his minimalist elegance with the elaborate costumes of the local Creole dandies and remarks upon his regal bearing. She allows him to speak with her though they have not been introduced. Once he explains who he is and why he has come, she understands why she is so drawn to him: he is none other than the son of Hélène Fleury, "la fée aux yeux verts" (*Gina* II 150). She introduces him to her daughter and sends them off to the dance floor, much to the

consternation of the other guests: “Disons vite qu’à cette époque reculée, à cette époque de haute aristocratie, les commis (surtout de magasins) n’étaient point admis dans ce qui s’appelait la bonne société. Une jeune fille se serait crue déshonorée s’il lui avait fallu danser avec un commis ou avec un économiste” (*Gina* II 150). Outraged, one of Alice’s admirers approaches Léontine to ask “‘Savez-vous, madame, quel est le danseur de mademoiselle votre fille?’ ...[il est] tout simplement le commis de mon oncle.’” Outraged in turn, Léontine responds “ ‘Je savais cela, monsieur, mais le travail ennoblit, et ce titre de commis relève encore davantage M. de Kernoke à mes yeux’” (*Gina* II 159).

Léontine, however, has just learned something that casts the depth of her egalitarianism into doubt. Yvon is not only her best friend’s son and a hard worker, but he is also the financially-stricken son of a Breton *comte*. Close connections to European aristocracy are discovered with surprising frequency amongst the genteel poor of New Orleans in *Les Quarteronnes*. Léontine herself, though once impoverished, is the granddaughter of a duke. Dahlia is the great-granddaughter of a baronet, and Valery II is his grandson. The narrator suspects that even Don José may be descended from aristocrats: “Pour moi, si on m’avait dit, en me...montrant [Petite]: ‘Voici la fille d’un duc!’ je l’aurais cru sans hésiter, et je crois encore que le capitaine don José Dalvéras devait bien certainement avoir du sang noble dans les veines” (*Dahlia* I 17). De la Houssaye’s official stance on aristocratic “roots” seems to be that while they are not as important as performative worthiness, they have their uses, the most important of which is that they trump the social status of even the wealthiest *bourgeois*. Since she found that her “egalitarian” viewpoint was not as widespread as one might hope, she ensures that her valorized characters will, like Lady Judith, be able to trace their ancestry back to the crusades. They may even, like Léontine, take secret pride in their good connections:

“malgré sa douceur, sa piété, son inaltérable charité...une nuance d’orgueil se cachait au fond du coeur de la petite-fille des Linleigh, et elle était fière de ses nobles aïeux” (*Gina* II 290).

It is interesting to consider de la Houssaye’s own social position when examining class structure in the novels. Perret conclusively proved that the author’s financial situation was perpetually strained. He does not mention any noble branches in the author’s family tree in his very thorough biography although it would not be surprising to discover that she had invented some for herself. Perret did, however, uncover a very public scandal in which a copy of a letter written by de la Houssaye to a “distant relative” was published, without her consent, in a New Orleans newspaper called *The Daily States*. In the letter, de la Houssaye makes the claim that several of her hometown’s most illustrious families have fallen upon hard times but that “owing to differences in creed and race prejudice,” nothing is being done to help them or other even poorer families who are black or Jewish (Perret 51). She concludes by requesting some pink fabric scraps that she and her daughter will use to complete a quilt that will be auctioned off for charity to help Franklin’s deserving poor (47). A popular columnist then wrote a piece which played off of the letter and made several further condescending remarks about the Creole population of Franklin (48). Soon a flurry of vociferous protests from residents of the town were lodged in both local and New Orleans papers, and de la Houssaye, unsurprisingly, became *persona non grata* in Franklin. At the same time that her letter was drawing so much negative attention, the veracity of several “true stories” she had sold to Cable was being publicly called into question by that author (52). She did not face this double embarrassment with equanimity, claiming in a letter to Cable that “many hate me just as others hate you, through jealousy, because we occupy a certain situation

in the literary world... I am ready for all, even to commit suicide! I am exaggerating nothing” (53).

De la Houssaye’s high opinion of her value to society as an artist and humanitarian contrasts sharply with the rather low opinion that so many of her neighbors held of her. This contradiction points to some compelling reasons for the paradoxes in her hierarchization of class. The letter scandal began in January of 1887. Later that same year, *Gina*, the novel in which class issues play the largest role, was completed.

Léontine, who is so often the author’s mouthpiece, is given all of the tools that would have insulated de la Houssaye, at least in her mind, from negative judgment by her peers. Léontine’s “social progressiveness,” unlike de la Houssaye’s, will be tolerated and even lauded by society because she has the two most important societal advantages: wealth and an old and powerful family. These two shields are more than enough, in de la Houssaye’s reckoning, to protect one from murder charges, as we see with Sir Richard’s treatment of Inez:

...La police fut chargée des recherches au sujet de cette mort mystérieuse et...Sir Richard jugea plus prudent de quitter l’Angleterre et de passer en Amérique. Mais comment la police le laissa-t-elle partir? ...en Angleterre comme partout l’argent est une aide puissante. De plus il ne faut pas oublier que Sir Richard Ashton avait un oncle au parlement qui bien certainement ne se souciait guère de voir un de ses neveux suspendu à une potence. Il l’aida donc de toute son influence et aussi de sa bourse... (*Dahlia* II *Manuscript* 100-101).

In *Gina*, Léontine herself uses her power to protect Jeannette from being arrested for stealing the Linleigh diamonds. De la Houssaye almost certainly imagined, with reason, how different her treatment by fellow Louisianians would have been had she had this kind of social and actual currency at her disposal.

Recognizing that not everyone will inherit either of these advantages, however, de la Houssaye makes it possible for people like herself, Gothe, Angèle, or Gina to be recognized for their “true” merit by those who truly count. These characters universally move above and away from Louisiana, from the “ville maudite” of “préjugés cruels” and “la barrière infranchissable” into the pinnacle of Parisian society (*Dahlia* I 35; *Dahlia* III 275, 152). From this elevated position, which even the author’s judgmental peers presumably would not have failed to recognize as socially superior to their own, Louisiana’s “haute société” would have looked satisfyingly insignificant. This social elevation, this emigration back to one’s “true” place, however, is not easy to accomplish. One must constantly work to establish and protect one’s “whiteness” and “femininity,” qualifications that form two parts of de la Houssaye’s triad of perfections, the third of which I will call “Frenchness.” In establishing the way that de la Houssaye portrays “Latin” and “Anglophone” characters, I have cordoned off two zones of cultural alterity, of unFrenchness. That extent to which these zones of cultural alterity overlap with “unwhiteness” and “unfemininity” underscores the interrelatedness of race, gender, and nation in the novels.

Americans in Paris

One of the interesting dilemmas of studying Louisiana literature is that readers are still struggling to “place” it. Recently, it has begun to be grouped not with “American Southern” literature, but with Caribbean literatures. There is an undeniable logic to this reclassification, for one of the key complications of life in nineteenth century Louisiana is more common to the Caribbean than the American South: the struggle to speak in a language that will be universally “heard.” When I was a teacher at a middle school for “at-risk” students in Baton Rouge, I frequently had occasion to try and settle arguments

between classmates. This was made more difficult by an interesting rhetorical stance that many of my students would take when confronted with a comment or attitude that they found invalid. They would explain to me that “She said I and I am *not trying to hear that!*” or “He’s acting like he’s better than me... and I am *not trying to hear that!*” In other words, what one party was saying, or even the *way* they were saying it, could simply be muted by the other party. If I do not respect you, if I do not respect what you say, if I do not respect the *way* that you speak, I will simply make no effort to *hear* you. Your thoughts, your language, are as meaningless to me as if they had never been spoken. This is similar to the attitude of the metropole towards the colonial: say what I want to hear, and say it in the way that I prefer, or I will not hear you. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon writes that:

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support a civilization... The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language. (Fanon 18)

For de la Houssaye the process of achieving and maintaining Frenchness, of making oneself worthy of utopian France, is, as Fanon suggests, achieved mainly through mastery of the French language. She contrasts “French-French,” as Fanon does, with creolized French and the pidgin “nègre” dialect. De la Houssaye is also, however, struggling to protect her language, once a colonizing force to be reckoned with, from a powerful invading force, American English. Further complicating matters is a lingering concern about what she thinks of as the major linguistic foe of the *quarteronne*’s era,⁷⁶

⁷⁶ This era would be 1820-1830, ostensibly, although this time-frame is constantly ignored throughout the series during which multiple decades pass. In any case, Louisiana was only a Spanish territory from 1762-

Spanish. With linguistic threats, real and imagined, on all sides, the author enshrines French-French as the “one true language” and a measure of social “worth.”

Creole French, in *Les Quarteronnes*, runs the risk of being killed by kindness. The author, herself French Creole, does not wish to run the risk of offending the Creole population of Louisiana in the manner of George Washington Cable.⁷⁷ She never, therefore, openly denigrates Creole French. Nor does she, however, slip into what she establishes from the first pages of the series as the “doux parler créole” (*Octavia* 5). This creolized version of the mother tongue is reserved for use by the “unwhite” characters of the novel. While the narrator never speaks in Creole, Octavia certainly does: “...Octavia, comme les autres quarteronnes, se servait toujours du langage créole dans son intérieur, mais, comme beaucoup de nos lecteurs ne sauraient comprendre cet idiome, tout aussi doux qu’il soit, nous serons forcés de le mettre de côté” (*Octavia* 59). The narrator establishes three things here: first, that Creole is the native language of the *quarteronne*, of the “unwhite.” I read “son intérieur” as referring not only to within the home, but also to within the head—it is the language of “unwhite” thought. Second, the narrator underscores the alleged unintelligibility of Creole French and, by extension, those who speak and think in it. Intelligibility is a measure of a language’s usefulness, so an “unintelligible” language is clearly inferior. Third, the author/narrator begins to position herself as a polyglot *par excellence*.

1800 and during this period the use of French was not seriously threatened. In 1803, Louisiana was sold to the United States and by 1812 it was admitted as a state. De la Houssaye’s depiction of Spanish as a dominant language in Louisiana from 1820-1830 is questionable. Her versions of French and Louisiana history typically do not stand up to basic fact-checks.

⁷⁷ Cable portrayed the Creoles as extremely backwards in several of his texts, particularly in *Old Creole Days*, *Les Grandissimes*, and *Strange True Stories of Louisiana*. De la Houssaye carries on this tradition of condescension less with the Creoles than with the Cajuns, as in *Poupponne et Balthazar*.

Interestingly, this disavowal of Creole, this refusal to use it on the grounds of its unintelligibility, does not “take.” Only two sentences later, Octavia continues to speak in Creole. This is not the only violation of the narrator’s newly-established policy on the exclusion of Creole French: characters who are persons of color continue to slip into and out of the dialect throughout the series. The narrator also continues to protest that she will not allow the use of Creole in the novels, that she will translate it for the reader, and yet she cannot seem to resist its untranslated inclusion in her stories. This lack of translation calls into question her claim that the reader will be unable to understand Creole without her help. She further undermines this stance in *Gina* when Léontine explains creolized French to Alice who asks: “les blancs et les nègres ne parlent pas la même langue?” Léontine responds, “non; quoique pourtant la plupart des mots soient les mêmes, seulement arrangés différemment” (*Gina* I 42). In other words, it is *not* really a separate language. Sure enough, as soon as Alice hears Pa Jean speak in patois, she comments: “j’ai parfaitement compris” (*Gina* I 43).

What Pa Jean speaks is Creole’s linguistic cousin and the favored tongue of characters like Babette. De la Houssaye calls this patois “le nègre, et encore le nègre le plus sale, le plus vulgaire” (*Dahlia* I 10). Pages of this dialect, too, are included, without translation throughout the series. It is interesting to compare samples of the two languages, the “doux” Creole and the “sale” pidgin. First, a selection⁷⁸ from Part One of *Dahlia* in which Babette argues with Don José Dalveras over the custody of Dahlia in the dialect the author considers “nègre:”

⁷⁸ Like Léontine, I am of the opinion that no particular expertise is needed to decode the “crêole” and “nègre” passages in the novel, proof of which is that I have understood them without much trouble. Without context, however, they may be more difficult to read. In English, this reads something like: “You can’t scare me,” she said. “And before you take my girl Petite, let me tell you a little story, Don José...When my kid’s father kicked me out of his house he wanted to keep the little one, but since he had no way to prove his rights, Célima stayed with me.”

‘Vous quènes non plus pas fait moin peur,’ dit-elle. ‘Et avant vous prend pitit mo fille, quittez-moi conté vous in tit l’histoire, don José Dalveras...Quand popa mo fille chassé moin côté li, li té oulé gardé pitit-là; mais comme li té pas connin prouvé so droits yé, Célima resté pour moin.’
(*Dahlia* I 38)

Next, consider Octavia’s “créole,”

‘Ah! C’est toi, Alfred,’ demanda-t-elle... ‘et où to sorti?’
Co faire to pas vini hier au soir? Mo pas couri dans litte,
mo attende toi tout la nuitte... Ma pé mouri en vie dormi!
Ah! Vilain coquin qué to yé!...Mais qui ça to oulé?’
demanda-t-elle, ‘qui ça to gagnin pou dire moin? Fred, mo
lasse...mos veux pas levé; parlé, ma tendé toi.’⁷⁹” (Octavia
59)

Except for the fact that Octavia leads into her Creole with standard French, the dialect of these two passages appears to be very similar, even identical.⁸⁰ Fanon commented that despite its romanticized reputation as “divine gurgling,” the Antillean knows that Creole is viewed with condescension, that it is “only a halfway house between pidgin-nigger and French” (*Fanon* 20). Despite her protestations to the contrary, de la Houssaye does not create even that much distance between the two dialects and those who speak them.

What is ultimately the most important aspect of any Creole dialect is that those who are, or aspire to be, “noble” should not use them. More than this, even: one should have absolutely no *desire* to use creolized French other than as a means of communicating with slaves. Again, Fanon’s experience of life in Martinique applies to de la Houssaye’s Louisiana: “the middle class... never speak Creole except to their servants. In school the children... are taught to scorn the dialect. One avoids *Creolisms*” (*Fanon* 20). Dahlia, though she has been raised exclusively by Babette who speaks only

⁷⁹ In English: “Where’d you go? Why didn’t you show up here last night? I didn’t go to bed, I waited for you all night...I about died I wanted to sleep so much. Oh! Big jerk thatcha are! What do you want? What is it you have to tell me? Fred, let me alone. I don’t want to get up. Spit it out, I’m listening.”

⁸⁰ I do not claim that de la Houssaye is accurately representing any dialect of Creolized French. Based on her representations of Spanish and Italian, in fact, I would tend to assume the contrary.

“le nègre,” instinctively rejects patois in accordance with these unwritten laws: “Une autre chose à remarquer en Petite était sa manière de parler. C’est avec raison que je dis que le beau semblait instinctif, naturel à cette petite créature...Elle écoutait parler les dames locataires et ne se servait que du français, non pas du plus pur, mais bien certainement du plus décent” (*Dahlia* I 10).

As Dahlia ages, she adds other languages to her repertoire. Multilingualism is something of an obsession with de la Houssaye. As part of her introduction of any important character, and some less important ones as well, the narrator reports which languages she speaks. At a minimum, a “white,” “feminine” character will speak the “purest” French as well as Spanish. Mastery of English and/or Italian is also common. Polyglotism serves two critical functions in the novels. Its most important use is that it allows “white” characters to “know” more about “unwhite” characters. Understanding their language means understanding their culture means understanding their motivations. This affords vulnerable female characters, white and unwhite, better protection from the Don Ignatios or Sir Richards of the world. The second advantage of speaking many languages is that it provides one with many escape routes. This, again, applies to white and unwhite characters. Octavia blithely sails for Europe or Havana when the need arises. When Louisiana loses its charm, Léontine sails for Canada. When, in Canada, tuberculosis threatens Léontine’s family, she sails for Italy. When Italy grows dull, they are off to England, and so on. To paraphrase Fanon, what I am getting at is plain: “Mastery of language affords remarkable power” in de la Houssaye’s novels (Fanon 18).

A final reflection on language in *Les Quarteronnes* concerns de la Houssaye’s own linguistic skills. I have already shown that while she does not speak Spanish or Italian, she would like it to appear as if she does. This explains her off-hand inclusion of

(invariably incorrect) titles, words, and phrases throughout the series. Her English, on the other hand, was fairly fluent if somewhat prone to “gallicizations.” As with Spanish and Italian, she pointedly displays her knowledge of English by injecting a word or phrase wherever possible as in the “green man” story or Octavia’s assertion that “...j’ ai...pris pour devise le mot anglais: *Cash*” (*Octavia* 100).

English may, however, be creeping into her writing in subtler ways as well. Léonce is offered not a “poney” but a “pony.” Léontine does not visit “les pays...,” she visits “les contrées... .”⁸¹ In the author’s handwritten manuscripts, one finds things like “son home” and “le baby.” Separately, all of these instances of Anglicized French are minor, but together they begin to suggest a pattern. They generally occur in places, such as descriptive passages rather than dialogue, where deliberate use of English would be out of context. Nevertheless, it is impossible to say with absolute confidence whether these were really “slips” or just more linguistic grandstanding. If, as I suspect, they are the slips inevitably caused by exposure to and conversation with the ever-increasing influx of Anglophone Americans into Louisiana, then one must wonder whether de la Houssaye could meet her own standard for perfect French-French. Had de la Houssaye ever been able to visit France, would her own French have been judged, like Gothe’s or Léontine’s, to be of “le plus pur” ? Would she, like Fanon, have learned to fear whispers that “[she] doesn’t even know how to speak French” (Fanon 20)?

Any uncertainties that de la Houssaye may have had about how she might be received in France are put to rest via the simple expedient of imagining a France emptied of the French. By this I mean that other than very vague notions such as “in France”

⁸¹ Une contrée is standard (if a little antiquated) French for a “land” or a “realm,” but the author uses it where “un pays” would be more typical. I suspect that the similarity between “contrée” and “country” may have influenced her choice of words.

nobility of character is still appreciated or “in France” there is less prejudice, the author does not develop a sort of “national character” for the French. Nor are there any characters in France who are fully described physically, intellectually, or otherwise. Instead we see vague sketches of a handful of individuals and are otherwise merely told that members of French high society were present for this or that event. Absolutely no French-French characters⁸² speak in the novels. This erasure makes it easier for a woman whose difficult, working-class life never took her outside the borders of Southern Louisiana to determine which qualities are required for her characters to assimilate into French society, even “high” society. There is no one in France to gainsay or snub her.

De la Houssaye seems, ultimately, to be searching less for a nation to call her own than a general *escape* from nations and the limitations they oppose on her. She alternately identifies herself and her characters as Creoles and Americans although she clearly does not fully identify with, or even particularly like, either label. When her characters assimilate into French society, it is less because they want to *become* French, to “[undergo] a definitive, an absolute mutation” than because they believe it to be a place where they will finally be recognized and appreciated for what they *already are* (Fanon 18). This is why French-ness, like “whiteness” and “femininity,” is largely performative: no matter how *unlikely* it is for a given person to achieve French-ness, say, for instance that they are born on a farm in the United States, it should still be *possible* if someone wants it badly enough. France, de la Houssaye’s definitive *locus amoenus*, is indeed the mother country, but she is an accepting mother rather than a judgmental one. Her role is not to make unwanted demands of the expatriates—they have already proven themselves worthy of her prior to their arrival—but to protect them from those who

⁸² Who are *in* France.

would. In short, it is much more agreeable to be a Creole American when one is a Creole American in Paris. In Paris no one knows or cares how a Louisianian woman, white or of color, rich or poor, noble or common, “is supposed to” act.

Occupation of this liminal non-nation has the added benefit of allowing continual movement. The Castels come and go between Paris, Canada, Bretagne, and Louisiana at will. This, of course, is the norm for the fabulously wealthy family. For others, the ability to come and go as they please is newer—New Orleans can be a difficult place to leave. In the meritocratic space of Paris, all of the characters achieve the financial security that Louisiana denied them along with other rights. It was lack of funds that kept Horace and Gothe and Valery II and Dahlia firmly in their social and physical places in New Orleans for so many years. In Paris Horace’s art is so highly valued that the couple has become very wealthy; an outcome that de la Houssaye was certainly hoping to recreate in her own life through the authorship of *Les Quarteronnes*. Gina, too, adds her rather substantial inheritances from Jeannette and Percy to her French husband’s surfeit of funds.

Despite their newfound wealth, however, any travel plans that Gina and Gothe have do not include a reunion with their hometown. This is hardly surprising: they remember all too well the shameful epithet that would overwrite their new patronyms the moment they set foot in New Orleans. Their progeny will have to wait a full century and a half to see their forebears’ marriages finally recognized by the state of Louisiana. If those great-great grandchildren have delayed their return to New Orleans until race, gender, and nation are no longer terrains of struggle in Louisiana, they remain in Paris to this day.

Afterword

This study began, although I did not realize it at the time, with a question asked in a seminar studying the work of colonial women writers. Leading the seminar was author Assia Djebar who was then in residence at LSU. During a class, she mentioned having recently spent many hours sifting through the Louisiana Collection at the university's archival library. She had made, she reported, several interesting finds. Foremost among them was the work of a writer named Sidonie de la Houssaye, which she declared truly fascinating. Why, she wondered, were not more people studying her work? As with any doctoral student searching for a thesis topic, my interest was immediately piqued at the idea of an understudied body of work which had been declared "vraiment fascinant" by a scholar whose opinion I respected.

Shortly thereafter, I underwent the arcane cleansing rituals required for entry into an archival library. I remember feeling somewhat surprised to discover that the reading room was not filled with fellow students jockeying to get their cotton-gloved hands on a portion of the Sidonie de la Houssaye papers. I soon discovered why: to do so meant many hours spent perched in front of the glare of a microfilm reader trying to make out photographs of an illegible manuscript or, worse, many quarters spent generating even less legible photocopies of same. I contented myself with a paper on a more accessible and recently republished edition of de la Houssaye's *Pouponne et Balthazar*, a notably anti-Cajun retelling of the Evangeline myth. It was, indeed, intriguing, but not quite enough to motivate me to commit seriously to the microfilm reader to "rediscover" her other work.

A few years passed during which I wandered far afield from my studies, and when I returned, it was long past time to dedicate myself to the task of selecting a

dissertation topic. I had never forgotten de la Houssaye. Indeed, during my absence, I had discovered that Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana had transcribed and posted online two of de la Houssaye's *Quarteronnes* novels, *Octavia* and *Violetta*, as a part of the excellent Bibliothèque Tintamarre program⁸³. I was pleased that I would finally be able to read the texts at my leisure, but disappointed that this republication meant that by now the reading room surely *was* crowded with scholars studying de la Houssaye's sizeable *oeuvre*. Much to my surprise and unabashed relief, a little investigating revealed that despite its comprehensive collection and very helpful staff, Hill Memorial Library had remained an insurmountable obstacle to all but a very few de la Houssaye researchers. Recognizing that to have had this kind of good luck twice was all that anyone could ask, I weighed down my pockets with fodder for the copier, filled out the necessary forms, and conclusively entered the fray. With *Violetta* and *Octavia* already in hand, I decided to focus on *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*. Professor Djébar's question still lingered in my mind: *why* were not more people studying these texts?

After only a few weeks of reading, I knew for a fact that the reason that the *Quarteronnes* texts been "forgotten" had absolutely nothing to do with a lack of merit. For the casual reader seeking entertainment, the novels are an eye-poppingly dramatic and utterly *outré* treatment of a subject that incorporates a panoply of enduring social taboos. One turns each page with an ever-increasing mixture of horror and awe wondering how much further into the wilderness of the human imagination this small-town Louisiana grandmother is willing to go. As de la Houssaye herself said of the

⁸³ The Bibliothèque Tintamarre is an online hosting of dozens of key Francophone Louisiana texts. The site may be found in French at <http://www.centenary.edu/french/louisiane.html>.

series, “c’est licencieux, immoral, demi-monde, mais c’est magnifique!” (Perret 284).

For the scholar, the terrain is richer still.

For every field of inquiry within French and Francophone studies that has gained academic popularity within the last three decades, there is corresponding material for study in *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*. Gender, Sexuality, Linguistics, Race Studies, Critical Mixed-Race Studies, Colonial and Postcolonial Studies; the list goes on. As I worked my way through this dissertation, I frequently found it expedient to demonstrate a point by silencing my voice and allowing de la Houssaye’s to replace it. This need to surrender authorship to my object of study came largely from a growing feeling that one must read these texts for themselves in order to understand how singular they are. It also came, in large part, from a suspicion that even the relatively tiny fraction of the *Quarteronnes* texts that I have reproduced in this study may be enough to tempt others to follow in my footsteps and take up these and other de la Houssaye texts for reading and study. Others who may come to agree with me and a handful of infinitely more well-known and respected readers of de la Houssaye including Professor Djebar, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and prolific critic Auguste Viatte who judged that “Mme de la Houssaye mérite plus d’attention” (quoted in Perret 5).

Of the *Quarteronnes* series, John Perret wrote in his dissertation that

Auguste Viatte has gone astray in attempting to read too much into *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*. He visualized it as a social protest... What has been said before of the Romantic inspiration of the work eliminates such lofty didactic purposes. Plainly stated, Madame de la Houssaye could not afford the luxury of didacticism. Moreover, had she wanted to teach, she would have chosen a current subject, not an extinct problem. (Perret 284)

Certainly in the 1960s, Perret was not alone in this kind of thinking. Now however, formerly scorned texts such as *Nini, la mulâtresse*, *Je suis Martiniquaise*, and *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans* are generating renewed critical interest. Such texts may seem to contain no agitation for social change. They may, as with *Les Quarteronnes*, seem to or even openly claim to reinforce repressive hierarchies. Between the lines, however, many scholars are finding the possibility of contrapuntal readings. In this dissertation, I undertook this kind of project. Camouflaged by the narrator's cries of "maudite socière!" and "nouvelle Mégère!", one finds ample evidence of the author's identification with the *quarteronnes*, both "good" and "evil." When Octavia's sublimely depraved vengeance against her wealthy white lover is such a complete success, it is reasonable to question the extent to which de la Houssaye underwrites white male privilege. When Gothe's interracial children are taken into the very bosom of the French aristocracy, it is pertinent to question the efficacy of the author's racial "policing." The "truth" of these novels, as I hope I have demonstrated in this study, lies somewhere in the liminal space between Viatte's reading of "social protest" and Perret's diagnosis of "historical romance."

Only a few days before I began to write these concluding thoughts on *Les Quarteronnes*, Yale professor Naomi Pabst wrote an article for the *Village Voice* that directly contradicts Perret's assertion that the subject matter of these novels is an "extinct" problem. In the article, entitled "Black and White and Read All Over," Pabst, who declares herself a member of "America's mixed-race baby boom," takes on a question that has dogged her since birth: "What are you?" (Pabst 1). Pabst goes on to discuss the growing field of critical mixed-race studies. This field is taking shape in part to formulate an intellectual response to the "dreaded demand," and in part to agitate for

practical changes in the binaristic inscription of race in this country. These groups have already made strides which are at once as basic and important as “a grassroots movement [that] brought about a key change on the 2000 census, allowing you to check more than one box for race” (3).

Pabst asserts, in the conclusion of her article, that “the crisis of classification is not just an American phenomenon” (4). Indeed, I would argue that it is also not a phenomenon limited to race. When one is asked “What are you?” it can as easily apply to one’s gender, sexuality, nationality, religion or any other category believed to encapsulate one’s essential personhood. In *Les Quarteronnes*, the attempt to respond to the question “What is she?” led to the nexus of all of these categories. In exploring the liminal spaces of identity in the novel, one uncovers responses to this “infamous” question that explode traditional binaries. One also begins to formulate an even larger question: “Why do we need to know?” Pabst points out that the “great thinker W.E.B. DuBois spilled much ink explaining what he called ‘the strange meaning of being black,’ but he was not the first to ponder these enduring questions, nor will Pabst be the last (Pabst 4). If the *Les Quarteronnes* series so obviously grapples with such eternal questions, then how has it managed to slip through the literary cracks for nearly a century? The answer, which should not have surprised me, is that they were not, in fact, forgotten after all.

When I presented the proposal for this dissertation to my committee, one of its members, Dr. Pius Ngandu Nkashama, asked whether I was certain that these novels were no longer being read. I could only respond that I did not believe them to have an enduring readership in Louisiana or the United States in general. This, sadly, I still believe, but beyond that, I could not claim any knowledge. Dr. Ngandu then shared with

me the information that while the books may have been forgotten in their “homeland,” they were still in circulation elsewhere in the world. As Louisiana began to ignore the texts, they were taken up for use abroad as colonial propaganda for their value in exporting the message that docility and virtuousness would lead to acceptance by “white” society. In a letter on the subject, Dr. Ngandu explains that, “ils étaient destinés exclusivement aux Écoles dans les Colonies pour des besoins de propagande. Ils étaient accompagnés de plusieurs autres manifestations artistiques comme des Films, de la musique exotique, des chansons des pays “*explorés*”, et ils insistaient davantage sur la ‘*supériorité de la race blanche*’” (2, his emphasis). As propaganda, the novels were well-known enough to have been remembered and commented on by scholars in the Négritude movement: “Césaire et Senghor en parlent longuement dans leurs interviews, à propos des manuels pédagogiques par lesquels ils s’étaient initiés à la littérature” (1).

Neither the young minds of students in need of mental ‘colonization’ nor the social critics that some of them became were members of the audience for whom de la Houssaye claimed to be writing. I would argue, in fact, that she may have had strong reservations about this appropriation of her texts on the grounds that they cannot, uncensored, be trusted to convey the messages that propagandists saw in them. Nor, as an unwillingly re-colonized “American,” did she wholeheartedly embrace colonial projects in general. Dr. Ngandu commented that “la Louisiana paraissait un ‘*Paradis*,’ une véritable réussite de la colonisation, malgré les avatars d’un racisme qui s’était dilué dans des images romantiques de l’exotisme” (Ngandu 3). De la Houssaye contains the opposite message: New Orleans is a “ville maudite” full of “préjugés cruels,” a prison from which many people, white or unwhite, virtuous or wicked, cannot wait to escape. Moreover, while the acceptance of the *quarteronnes* who are docile and virtuous

underscores the colonial project, the success of those *quarteronnes* who are neither docile nor virtuous contains the seeds of its destruction. Such are the gaps between what the author says, what the author “intends,” and what the audience “hears” in the series that readings *à rebours* are a temptation too great to resist. These “*romans de moeurs*” have the potential to be, instead, “texts of resistance” where one may choose to side with any of the series’ nearly-omnipotent anti-heroines as they not only overcome but completely decimate the hallowed institution that is white male society. In the end, regardless of *how* these books have been read, they have had a larger role in shaping postcolonial consciousness than has lately been suspected. It is past time that these books are re-introduced where they have been forgotten and re-read where they are still remembered.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the eyes of the world have turned with unprecedented focus and interest towards Southern Francophone culture. International sympathy has already begun to take the form of a desire to help resurrect the storm-battered cultural institutions of New Orleans and Acadiana. Even as I write this, hotels are rushing to repair enough rooms to accommodate the influx of tourists wishing to participate in the “recovery effort” in the form of a pilgrimage to the first “post-Katrina” Mardi Gras. A Hollywood film crew has already returned to New Orleans’ neighborhoods and “the hurricane and its aftermath have been added to the movie’s script” (Wirt 1). In just under two weeks from today, the first conferences and parties will hurry to set up refreshment tables where refugees fought for sustenance in the now-infamous Morial Convention Center. It is hard to imagine a more tragic reason for gaining the world’s attention, but that is nevertheless precisely what has happened in Louisiana.

This is a time of critical reassessments for Louisiana culture: what will be resurrected, what will be replaced, and what will merely be forgotten? When the storm tore past regional libraries and archives, how many irreplaceable documents from the United States' Francophone past were carried with it? In the years before this turning point in the region's history, the culture, and in particular, literature, of Louisiana⁸⁴ was beginning to be rediscovered, republished, and re-examined. It is up to the academic and cultural communities to speak up on behalf of its interests so that this progress continues as the Louisiana area coalesces into the newest version of itself. Out of the liminal space that is post-Katrina Louisiana, there are yet many texts that, like *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, demand and deserve a wider audience.

⁸⁴ I refer her to include all the coastal areas that were once considered a part of "Louisiana."

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Appendix A—Plot Summaries

Octavia

The first novel in the series is *Octavia La Quarteronne*. It begins from the perspective of the author, who tells the audience that on a stormy day in 1878, she wandered up to the attic to examine the papers left to her by her grandmother. In the trunk full of documents, she finds a sheaf of papers labeled “Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans de 1800 à 1830.” These papers turn out to be a collection of notes and clippings loosely formed into a sort of manuscript that described and documented the lives of several New Orleans *quarteronnes*. Since the grandmother has left behind only a literary sketch, the author claims she has been forced to do extensive research in order to flesh out the manuscript into the series of novels that she is presenting to her reader. This research consists of interviewing old friends who were present at the events described and reading the newspapers from the period, which she claims were full of minute studies of the lives and loves of the *quarteronnes*.⁸⁵ Once the author has established her grandmother’s research *bona fides*, she switches the narrative voice to that of the grandmother, recounting the events that reached her ears through various sources.

The novel then proceeds to the story of Charles Rennes, a young man from a country plantation who is in New Orleans to sell the proceeds of his family’s harvest and settle the last of their mortgage. Though he is shy and retiring, he is persuaded to attend a “quadroon ball” by an old school friend that he has chanced upon. At the ball, he sees a *quarteronne* named Adoréah and is immediately and obviously bewitched by her beauty.

⁸⁵ In his dissertation, Perret categorically disproves this conceit. His research showed that newspapers from this era contained no “social” columns at this point and ran even marriage announcements only rarely. It seems unlikely that there would have been any discussion of *quarteronnes* in the papers, let alone the sort of fetishization of them that de la Houssaye/ the grandmother claim to have found (Perret, 209).

Shortly thereafter, he sees Adoréah once again at the jewelry shop of M. Rache. On display at the shop is a diamond necklace that is purportedly the infamous one worn by Marie Antoinette. Adoréah, recognizing her conquest from the previous night, begins to drop hints that she would do “anything” to have the necklace.

At the jewelry store she encourages Charles’ attentions, and he begins courting her. She seduces him with increasingly physical flirtation, all the while constantly reiterating her desire for the necklace and promising that she will “belong” fully to whoever purchases it for her. Desperate to consummate the relationship, Charles spends the proceeds from the family’s harvest which were destined to pay off the mortgage on the plantation. Since this does not cover the cost of the necklace, he obtains an additional three thousand piastre loan by forging his father’s name on the note and buys the necklace. He brings the necklace to his potential mistress with all due haste.

Adoréah accepts the necklace, but rejects Charles and mocks his naïveté in thinking that she would sell herself so cheaply. Charles, despondent, returns to his hotel and finds a letter from his father asking why he is late in returning home and reminding him that the mortgage is due in two days. Knowing that he has destroyed the family’s fortunes and has no hope with Adoréah, the dishonored Charles shoots himself in the head. When his mother hears the news, the shock kills her, and the elderly family scion is left alone with the new debts his son incurred. He abandons the plantation to the bank, moves in with family as a poor relation and dies only three months later. New Orleans society is stirred to anger when it learns about the destruction of the Rennes family at the hands of Adoréah, but despite murmurings of a lynching, no action is ever taken against her and before long, the scandal is forgotten, and she continues to wear the necklace.

The story of Octavia then begins with a reflection on how the newspapers that had stirred anger against Adoréah devoted pages to describing the *toilettes* and parties of *quarteronnes*. So fabulous were the descriptions of one of these, Octavia, that even white women were jealous of her great beauty and “luxe princier” (*Octavia* 43). Octavia’s lover is the attorney Alfred D--. They have already been together for some time at the beginning of the story, and she is reportedly very devoted to him. The couple has been traveling in Europe where Alfred presents her as his wife and where she enjoys great success in the highest social circles due to her ability to “seem” cultured and educated. No one in Europe is capable of visually detecting her “true” race.

When they return from Europe, Alfred is offered a judgeship and in deference to the dignity of his new position, resolves to give up his wild lifestyle. He meets with his uncle, Doctor Verdier, from whom he has been estranged because of his relationship with Octavia. During this meeting Alfred sees his cousin Angèle Verdier for the first time since her childhood. He falls in with love her and decides to rid himself of Octavia and marry Angèle as soon as possible. His uncle approves of this plan but warns him that Octavia will not easily be put aside and reveals what he knows about the violent nature of Octavia’s own mother as a cautionary tale. Her mother, Sylvira, he recalls, was a famed beauty and *empoisonneuse* who has probably passed on her secrets to her daughter. Sylvira’s life was cut short by a Spanish lover, who suspecting that she was preparing to poison him, fatally stabbed her and was later hanged for the crime. The Spaniard, of course, is Octavia’s father, and thus the blood of two murderers runs in Octavia’s veins. With this in mind, Alfred proceeds with his plan and goes to Octavia’s house, where he abruptly informs her that their relationship is at an end and offers her a financial settlement. Furious and heartbroken, Octavia swears she will have her revenge.

With Octavia ostensibly dealt with, Alfred marries Angèle. They go to Europe, stay for two years, and return to New Orleans with an infant son. Alfred is relieved to learn that Octavia now has a wealthy Cuban lover and is apparently pregnant, which he takes to mean she has forgotten about him. He becomes a father a second time, this time to a daughter, Félicie.

Meanwhile, Octavia has been planning her revenge carefully and anticipating her ex-lover's return. Her pregnancy has been faked. When it is time for the "birth," she rents a newborn from a poor Irish couple to make the illusion complete. She then arranges the kidnapping of Alfred's newborn daughter, returns the rented child to its parents, and makes for Havana passing off Alfred's child as her own. The loss of her baby is too much for Alfred's wife, and she eventually dies of a broken heart.

Octavia renames the child Mary and for twelve years, raises the child to be as debauched and perverse as possible. She then brings her back to New Orleans, where she sows the seeds of an infatuation between Alfred's remaining child, his son Léonce, and "Mary" who is actually his sister, Félicie. As they reach adulthood, Léonce's obsession with the beautiful "*quarteronne*" grows and eventually he is steered into a *plaçage* contract with Mary by Octavia. On the night that they are incestuously consummating their relationship, Octavia sends details of her revenge and proof to the judge, and then leaves the country. The judge, once he understands what has happened, goes to the address provided by Octavia, interrupts his children *in flagrante delicto*, shoots his daughter, and then shoots himself. Léonce goes mad and never recovers, and no trace of Octavia is ever found.

Violetta

The second novel, *Violetta La Quarteronne*, introduces the wealthy and noble Pierre Saulvé, his virtuous wife Hermine, and their five children, the eldest of whom is Marie. Pierre is a shopkeeper, and on one afternoon, a wealthy American comes to his store where he spends a great deal of money. In gratitude, Pierre invites him to dine with his family; he accepts. After dinner, however, the valuable customer persuades Pierre to a quadron ball, something which Pierre has never done despite being a native New Orleanian. At the ball, Pierre sees Violetta, a tiny, beautiful, teenaged *quarteronne* who is described as the most dangerous woman in New Orleans. Pierre becomes instantly obsessed with her and begins courting her that night, instantly forgetting his wife and family and single-mindedly pursuing the goal of “possessing” Violetta.

As their courtship continues, she demands increasingly exorbitant gifts from him, culminating in an extremely costly *plaçage* contract, all of which he willingly pays for, though his wealth is beginning to be endangered. She also has *carte blanche* in Pierre’s store, where she depletes the inventory and abuses the employees. Over a period of three years, due to the demands of his relationship with Violetta, Pierre financially and emotionally neglects his family. Eventually, a disgruntled employee exposes his relationship with Violetta to his wife and makes her aware of the family’s imminent financial ruin. Her horror escalates when Pierre tries to force her to sign an act mortgaging the family home in order to finance a summer “palace” in the resort town of Bay St. Louis for Violetta. Hermine refuses and Pierre retaliates, abandoning his family completely and leaving Hermine and the children to make ends meet through menial labor. Pierre even refuses to come home to see his son Henri, who has come down with a sudden and fatal illness, and wants nothing more than to see his father one last time.

Desperate to fulfill her brother's dying wish, Pierre's daughter Marie tracks down her father at Violetta's home, and, humiliated, interrupts a *petit souper* where her father, Violetta, and several others are engaging in a sort of drunken orgy. She convinces Pierre to return home to see his son over Violetta's vociferous objections and threats. On his deathbed, Henri extracts a promise from his father to abandon Violetta and reunite with his wife and children who are close to starving without his financial support. Pierre keeps his promise and stays away from Violetta for a time. Eventually, however, Violetta convinces him to return, but she does not give up the lover, Louis Pain, whom she took during Pierre's absence.

Suddenly, Violetta contracts typhoid fever, and both her lovers are terrified she will die. She survives, but as was customary, her legendary hair had been shorn as part of her treatment. She demands that Louis bring her his young wife's hair, which is the same rare shade as her own, and Louis willingly obeys, convincing his trusting wife to cut off her hair as a proof of her love for him. After he brings Violetta her prize, she is gratefully entertaining him when a suspicious Pierre enters the house and nearly catches Violetta and Louis together. Suspecting that she is hiding a lover, Pierre ransacks the house, all the while loudly threatening to kill Violetta if she is being unfaithful. To protect Violetta, Louis leaps to his death from the balcony so that Pierre cannot find him in the house, widowing his trusting and now bald wife.

The episode dampens Pierre's affection and generosity towards Violetta, so she seduces his future son-in-law, Marie's fiancé George Ormsby, who until now has been one of her greatest detractors. In short order, a still-suspicious Pierre catches the new lovers together, slaps George's face with a glove, and permanently ends his relationship with Violetta. Although friends try to dissuade George on the grounds that a duel will

destroy his fiancée's reputation, he demands satisfaction. At their duel, which takes place in a bayou outside of the city, Pierre apologizes and delopes, but George is not moved and fatally wounds him. George flees to avoid arrest, and fearing repercussions from this final outrage, Violetta flees to Havana to live with Octavia. Though Hermine, Marie, and a priest are at Pierre's side to forgive him before he dies, his actions have one final consequence. Devastated by the dual loss of father and fiancé, a broken-hearted Marie can no longer take any comfort in life and eventually enters a convent. The few remaining Saulvés live relatively happily thereafter and George Ormsby eventually becomes a respectable husband and father despite Violetta's corruptive influence.

Gina

The third novel is *Gina la Quarteronne*, written in two parts although Gina is something of a minor character. It is several hundred pages longer than *Violetta* and *Octavia*. The first portion of the novel, subtitled *Jeannette et Gothe* tells the story of Léontine Percy. Léontine's father, the second son of an English duke, left England and came to America to make his fortune in his youth and found work in a New Orleans bank. Her mother is a gauche but beautiful white Créole woman with extravagant tastes, and so the family lives in prodigal luxury. Also living with the family are a host of slaves, including two young *quarteronne* girls, Jeannette and Gothe, the daughters of Léontine's nurse, Angélique. Léontine is the godmother of the two girls who are both indescribably lovely, particularly Jeannette who is also a prodigy in numerous fields, including art, music, and acting. Léontine pampers both girls, dresses them richly, and hires the best tutors to educate them, despite their mother's loud protests that this will give them ideas 'above their stations.' Both girls are taken to be white by all observers. Gothe is angelic, while Jeannette is something of a bad seed—she is greedy, forward, and

has a horrible temper when crossed. Nevertheless, Jeannette and Gothe love each other as well as their “*marraine*,” who is confident that Jeannette’s faults will be overcome by her own positive influence.

When Léontine’s father very suddenly dies, the Percys are left genteelly poor. Though in possession of a richly appointed mansion, they have no means to pay for household or other expenses. Despite her mother’s fretful objections, Léontine decides to take in boarders to make ends meet. Arrangements are made for a family of Canadian millionaires to come and live with them. This family, the Castels, comes to Louisiana in hopes that the climate will provide relief from the family curse of hereditary consumption, which has already claimed the father and most of the children. The remaining daughter, Alice, is ill when she arrives, but is charming and becomes Léontine’s friend. The son, Hamilton Castel, arrives later, and he and Léontine fall in love. Alice dies of consumption, and her dying wish is that Léontine marry Hamilton despite his desire to remain a bachelor and avoid passing the disease to future generations. He agrees, they marry, and Léontine, Hamilton, and Mme Castel return to the family’s massive estate in Canada, *Sept Tours*. Feeling her protégées should be in the care of their mother, Léontine leaves them behind, but makes ample provisions for their continued education and pampering. The newlyweds remain in Canada until the death of Mme Castel, then travel in Europe for a time, having a daughter and a son along the way. Eventually, Hamilton begins to sense that he, too, has consumption, and they return to Canada where he dies. His dying wish is that his wife and children leave *Sept Tours*, again because of the climate. The children are brought up in Europe and live there until they are teens, when Léontine’s overwhelming desire to return to Louisiana brings them back to her New Orleans estate.

In the second part of the novel, Léontine returns to New Orleans to learn from a distraught Angélique that her two protégées, Jeannette and Gothe, are now known as Adoréah and Althéa, two *quarteronnes* so infamous that Léontine read about their exploits even in the newspapers in Europe, particularly the story of Charles Rennes. Adoréah (Jeannette) is being kept by a millionaire doctor and Althéa (Gothé) is living with a famous painter. Léontine and Angélique share the sentiment that it was Jeannette who led the virtuous Gothe astray from the life of legitimacy that their godmother had planned for them. Léontine then remembers a figure from her past, a talented urchin whom her husband, also a painter, saved from the streets. Hamilton personally instructed the boy and ultimately sent him to art school in Europe, and when the boy finished school, he lost contact with the Castels. This young painter is Horace Delmond, none other than the protector of Gothe, and Léontine also blames him for the ruination of Gothe.

Léontine resolves to repurchase her family's slaves, who were sold to different families after her departure from Louisiana. One of the slaves is owned by Alfred D. and Octavia, which results in Léontine inadvertently paying a formal visit to Octavia, whom she believes to be Alfred's white wife, a misconception that Octavia does not correct. A second slave is owned by Horace Delmond, and it is during the attempt to reacquire this slave that she hears the tragic tale of how Gothe came to be his lover and the mother of his children. As she suspected, it was Jeannette who pressured Gothe to leave their mother's home, where they were expected to do manual labor rather than enjoy the wealth and glamour of *quarteronnes*. Jeannette quickly found a rich protector, but Gothe resisted all advances and remains a virgin, despite the fallacious rumors about her in the paper. Eventually, Jeannette tired of waiting for Gothe to choose a protector, and on a

night when Gothe is weakened from illness, arranges her rape⁸⁶ by the wealthy but repulsive Italian Jew Don Ignatio.⁸⁷ Gothe escapes via the window, and in her weakened state, flees to Horace's house, and collapses in his arms. They are already in love, but she has denied him any sexual relationship outside the bonds of marriage until now. Horace nurses her back to health and promises to marry her as soon as he can save enough money to move to Europe, and she lives with him from then on, ultimately bearing him children. After hearing the story, Léontine agrees that Gothe had no choice, asks to see her, and forgives her.

Jeannette/Adoréah does not fare as well. Boldly, she pays a visit to her godmother's home to ask for her forgiveness. Léontine, well aware of Jeannette's conduct, coldly rejects her and instructs her to leave. Jeannette swears she will avenge herself on Léontine through her son, Percy Castel. True to her word, Jeannette arranges a relationship between her niece Gina (granddaughter of Angélique) and Leontine's son Percy. Jeannette encourages Percy to go deeper and deeper into debt with Jewish moneylenders, omnipresent villains throughout the series, to support Gina.

Unfortunately for Jeannette, Gina is semi-virtuous. Though she is happy to have an illegitimate relationship with Percy, she loves him and has no desire for expensive things. Gina tears up the *plaçage* contract that Jeannette carefully drafted and lives simply on an inheritance and her income as a seamstress. She bears Percy a daughter, Angèle, who is the image of Léontine. Meanwhile, Percy's sister Alice has also fallen in love and become engaged to a young and poor Breton *comte*, Yvon de Kernokey, who is the grandson of Jeannette's protector, Doctor Fleury. Fleury has ejected his widowed

⁸⁶ Rape here refers to both sexual violation and abduction.

⁸⁷ De la Houssaye's understanding of Spanish and Italian titles is not strong. She frequently confuses Señor and Signor, etc.

daughter and her children, including a granddaughter paralyzed by a childhood illness, from his home at Jeannette's insistence. As a result, Yvon is forced to work as a lowly clerk at M. Rache's jewelry store in order to support his mother and sister.

When a pair of English aristocrats, relatives of Léontine's father, come for a visit, they bring the priceless Percy family diamonds with them as a gift for Alice. The jewels are sent to M. Rache's to be remounted. Jeannette, seeing them in the window, becomes obsessed with them, and recognizes a chance for a double revenge. She conceives a plan to steal them by impersonating their owner, the eccentric Lady Judith Percy, and to frame Yvon for the crime, avenging herself simultaneously against Léontine and Yvon, who had insulted her in the past. The complicated plan succeeds, Yvon is jailed, and a trial date is set. Jeannette, unbeknownst to Gothe, hides the jewels in her sister's home.

No one in the Castel family believes Yvon is guilty, and both Léontine and Horace secretly suspect Jeannette. Just as the trial is coming to a close, Horace and Gothe discover the jewels, they bring them to Léontine, and Yvon is exonerated. Enraged by her defeat and hysterical over the loss of the jewels and the possibility of being jailed, Jeannette races home from the courtroom where she suffers a sort of aneurysm and collapses in a pool of "black" blood that she has symbolically vomited up. It is a fatal injury, and after lingering long enough to obtain the forgiveness for her many sins from loved ones, Jeannette dies. Docteur Fleury is rendered mentally incompetent by the loss.

As a result of Jeannette's death and Yvon's exoneration, several things take place. Léontine hires Yvon to help manage her financial affairs and agrees to allow him to become officially engaged to Alice. Mme de Kernokey becomes her ailing father's legal guardian, the family returns to their ancestral home. The Doctor's fortune, still intact,

ameliorates the family's financial situation. Gina and Gothe are the sole beneficiaries of Jeannette's will and divide her substantial fortune. This gives Gina increased wealth and resources and provides Gothe and Horace with the funds needed to travel to Paris and finally marry.

Alice and Yvon marry and travel the world. Léontine still doesn't know she is the grandmother of the infant *quarteronne* Angèle, who, along with her mother Gina, is now being neglected by Percy in favor of Violetta. Percy's predisposition to illness is augmented by orgiastic excesses until finally, he falls prey to the family curse of consumption and collapses. Percy is sent to his mother's home, and when it becomes obvious to all that he is on his deathbed, he makes his confession to Léontine and reveals the existence of her first grandchild. Gina and baby Angèle are summoned to his side, and all is forgiven. At this time Percy makes his testament, providing for Gina's future needs and desiring that she go to France and represent herself as the widow of "Georges Percy" so that she can legitimately marry. Angèle is to be taken along and sent to a French convent until she turns eighteen. He dies shortly thereafter.

After Percy's death, Gina departs for France along with Horace and Gothe who are immediately married upon their arrival. Gina, too, soon marries a wealthy Frenchman and has five children. Angèle is sent to the convent as agreed upon. When old Doctor Fleury dies, Yvon's mother and his paralyzed sister also travel to France where she is cured and later return to New Orleans where she happily marries.

The story then skips fifteen years into the future. Léontine is living in New Orleans with Yvon and Alice and their six children, but all have a burning desire to sail for France to be reunited with their ersatz family members. When they arrive in Paris, they find Angèle grown and in love with one of Horace and Gothe's many children, who

is named Hamilton after Léontine's husband. They marry in an enormous ceremony in Notre Dame with many members of the European aristocracy in attendance, and no one realizes that the bride and groom are both the children of *quarteronnes*. Although Léontine never returns to New Orleans, it seems that Alice and Yvon may return after she is gone. The last lines of the story, strangely, concern the family slave Jean-Marie, who, despite his manumission, remains loyally at Léontine's side.

Dahlia

The final novel in the series, which, like *Gina*, is quite lengthy, is *Dahlia La Quarteronne*. The first part of Dahlia is entitled "Petite" and begins with the story of Célima, a quadroon who is sold against her will by her mother, the free mulatta Man Babette. Her buyer is a Mexican ship's captain, Don José Dalveras, who kidnaps her and takes her aboard his vessel. Though he is kind to her and even marries her, she does not recover from the shock of her rape and becomes withdrawn and despondent. When she finds she is pregnant, she begs her husband to take her back to New Orleans to be with her mother for the birth.

Reluctantly, her husband leaves her in the dubious care of Babette to return to his business, and Célima dies giving birth to a daughter. A grief-stricken Don José briefly returns, erects a glorious monument to his wife at the cemetery, deposits a large sum in the bank for the care of his child, and leaves Babette with strict instructions to spare no expense in the child's upbringing while he is away at sea. He will return in twelve years to collect his daughter. Babette, described as a true "*Harpagon*," regularly collects the stipend for the care of the child, but hides it away and is unwilling to spend even the amount it would take to have the child baptized or christened, and so the child is known only as "Petite." Despite her grandmother's total neglect, the lovable Petite survives with

the help of the occupants of Man Babette's boarding house and a benevolent old gardener, Benoît, who lives nearby. Petite, herself an avid gardener, bonds with the old man who she calls *grandpapa*, and he later christens her Dahlia in a pseudo-religious ceremony. After twelve years Don José returns as promised, learns of Babette's neglectful treatment of his daughter and of Benoît's kindness which he rewards with a generous financial gift that he covertly has delivered upon their departure. He has Dahlia baptized Marie-Célina-Dahlia Dalveras and then whisks her away and places her in a convent in Baltimore, leaving Benoît saddened but happy to see his "*poulette*" in a happier situation.

The second part of the novel, probably called *Valery*, although the official title is now lost, remains only in the form of the original manuscript. This portion tells the convoluted story of the Ashton family, who, like the Percys, are English peers. Sir Richard Ashton is the patriarch, and he has come to Louisiana to purchase and run a plantation. He secures a property near Pointe-Coupée known as *Les Lilas*, and earns a reputation as a man who is cold and strict unto the point of cruelty with his slaves, though he provides for them well. He is disliked by the local Créole families as is his eldest son Gérald. His younger son, Valery, is much more popular with the locals due to his genial personality, but his father mysteriously hates him.

This we later learn, is because after the death of his first wife, in which Sir Richard may have had a hand, he becomes infatuated with and marries a beautiful Spanish lady, Lady Inez. A misunderstanding leads him to believe that the son she gives birth to may not be his. He has her imprisoned in Scotland and leaves her there to die, then sends young Valery off to be raised by peasants. Eventually, Lady Inez's powerful family begins to make inquiries into her sudden disappearance, and Sir Richard decides

to relocate to America with his heir and even Valery, presumably to erase the evidence of his crimes.

Sir Richard is a controlling father and manipulates Gerald into two relationships with women. The first is with an attractive slave girl, Babette. Her role is to distract him from his ennui and his desire to return to England. She becomes his mistress and gives birth to his daughter, Célima, who later becomes Dahlia's mother. The second woman is an extremely wealthy but extremely ugly heiress, Léna, with whom Sir Richard arranges a marriage for Gerald. To eliminate resistance from Gerald, his father sends Babette to the auction block. Babette, however, manages to slip out of Sir Richard's grasp by raising the money to purchase her freedom and that of Célima, which she does by soliciting it from Gerald as well as his tutor and another plantation employee, whom she also took as lovers, unbeknownst to Gerald. Gerald eventually accedes to his father's wishes and marries Léna.

With the money the marriage brings to him, Gerald, who loves Valery, takes pity on him and sends him to the Jesuit college in New Orleans in order to spare him their father's cruelties. This exile is temporary, however, because Sir Richard dies within a few years of the wedding. On his deathbed, his mumblings alert Gerald to his past crimes and a letter Sir Richard wills to him confirms the story. Furthermore, Sir Richard's will excludes Valery from any inheritance except for two thousand piastres, leaving the entire estate to Gerald. Valery will have to earn his living and decides to become an attorney.

Gerald's marriage is not a happy one and after his father's death, he locates Babette and brings her back to *Les Lilas* ostensibly as the housekeeper, but his wife is well aware of the real nature of their relationship. Gerald allows Babette to supplant Léna as the mistress of the household, driving her to remain in her apartments more and

more. The Gerald Ashtons have two children, but neither survives, and Léna becomes increasingly hysterical and miserable, even accusing Babette of poisoning the second child, a charge of which she is innocent. The death of her second child is a fatal blow for Léna, and she dies unmourned by her husband.

Valery is luckier in love and marries Laure who is pretty and charming. She has a younger sister who lives with them, Pauline, equally beautiful. Valery and Laure have two sons, whom they name Valery and Gerald who will heretofore be designated by a “II” after their names. When Valery suddenly dies, Gerald sends for Laure, Valery II, Gerald II and Pauline. The widow, the widower, and the children all live peacefully at *Les Lilas* until it becomes apparent that Gerald has fallen in love with the very-much-younger Pauline. Despite the gap in their ages, the wealthy widower persuades Pauline to marry him. Babette, still Gerald’s mistress, sees the writing on the wall and negotiates a severance package with him that will provide her with a property in New Orleans which she can use for a boarding house. This is the last that is seen of her until the third part of the novel. Gerald, meanwhile, is deliriously happy until Pauline dies giving birth to their daughter Camille.

After Pauline’s death, Gerald follows in his father’s footsteps, becoming bitter and cold and showing almost no affection for Camille who is predominately raised by Laure alongside her older cousins Valery II and Gerald II. As they grow up, Valery II and Camille develop a *tendre* for each other, and Gerald II develops an unrequited *tendre* for Camille as well. When Gerald II turns twenty, Laure produces a letter written by her deceased husband for the occasion and calls her sons into a family conference. If she is to read the letter, they must vow in advance to adhere absolutely to the wishes expressed therein, no matter what. If they do not agree to this condition, she will tear up the letter.

Both sons solemnly promise to obey their late father's wishes in every particular and the letter is read. It then instructs them to obey their uncle Gerald's wishes in all things, from careers to marriages.

Following the reading, Gerald calls his nephews into his office and discusses his plans for their lives. Gerald II, who is the less intelligent of the two boys, is to remain at *Les Lilas* and become a planter. Valery II will become an attorney. During his studies Valery II corresponds with Camille, and their infatuation continues. On her seventeenth birthday, her father calls her and Gerald II into his offices and announces that he plans for them to marry. Gerald II knows that she loves his brother, but he is bound by his earlier vow to obey his uncle. Moreover, he has never gotten over his feelings for Camille and is pleased at his uncle's choice. Camille is furious, particularly when after hearing the news, Valery II, also bound by a vow to obey his uncle, decides to travel in order to forget his woes rather than committing suicide or fighting a duel in her name. Camille's objections to Gerald II are eventually overcome by the promise of an extravagant trousseau and honeymoon, and she and Gerald II happily marry and have a daughter, H el ene, who is the apple of her grandfather/great-uncle's eye. As this part draws to a conclusion, Valery II returns from abroad with news that he has met his great-uncles, Lady Inez's brothers, in Spain, and they have given him a small fortune. With the money, he leaves *Les Lilas* behind and moves to New Orleans permanently, where he establishes himself as a renowned attorney.

The third part of the novel is entitled "Valery et Dahlia." It opens with Dahlia at the convent, where she has spent many happy years completely unaware of the fact that she is a *quarteronne*. Over the years, she has received a few visits and many gifts from her father, and she is anticipating his arrival after her eighteenth birthday when she learns

that his ship has been attacked by pirates and he is dead, and any documents regarding his plans for Dahlia or the location of her inheritance are at the bottom of the sea. Almost penniless, Dahlia is sent to New Orleans to live with Man Babette who has become many times more avaricious than she was when Dahlia left her as a small child.

Babette immediately begins to make arrangements with Octavia to sell her granddaughter into concubinage as she did with Célima. They agree to hide their intentions from Dahlia, who still does not realize she is a *quarteronne* nor does she understand what it means to be one, so she is completely unaware of the danger surrounding her. Several other *quarteronnes* come to meet Dahlia, who finds Octavia acceptable, Violetta repugnant, and Althéa/Gothe completely charming. Dahlia and Gothe become friends, and it is while they are together that they meet a friend of Dahlia's from the convent. When the girl's mother amiably asks where Dahlia lives, Dahlia explains that she lives with her grandmother Babette. The mother suddenly understands what Dahlia's parentage is and causes an enormous scene. She upbraids Dahlia *la quarteronne* for daring to address her daughter in the streets, and this is how Dahlia learns about her social and racial status. Dahlia collapses from the shock and shame, and Valery II, now living in New Orleans, happens upon the scene and helps her home.

This is the beginning of their infatuation with each other. It is discovered that the humble gardener Benoît has left Dahlia a small fortune in cash and property. Valery, as an attorney, becomes Dahlia's legal guardian and helps her to safeguard her inheritance from Babette. They quickly fall in love, and Dahlia begins to hope for an offer of marriage which Valery, full of "*orgueil de race*" has no intention of making, though he would like her to be his mistress (Dahlia III 201).

Meanwhile, Babette and Octavia, sensing that their plans for Dahlia are endangered by Valery II, take action. They find an extremely rich but criminally insane Brazilian, Don Orlando Trocadero, who has seen Dahlia at a quadron ball and is obsessed with having her at *n'importe quel prix*, and they enter into a contract with him that will be fulfilled when he successfully kidnaps and rapes her. Dahlia has recently seen what Adoréah attempted with Don Ignatio and Gothe, and is on her guard. Since she is becoming aware that Valery II will not agree to marry her, she contacts the convent in Baltimore to see if she can return there to become a nun and thus remove herself from the temptation of becoming Valery II's mistress. She is rejected outright, however, because the Mother Superior has been made aware of her race by the outraged mother who accosted Dahlia in the street.

Dahlia then turns to Virginie LeBon, whose racial status is identical to Dahlia's and whose story is very similar to hers. Mme LeBon, however, married a *quarteron* tradesman rather than endure the dishonor of being placée with the white man she loved, and she urges Dahlia to do the same. Octavia and Babette seize the first available opportunity to prevent this, and they slip Dahlia, still living at Babette's boarding house, a near fatal amount of morphine. Don Orlando is about to make off with his unconscious victim when he is discovered by Dahlia's neighbor and friend Nicolas. Nicolas, a *quarteron*, was a childhood playmate of "Petite" and has always been in love with Dahlia. She is taken to Mme LeBon's house and there is persuaded to marry Nicolas to save herself. She is on the point of doing so when an enraged Don Orlando attempts to kill Valery II, whom he sees as the cause of his frustrations.

When Dahlia hears that Valery II is injured and unlikely to survive, she hurries to his bedside and remains there, knowing that her presence in his bedroom is the ruination

of her virtue. Valery II, who has been calling for her, begins to recover because of her presence. When he is healed, they enter into an illegitimate but semi-honorable cohabitation similar to that of Gothe and Horace, and Dahlia bears him a son, Valery III.

Although Dahlia is discovered to have a dangerously weak heart, all is well until Valery II is suddenly called back to *Les Lilas*. An epidemic has struck the plantation, and both Gerald II and little H el ene are dead. Camille is pregnant with Gerald's child, a second daughter who will also be named H el ene. Meanwhile, Dahlia's health is failing due to her pregnancy with their second child and the strain of her concerns about her family's future. Matters become critical when Valery II is called back to *Les Lilas* yet again.

Gerald has had a stroke and is dying. On his deathbed, he orders Valery II to marry Camille on the spot in front of the priest he has already summoned. Still bound by the vow he made to his father's memory, Valery II must obey, although he understands how it will affect Dahlia and immediately tries to think of grounds for annulment. Afterwards, he asks Camille if she, too, wishes to have the marriage annulled and she refuses because she is already feeling the stirrings of a passionate love for Valery. He agrees to spare her the scandal of an annulment but informs her that she can never be more than a sister to him. Valery II returns to Dahlia's side in New Orleans and gives her the news of his recent marriage. The strain of Valery II's marriage is too much for Dahlia's weakened heart. Sensing that she is dying, she draws up a will making Virgine and Jean LeBon the godparents of her children. She requests of Virgine that the children be raised in France and never allowed to return to Louisiana. Valery II agrees to this arrangement. The birth of their daughter, C elima II, is the final blow to Dahlia's health, as she has herself predicted.

When news of Dahlia's existence reaches *Les Lilas* via a newspaper, Camille determines to rush to New Orleans and tear her husband from Dahlia's side. Upon arrival, she finds Dahlia on her death bed and is so moved by the scene that instead of attacking Dahlia, she offers to help her in any way she can. Dahlia asks only that she be allowed to die in Valery II's arms and that Camille help stiffen Valery II's resolve to send his children to France with the LeBons. Camille agrees and returns to *Les Lilas*.

After Dahlia's death, Valery II returns to the plantation, his own health at risk due to his grief. Camille and Laure nurse him back to health which helps to foster a friendship between the two newlyweds. After his recovery, he receives a letter from Virginie LeBon assuring him that his children are now her own and will be cared for accordingly. Ten years pass. Valery II and Camille have become close friends and are relatively happy together, though they have no more children and he does not return her romantic love. Valery II treats H el ene II as his own daughter and she is educated by her grandmother at *Les Lilas* until Laure passes away. She is then sent to a convent in Louisiana to complete her education. There she becomes fast friends with a girl named Louise Raymond (which happens to be the pseudonym de la Houssaye's employed for the publication of the novels). They correspond when H el ene returns home.

Meanwhile, Valery II has received frequent letters from Virginie LeBon regarding his children. Jean passes away three years after the LeBons and the Ashton children arrive in Paris. C elima II is sent to a convent and Valery III to a jesuit college to receive their education. Valery III and C elima II believe that they are the result of a mythical marriage between their father and his "first wife." H el ene has been told the same tale. Valery III and H el ene have corresponded throughout the years and are forming the beginnings of a *tendre* despite considering each other siblings. H el ene resists all of her

parents' efforts to find her a husband because none compare favorably to her ideal, Valery III.

When Célima II reaches her majority, she marries a French *comte*, Charles de Chavigny, whose sister was her classmate. She passes into the aristocracy none the wiser about the secret of her race. Soon after, Virgine LeBon dies and Valery III decides to visit Louisiana. The visit cements his infatuation with his cousin Hélène II. They fall in love and plan to marry, but when Valery III asks for her hand, Valery II refuses. He informs his son that he is a *quarteron*, explains what his social status is in Louisiana and that Louisiana laws prevent his marriage to Hélène. At the same time, Laure informs Hélène about Valery III's race. Crushed, Valery III apologizes to Hélène for insulting her with his proposal and tries to bid her adieu, but she insists that she is above prejudice, still plans to marry him, and regards her native society and laws with scorn. The couple elopes that night, stopping to marry in Mobile, Alabama before heading on to Paris. Upon reading the letter Hélène left for her mother explaining her actions, Valery II approves of his son and niece's courage.

Soon after the elopement, Valery II and Camille go to visit the couple in France and find them living happily in the little society composed of all of their children, grandchildren, and all of the expatriate characters from *Gina* and their children and grandchildren. After a few happy years spent in France, Valery II senses that his health is failing and he and Laure return to Louisiana so he can die in the country where Dahlia died, though he cannot be buried beside her. After his death, Laure rents out *Les Lilas* and returns to Paris to live with her daughter and son-in-law.

The series ends with a brief note from the author explaining that she has now revealed the different "types" of *quarteronnes*. She reminds her readers that though they

may justly scorn Adoréah, Violetta, and Octavia, they should also remember with
indulgence the goodness of Gothe, Gina, and Dahlia. These “puppets of fate,” she urges,
deserve our pity more than our scorn.

Appendix B

Contradictions in Descriptions of the Character Octavia

<u>Appearance</u>	<u>Tastes</u>	<u>Comportement</u>	<u>Behavior/Motivations</u>
<p>“Un soir, je vis Octavia au théâtre et je fus surprise de la décence de sa toilette; jamais, en la regardant, <i>on se fut douté qu'elle avait du sang noir dans les veines.</i>” (44)</p>	<p>“Il lui avait fait bâtir...une magnifique maison qu'elle avait meublée avec un goût irréprochable.” (43)</p>	<p>“Elle était brune, grande et voluptueuse. <i>On devinait la courtisane rien qu'à la voir marcher...</i>” (48)</p>	<p>“On disait que ces quarteronnes n'avaient pas de coeur... mais il est à supposer qu'il n'en était pas de même d'Octavia et qu'elle formait une exception à la règle générale. <i>Elle adorait Alfred D...pour le suivre...elle aurait volontiers abandonné tout le luxe et la splendeur dont il l'entourait.</i>” (45)</p>
<p>“Je dois avouer cependant qu'elle <i>était brune, bien plus brune que quelques-unes des autres quarteronnes</i>, mais ses traits fins et délicats donnaient à l'olive clair de son teint <i>le véritable type espagnol.</i>” (44)</p>	<p>“Octavia était une autorité parmi les femmes de sa race; on la consultait en tout et son goût n'était jamais contesté...il fallait toujours consulter Octavia et toujours son goût faisait loi.” (43-44)</p>	<p>“...ses mouvements étaient empreints d'une grâce vraiment idéale.” (44)</p>	<p>“...si Octavia aimait Alfred à mourir pour lui, il n'en était pas de même de lui: ... il y avait trop de ...noblesse dans [son] âme pour lui permettre d'éprouver de l'amour pour une créature qu'il savait être vile et méprisable et que, dans son opinion, un plus riche que lui pourrait facilement lui enlever.” (46)</p>
<p>“Elle était habillée tout de blanc;... ses manches longues, mais très larges, montraient en se relevant <i>ses beaux bras d'un blanc de neige.</i>”(44)</p>	<p>“Une rose rouge était le seul ornement de sa magnifique chevelure...Les seuls bijoux qu'elle portait étaient deux larges bracelets d'or... et une paire de superbes dormeuses à ses oreilles.” (44)</p>		<p>“Octavia <i>était moins ignorante</i> que la plupart de ses compagnons et, <i>vrai caméléon</i>, savait revêtir toutes les formes et faire croire à sa vertu aussi bien qu'à son instruction.” (45)</p>
	<p>“La quarteronne <i>avait les goûts de sa race, le brillant, l'éclatant remplaçaient partout la grâce et l'élégance.</i> La simplicité, pour elle, était une preuve de pauvreté.” (57)</p>		<p>““Fred!’ s'écria-t-elle d'une voix qui <i>n'avait rien d'humain</i>, ‘que dis tu?...répète ce que tu viens de dire!’...elle entra dans des fureurs qui dépassaient encore celles de Médée. Elle se roula sur le tapis, remplit la chambre de ses cris, elle rugit de colère, cria, écuma comme en crise d'épilepsie.” (60-61)</p>
			<p>“Quelques minutes venaient d'opérer une étrange transformation dans la jeune quarteronne. Ses yeux, remplis de larmes tout à l'heure, étaient secs, sa voix ne tremblait plus, et son corps, <i>écrasé par le désespoir, se relevait maintenant avec une dignité réelle.</i>” (61)</p>

Appendix C

The Ashton Family Tree

Sir Richard Ashton: Marries a British Peer. They have one son, **Gerald Ashton I**. She dies. He then marries a Spanish aristocrat, **Inez**. They have one son, **Valery Ashton I**.

Valery Ashton I: Marries a white Creole woman, **Laure**. They have two sons together, **Valery Ashton II** and **Gerald Ashton II**. **Valery Ashton I** dies while the children are young.

Laure: Has a younger sister **Pauline** who comes to live with her family.

Gerald Ashton I: Has a quadroon mistress, **Babette**. They have one illegitimate daughter, **Célina I**. He falls in love with **Pauline**, and they marry. They have one daughter, **Camille**.

Célina I: Marries **Don José Dalveras**. They have one daughter, **Dahlia**. Both parents die before she reaches adulthood.

Gerald Ashton II: Marries his cousin **Camille**. They have two daughters, **Hélène I** (who dies along with her father during an epidemic) and **Hélène II** (who is in utero during the epidemic and is named after the deceased sister).

Valery Ashton II: Takes his cousin **Dahlia** as a mistress. They have two illegitimate children, **Valery III** and **Célina II**. He is forced to marry his cousin/sister-in-law **Camille** after the death of **Gerald II**.

Valery III: Marries his “double cousin”/ step-sister **Hélène II**.

Célina II: Marries a French *comte*.

Appendix D

The Castel Family Tree

Madame Castel: Has three daughters, **Blanche**, **Agnès**, and **Alice**. All die of consumption while young. There is one son, **Hamilton Castel**.

Madame Percy: Has one daughter, **Léontine Percy**. They own a family of slaves, the matriarch of which is **Angélique**.

Angélique: Has three daughters. The eldest by far is **Matte**, who is **Léontine Percy**'s "soeur de lait" (meaning that they are the same age and were nursed together by **Angélique**). Her two younger daughters (by approximately fifteen years) are **Jeannette** and **Gothé**. They are **Léontine Percy**'s godchildren/ informally "adopted" daughters.

Hamilton Castel: Marries **Léontine Percy**. They have two biological children: **Alice Castel II** and **Percy Castel**. They also informally "adopt" a child, **Horace Delmond**.

Matte⁸⁸: Marries an Italian man named **Giulio**. They have one daughter, named Angelina, called **Gina**.

Alice Castel II: Marries an impoverished Breton *comte*/New Orleans shop employee, **Yvon de Kernokey**. They have six children whose names are not provided.

Percy Castel: Takes **Gina** as a mistress. They have an illegitimate daughter, **Angèle**.

Jeannette: Is the mistress of **Doctor Fleury** who is **Yvon de Kernokey**'s grandfather.

Gothé: Is the mistress and eventual wife of **Horace Delmond** who is her ersatz step-brother due to the informal adoptions. They have several children, one of whom is named **Hamilton II**.

Hamilton II: Marries **Angèle**, **Gina**'s daughter & **Léontine Percy**'s granddaughter.

⁸⁸ The identity of Matte's father is a mystery. Since male owners often impregnated female slaves, however, it is possible that Matte and Léontine are actually half-sisters in addition to being *soeurs de lait*.

Vita

Christine Koch Harris was born and raised in Vero Beach, Florida. She was lucky enough to find herself in a family full of women who took pride in being *readers*, some of whom particularly enjoyed French culture and literature. Following in her former-French-major mother's footsteps, she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in French in 1997 from Mercer University. That same year, she was offered a Board of Regents' fellowship and continued her studies at Louisiana State University's Department of French Studies. While at Louisiana State University, she made the decision to focus on nineteenth-century French and francophone literature. She earned her Master of Arts degree from the university in 2003 with a focus on that era. Her combined interest in nineteenth-century literature, francophone literature, and Louisiana literature made the choice to study Sidonie de la Houssaye's novels a natural one. After spending many hours in the rare books library at the university and many more in front of her computer, she successfully defended her doctoral dissertation on de la Houssaye's *Quarteronnes* novels in February of 2006. After graduation, Ms. Harris hopes to work on further study, translation, and re-publication of the *Quarteronnes* novels before moving on to examine more of this and other authors' Louisiana literature.

Ms. Harris is currently living in Long Beach, Mississippi, with her husband of one year, University of Southern Mississippi mathematics professor John M. Harris and their large and varied menagerie of household pets. Thanks to hurricanes and interspecies quarrels, their life together is never dull.